



## War commemoration as an (Anti-)European radical past

Hedwig Wagner

### 1. Introduction: Online posting as a memory-cultural interweaving of Europe

Levy/Sznaider (2006) have identified the memory of the Holocaust, which is inextricably linked to the Second World War, as the matrix for memory culture par excellence. A matrix is a practised dispositive element, it can be understood as a “regulatory administrative measure” and “moral proposition” (Foucault 1977: 194). The research network LEMEL (<https://lemel.hypotheses.org/>) was able to demonstrate that this matrix can also be extended to other (world) war commemorations and can even be historically brought forward as the point of origin of the modern project Europe, as shown by me and other authors of *Media Discourse of Commemoration. The Centenary of World War One in Europe* for the commemoration celebrated in Paris in 2018 (cf. Le *et al.* 2021). Vladimir Putin also makes use of the commemoration of the Second World War, misusing this commemoration for the ideological justification of his war against Ukraine. This narrative is countered in many tweeted European newspaper articles of quality journalism. The medial constitution of European memory culture has been emphasised many times (f.i. Assmann 2018; Gerhards 2017), but it has not yet been related to the rebuttal of aberrant historical visions. My article will focus on online posted journalistic articles from the dailies *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Die Welt* and the weeklies *Die Zeit*, and the news magazine *Der Spiegel* that counteract them, and work out to what extent a “heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses” (Foucault 1977: 194) has been created. The extent to which newspapers function as institutions and online posting as practices of a dispositive (Foucault) that thematises and represents a war in Europe, will be explained with reference to Michel Foucault and theorists of war commemoration in the digital dispositive, with main reference to the radical past-concept (Ford and Hoskins 2022). I will apply Michel Foucault’s concept of the dispositive to war commemoration, emphasizing how digital platforms, like social media, act as tools for shaping collective memory and public discourse. My analysis will show that Europe is throughout this rebuttal reacting to an “urgent need” (Foucault 1977: 195). According to my main thesis online posting a radical past war and a memory-cultural interweaving of Europe.

## 2. Theoretical background: Digitalization and transnationalisation of the remembrance war

In May 2025, the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II is commemorated. The commemorative events marking the end of the war, such as the landing of Allied troops in Normandy on D-Day (06.06.1944), have already opened a new chapter in history. Three interconnected phenomena are particularly new: firstly, the shift of the culture of remembrance to the media, transforming memory culture into digital memory. Innovative, interactive, and immersive media, particularly those set in authentic locations like former (concentration) camps and other memorial sites, as well as established museums, replace the deceased eyewitnesses in virtual worlds. These media create new forms of mediation with emotional and persuasive power for visitors and users.

Secondly, beyond traditional national historiography, the question of inter- or transcultural dimensions has become pressing. *Memory and the Holocaust in a Global Age* (2006) by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, nearly 20 years ago, postulated the Holocaust as a global memory, highlighting genocide as a reason for universal morality. They argued: "the Holocaust has become a moral certainty that stretches across national boundaries and unites Europe and other parts of the world" (Levy and Sznaider 2006: 18). The Holocaust helped "[to] facilitate the formation of transnational memory cultures, which in turn have the potential to become the cultural foundation for global human-rights politics" (Levy and Sznaider 2006: 4). Although this positioning has been contested (cf. Novick 2015), new 'transcultural memory studies' (Törnquist-Plewa *et al.* 2017) have emerged. After two decades of research, these studies have penetrated both on-site museum and memorial work and the media discourse of quality journalism and other forms of public discourse. "This has led to "acts of reception" which are located beyond commonly assumed boundaries (national, ethnic, linguistic, religious ones, for example). For transcultural memory to actually come into existence, deterritorialised transmission must be followed by localizing reception" (Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbæk Andersen and Erll 2017: 3). The intertwining of transcultural remembrance with local reception, and the shift from historical knowledge (history knowledge about) to empathetic understanding that leads to a moral stance, now shifted to the responsibility of museums, is of great importance. Additionally, cross-media, transnational, and transgenerational remembrance has become crucial.

Thirdly, with the advent of mobile geolocated media, the 'locative media', another significant shift has occurred: from the authenticity of places whose historical traces are increasingly disappearing (at least for the many hundreds of small satellite camps of the major concentration camps) to purely virtual information and representations on the Internet, towards augmented reality of geolocated, visualized app tours of digital on-site presence. Geolocation is the third major innovation strand of memory studies. The fact that remembering is not only institutionalized but increasingly individualized is also a result of decades of mediation through classical mass media (especially television and cinema films). A media usage that mixes collective,

imaginary memory with individualized reception. The broader spread into various groups of actors (besides victims and perpetrators, witnesses and 'bystanders' have increasingly come into focus) has thus produced multidirectional remembrance. The diverse media arrangement has overall caused a "reception-as-remediation" (Törnquist-Plewa *et al.* 2017: 7). "In the words of Erll and Rigney, 'remediation is concerned with the ways in which the same story is recalled in new media at a later point in time and hence given a new lease of cultural life'" (*ibidem*) Digital media and political narratives have transformed war commemoration, therefore the attention has to focus on the interplay of memory, power, and media in shaping public perceptions of history. To do so, I apply Michel Foucault's concept of the dispositive to war commemoration, emphasizing how digital platforms, like social media, act as tools for shaping collective memory and public discourse.

### 3. Commemoration as a dispositive

Lots of articles have been written on a Foucauldian discourse analysis (f.i. Riley *et al.* 2021) on a corpus gathered from social media (Khan *et al.* 2021), be it tweets or hashtags. Social media platforms and their influence on politics as well as on policies are struggling with false or misleading information, and the public sphere is calling for action to regulate the discourses, claiming institutional intervention to restore the truth. The Foucauldian approach is also connected to social media and the "truth regime" (Foucault 1971, 1972) in order to make it applicable to technical systems and to "technological operation of truth regimes using the [...] News Feed algorithm". (Cvrtila 2024: 10). But more specifically commemoration in a Foucauldian approach had been explored by Jacobs (2003), who states that the Foucauldian "notions of archaeology and genealogy are meant to serve the goal of developing conceptual alternatives for approaching the past in distinctively anti-authoritative ways" (Roudometof 2003: 164). Commemoration as a Foucauldian dispositive has not been explored, yet. Foucault defines the dispositive as "a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (Foucault 1977: 194).

For Foucault, a dispositive is not just a traditional apparatus as physical structure or a set of tools, but rather a network that includes heterogenous elements such as discourses, institutions, technological devices, and power relations. The discourses can be analysed by the tweets as ways of speaking and thinking that are circulated by the social media accounts of the newsrooms. The newspapers electronic articles to which the tweets containing links are leading are released by institutions seen as organizations that create and enforce power. They do so via specific technological devices, the social media accounts of twitter, framed as the material means through which power is transmitted. And finally, power relations manifested in the way that power and control emerge in various social practices, such as microblogging. Commemoration can be seen as a network of practices and discourses, that collectively

shape knowledge and power structures. The different aspects come together to create a multifaceted apparatus of which is “to identify in this apparatus [...] the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogenous elements” (Foucault 1977: 194) which organize collective memory, shape public discourse on commemoration, and reinforce social norms around war. The analysis of war commemoration gives appearance to the regulation of social and political memory. As war commemoration is not just about honoring the past but also about regulating how society remembers and processes war, in alignment with Foucault’s idea that a dispositive has a “dominant strategic function” (Foucault 1977: 195). Commemoration as a dispositive operates as a tool of power, reinforcing power and control through memory. It is to highlight that the politics of war remembrance are deeply intertwined with national identity, political power, and historical narratives. But on the other hand, as early as already argued by Jacobs in 2003 (Jacobs 2003), commemoration is also a site of struggle and resistance. Foucault’s dispositive is not just about control but also a site where power is contested. I critically address how modern political figures, particularly Vladimir Putin, misuse historical memory, like that of World War II, to justify the current war. To give evidence, I tackle with German quality journalism, particularly in outlets like *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Die Zeit*, and *Der Spiegel*, offering a counter-discourse, opposing revisionist history and emphasizing a European memory culture aimed at combating such manipulations. Further, I highlight the broader media and public discourse that mocks and challenges these narratives on platforms like Twitter. Memes, tweets, and critical articles act as counter-narratives, framing Putin’s use of history as a means to legitimize aggressive policies, while calling attention to the role of memory in modern political conflicts. As I will show, memory now overtakes traditional historical accounts, influencing contemporary conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war.

#### 4. Rebuttal of Russian interpretations of history

In German journalism of quality, e.g. the FAZ (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), a specific counter-discourse to the Kremlin<sup>1</sup> has been set up. At FAZ, a specific section has been created ‘Russian Visions of History’ [*Russische Geschichtsbilder*, translation by H.W.] in which Putin is labelled ‘dilletting presidential historian Vladimir Putin [*dilletierender Präsidialhistoriker Wladimir Putin*, translation by H.W.]’<sup>2</sup>. Much ‘liked’ (or recommended as FAZ labels it) and with lots of reader opinions (or ‘replies’ in twitter jargon) to counter Putin’s version of history, detailing that it is not so easy to see in it a completely aberrant megalomaniacal vision of the ‘presidential historian’, but that it is a well-established narrative of the Russian elite since the 17th century, predominating in the 19th century.

With regard to cultural memory quarrels are to be observed and reflections on

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Le, member of the Lemel-network, has stated this rebuttal for the French news portal of *Le Monde*, publication in print.

<sup>2</sup> Faz 30.09.2022, Ricarda Vulpius, comment-out, „*Russische Geschichtsbilder: Kampf dem Ukrainertum*“. [Russian Visions of History. Fight against Ukrainianism]

strategies of counteracting are explored as well as a self-questioning takes place. The three hot topics are firstly fascism or authoritarian regimes, secondly the empire or nation-state debate and thirdly decolonization and processes of de-communism.

*Zeit online* launched on 10.06.2022: "Putin compares himself to Peter the Great"<sup>3</sup>. The beginning of the article states: "The Tsar fought a war against Sweden to take back something that belonged to Russia", says Vladimir Putin, "Apparently, the task has fallen to us as well" (*Ibidem*). The same day, 10.06.2022, the weekly journal *Der Spiegel* (@derspiegel) tweeted: "Vladimir Putin compares himself to Tsar Peter the Great and admits what the war against Ukraine is really about: 'taking back' territories"<sup>4</sup>, posted as well as a video by *welt.de* (@welt.de, 10.06.2022).

The *Zeit* article linked to the tweet clearly states that Putin's attempt to compare himself with Tsar Peter the Great serves to legitimise the war against Ukraine. In addition to pointing out the inadequacy of the comparison, the article refers to the geopolitical instrumentalisation of a supposed historical truth and the essentialisation of Russia through its supposedly timeless purpose, its 'destiny'. The legitimisation claims arise from this. Significantly, the final sentence reads: "Russia today emphasises above all the expansion of Russian territory forced by Peter the Great" (*Ibidem*).

While the journalistic discourse seeks to reflect on a level between empire and nation state, there is a direct counter-speech on Twitter, a mockery that is aimed at the president's height and is a counter-speech against warlike expansion (The Hill, 2022)<sup>5</sup> as in the post: "Unfortunately for him, he will be remembered as Putin the scumbag. Greatest Moron in the eyes of the world" (u/username, 2022, June 9)<sup>6</sup>. On a meta-level, reference is made to the false mediation of history, as there are indeed imperialising nation states.

On 21 July 2022, the @zeitonline account tweeted the guest article by Aleida Assmann "Vladimir Putin: He wants the empire back. Vladimir Putin's actions are closely linked to his view of history. For him, it is not a completed process, but a crystal ball for visions of the future"<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Schwedt Anna, *Zeit Online* [@zeitonline]. (10.06.2022). „Russlands Präsident Wladimir #Putin sieht im Krieg in der #Ukraine Parallelen mit dem Vorgehen von Zar Peter dem Großen. So wie der Zar sich Schweden zurück geholt hatte, würde sich Putin jetzt die Ukraine zurück holen.“ [Russian President Vladimir Putin sees parallels between the war in Ukraine and the actions of Tsar Peter the Great. Just as the Tsar reclaimed Sweden, Putin would now reclaim Ukraine.] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://x.com/zeitonline/status/1535026371742912520>

<sup>4</sup> Esh Christian, *Spiegel Online* [@derspiegel]. (10.06.2022). „Wladimir Putin vergleicht sich mit Zar Peter dem Großen und gibt zu, worum es eigentlich geht im Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Um das »Zurückholen« von Gebieten.“ [Vladimir Putin compares himself to Tsar Peter the Great and admits what the war against Ukraine is really about: 'reclaiming' territories.] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://x.com/derspiegel/status/1535351361134469120>

<sup>5</sup> The Hill, I. [@thehill]. (2022, June 9). "Putin compares self to Peter the Great, says he is taking back Russian lands" [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thehill/status/1535370487882485760>

<sup>6</sup> u/username. (2022, June 9). "Unfortunately for him, he will be remembered as Putin the scumbag. Greatest Moron in the eyes of the world" [Comment on the post "Putin compares self to Peter the Great..."]. Reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/v8vulo>

<sup>7</sup> @zeitonline, 21.07.2022: „Wladimir Putin: Er will das Imperium zurück. Wladimir Putins Handeln ist eng mit seinem Blick auf Geschichte verknüpft. Sie ist für ihn kein abgeschlossener Prozess, sondern eine Glaskugel für Zukunftsvisionen.“ [Vladimir Putin: He wants the empire back. Vladimir Putin's actions are closely linked to his view of history. For him, history is not a completed process, but a crystal ball for visions of the future.] By Aleida Assmann, 120 comments, tweeted <https://t.co/gQ5TJXU5Vs>.

The prominent cultural scientist, who is one of the founders of the memory culture studies with a broad social impact as well as in academia, goes into detail in her article - written in a popular science style - about the differences between empires, reigns and nation states; their respective relationship to history, the exclusions and repressions that they cause. Putin is attached to the - historically actually finished - empire, which is characterised by territorial size, and which is multi-ethnic, multilingual and expansionist and has no clearly defined borders. The orientation of politics towards the present and the future changed with the end of the Soviet Union is explored and it is stated that now a phase of reconsideration and political orientation through historical revisionism has begun.

“The end of the Cold War was the end of an ideological war of position between capitalism and communism, in which there was, however, an important consensus between the opponents: the past played no significant role in politics or the public sphere. Historians were concerned with the past, while society was completely focussed on the future and progress. This changed in the 1980s and 1990s, when Holocaust remembrance returned to the public eye after four decades of leaden silence” (*Ibidem*, translation by H.W.).

Of all things, the memory of the Holocaust, the remembrance of the victims, was the basis for the return to expansionist empires. The memory controversy about the right commemoration, which brought about a critical-reflective remembrance, was contrasted with heroic-affirmative remembrance. Imperial remembrance and Putin's heroic-affirmative remembrance are, according to Assmann, the cause of the war.

“Putin has attacked the country [Ukraine] because he - like many others - equates the term nation with nationalism and especially with National Socialism. That is why he declares Ukrainians to be fascists and himself to be a kind of second Stalin, a saviour of history” (*Ibidem*, translation by H.W.).

Assmann is not alone in finding that the attack on Ukraine stems from a misguided understanding of history. Countless memes, caricatures and posts on twitter and other social media channels polemicise against the amateur historian, the ‘historiographer’ Putin, such as: “Mr. Putin seriously comparing himself to Peter the Great. Tens of thousands have to pay with their lives for the megalomaniac dreams of a man who has lost touch with reality” (@GermanAmbUK, 2022, Juni 10)<sup>8</sup> or “Putin has taken to comparing himself to Peter the Great. A vastly better comparison would be Ivan the Terrible” (@GermanAmbUK, 2022, Juni 10)<sup>9</sup>. In addition to that, many journalists are turning against the vision of history with their articles and tweeting them - more frequently than other articles. However, Assmann analyses this ‘historical-political imbalance’ more precisely than others, seeing the cause of this in the failure to decolonise, a characteristic of the 20th century. Decolonisation should have taken the form of

---

<sup>8</sup> Berger, Miguel [@GermanAmbUK]. (2022, Juni 10). „Mr. Putin seriously comparing himself to Peter the Great. Tens of thousands have to pay with their lives for the megalomaniac dreams of a man who has lost touch with reality.” [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/GermanAmbUK/status/1535147266780037122>

<sup>9</sup> Stavridis, James [@stavridisj]. (2022, Juni 10). „Putin has taken to comparing himself to Peter the Great. A vastly better comparison would be Ivan the Terrible.” [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/stavridisj/status/1535292108717932546>

'decommunisation'.

"Now Putin needs a new legitimisation for the war of aggression against Ukraine. This is a new Great Russian Empire in the tsarist tradition. It is no longer Stalin to whom he refers, but Peter the Great. By 'sovereignty', Putin does not mean the right of nation states to exist, but the unrestricted freedom with which he wants to rule in world history. Sovereignty is not achieved on the basis of mutual legal systems and agreements, but solely through power. This includes supersonic weapons and nuclear warheads as well as 'geopolitical, scientific and technical information'" (*Ibidem*, translation by H.W.).

The *Tagesspiegel* published "Putin's view of history. Weak leaders caused the end of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union" on 15 April 2022 "Russia's president draws only one lesson from history: to win, you simply have to be prepared to fight and use force for longer than your opponents"<sup>10</sup>. *Der Tagesspiegel* also tears apart Putin's understanding of history. It criticises the fact that history is reduced to the actions of rulers, focussed on individuals and no structural history is pursued. In this way, the population is not captured. In line with the empire endeavour, Ukraine is becoming a 'buffer state' between the USA and Russia.

"This one-dimensional understanding of history was also recently reflected in his view of the Russian defeat in the First World War and the end of the USSR. In his speech on 22 February this year, Putin accused Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership of having signed the Peace of Brest-Litovsk purely for the sake of maintaining power, even though Germany's defeat was already a foregone conclusion" (*ibidem*, translation by H.W.).

The historical revisionism imposed from above was already evident in 2018 and was achieved by the appointed commission of historians, which was tasked with the objective of conveying to the Russian population that Russia had sided with the victors in the First World War (the withdrawal from the war in 1917 was neither surrender nor victory and peace, see Wagner 2018). Revisionism was initiated in 2014 and reached its temporary climax in 2018, to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War. The commission of historians was measured by its effectiveness and set up under the condition that the number of Russians 'who side with Russia against the war and the victors' should be increased to over half of the population.

"Putin's view of the end of the Soviet Union is similarly superficial, which he interprets simply as the result of weakness and leadership failure. As recently as 2000, he expressed between the lines his incomprehension that the democracy movement in East Germany had not been put down by Russian troops. Ukrainian independence was the work of the leadership circles there" (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 15.04.2022, translation by H.W.).

---

<sup>10</sup> *Der Tagesspiegel*, 15.04.2022, comment-out by Alexander Brakel: „Putins Geschichtsbild. Schwache Führungsfiguren verursachten das Ende von Zarenreich und Sowjetunion. Russlands Präsident zieht nur eine Lehre aus der Geschichte: Man muss für den Sieg schlicht länger zu Kampf und Gewalt bereit sein als die Gegner.“ [Putin's view of history. Weak leaders caused the end of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. Russia's president draws only one lesson from history: to win, you simply have to be willing to fight and use force longer than your opponents. translation by H.W.]

Jörg Baberowski - according to Schulze-Wessel<sup>11</sup> - claimed that Ukraine's identity was shaped by Soviet policies, suggesting a potential divide between its eastern and western regions. In contrast, historians Ulrich Schmid and Andreas Kappeler highlighted the 19th-century roots of Ukraine's national movement and the eastern support for independence post-Soviet Union. Despite their arguments, Baberowski's views gained popularity, with former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt echoing in *Die Zeit* (*Die Zeit*, 27.03.2014)<sup>12</sup> doubts about the existence of a distinct Ukrainian nation shortly after Crimea's annexation.

In the corpus of predominantly popular historical articles written by historians for the high-circulation daily and weekly newspapers of quality journalism, and whose editorial teams have decided to tweet these articles widely — in addition to making them accessible online — there is a self-reflective reference to the idea that historical theses about a fundamental cultural memory divide running between the western and eastern parts of the country, thus implying a separate Ukrainian memory culture. That this can find their way into journalism and politics and may contribute to questioning Ukraine's right to exist<sup>13</sup>, has been admitted. In contrast to the general discourse, *i.e.*, the assumption of many Germans, the thesis of 'imperial nostalgia' among many Russians, as a longing for the Soviet Union, is rejected as unsuitable — also to explain Russia's stance on Ukraine. The restoration of Soviet borders has no existential significance for Russians today.

A second important point is the reference to colonization. Putin is attributed with a recolonization of Eastern Europe. In addition to the demand for the decolonization of Russia, efforts toward de-communization are also called for. The fact that at least parts of the Russian population have a critical awareness of Russia's colonial past is known only to experts. With regard to what Paul Gilroy calls a 'post-colonial melancholia' (Gilroy 2006) Hoskins and Ford (2022) argue, what is perfectly applicable to Russia today, that "[i]n these circumstances, it seems that an excess of remembrance has led to a devaluation of what it means to commemorate. Consequently, the defining features of the current memory boom are that everything is memorialised, but nothing stands out in memory" (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 126).

A third important point is the debate surrounding the nation-state versus empire. While, with regard to Ukraine, the historically rooted existence of a nation-state and a nation (in the sense of a shared feeling of belonging) is emphasized, Russia is criticized for historically constructed imperialist tendencies. Notably, this is reflected in the debate on how to assess Russia: "The dichotomy between empire and nation is

---

<sup>11</sup> FAZ 19 03 2022: „Deutsche Irrtümer über Russland. Die Ukraine ist längst eine Nation.“ [German misconceptions about Russia. Ukraine has long been a nation.] By Martin Schulze-Wessel.

<sup>12</sup> Helmut Schmidt: „Es gibt die Ukraine so nicht als eine Nation.“ In: Naß Matthias (27.03.2014). „Kampf um die Ukraine. „Putins Vorgehen ist verständlich.““ [„Ukraine does not exist as a nation.“ In: „The battle for Ukraine. 'Putin's actions are understandable.'“] Interview Helmut Schmidt. *Die Zeit*; <https://www.zeit.de/2014/14/helmut-schmidt-russland>

<sup>13</sup> For example, Wessel-Schulze's debate with Barberowski, see Wessel-Schulze, FAZ 19.03.2022.

<sup>14</sup> FAZ 19 03 2022: „Deutsche Irrtümer über Russland. Die Ukraine ist längst eine Nation.“ [German misconceptions about Russia. Ukraine has long been a nation.] By Martin Schulze-Wessel.

false, because empires also invent their traditions, and they are by no means more tolerant or peace-loving than nation-states. Today, Russia is a nationalizing empire"<sup>14</sup>. Inventing traditions in a digital age leads to a radicalization of the past. In the digital era, as explored by Ford and Hoskins (Ford and Hoskins 2022), who's concept of the radical past will be presented in detail in the following section, war commemoration undergoes a radical past and has become more participatory and contested, particularly through social media and digital archives. This creates new spaces for resistance and alternative narratives, where the radicalization shows up as abuse of History and resistance against this one-sided adoption of points of reference in history, dismantling these by memes and posts.

## 5. Radical Past

The concept of "The Radical Past" by Andrew Hoskins and Matthew Ford<sup>15</sup> explores how digital technology has transformed our understanding and commemoration of war, focusing on the role of memory, disinformation, and media in shaping this evolution. Seen the topic dealt with on Twitter historians could complain that history is being debased, that a concentration on commemoration radicalises the past, at least the understanding of the past. The past is radical, insofar as it is characterized by an agitation. It is defined as: "Our shared understanding of the past is caught between a pre-digital and highly sedimented appreciation for war in history as framed by analogue archives versus the digital churn of a present framed by social media. This agitation of history and memory is the radical past." (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 118). Discourses on war itself are time-layered and war's perception is framed by the interpretation of previous war meanings, for instance of World War I and World War II where "an established and routinised commemorative culture of the First and Second World Wars framed by, for example, Remembrance Sunday or Memorial Day" (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 118 f.), are now agitated by the actual war thus becoming a radical past, which's meaning becomes unclear and which's commemorative forms must be therefore revised. The established matrix of commemoration is seen in its radical effects by Ford and Hoskins, who argue: "that this mainstream memorialisation of war does considerable work in framing how twenty-first-century wars are seen, legitimised or ignored" (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 119).

The complex of digital media and war memory evolved as the digital age has disrupted traditional ways of remembering war, with social media playing a major role in how conflicts are understood. Information spreads faster than ever, often amplifying falsehoods, making it hard to distinguish between fact and fiction. This creates a "hall of mirrors" (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 117) where perceptions of war are shaped not by truth but by the viral potential of narratives. Commemoration of WWI has pro-

<sup>14</sup> FAZ 19 03 2022: „Deutsche Irrtümer über Russland. Die Ukraine ist längst eine Nation.“ [German misconceptions about Russia. Ukraine has long been a nation.] By Martin Schulze-Wessel.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins: "Radical Past". In: Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins (2022), *Radical War*. C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197656549.003.0006, pp. 117 - 142

voked an acceleration of memorial discourses (Ford/Hoskins 2022: 119), the massive tweeting has splintered the national narrative of the war, and its effects of polarization politicises history (and war) further. The fact that multiple actors come in, that the globalization takes place, fosters even more various interpretations of the past and radicalizes them in times of post-truth and post-trust. Memory is an attitude towards and representation of the past, memory is an “imaginative reconstruction” (Bartlett 1932: 213, op. cit. by Ford and Hoskins 2022: 120). “Remembering is, then, dynamic, imaginative and counter-intuitively, an essential aspect of what it means to live in the present. As such, memory is always new and continually emergent, shaped by what is going on around us” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 120).

Not only the interpretations of the past are radicalized but memory itself undergoes a radicalization. Historically, war memories were grounded in analogue records, but today they are shaped by the immediacy of digital media. This leads to a blending of the past and present, with old memories being constantly recontextualized by current events. For example, the WWII mission of fighting fascism is invoked in the modern conflict (since 2014) and war (since 2022) in Russia against Ukraine, stacking layers of memory<sup>16</sup> on top of ongoing digital narratives as seen by the example of posting grandfathers’ images or the names of Russian weapons. Cause and effects can get blurred when the attention for the past is already a result of the ongoing actual digitally presented war:



Caption: Hitler-Putin Meme by Ukraine’s Official Twitter Account, posted on February 24, 2022, by the official @Ukraine Twitter account.

“For the more connected and proximate wars are to people’s experience, the more people seek refuge in the past. These anxieties create the urge to relentlessly turn over the past in an attempt to find glimmers of continuity and stability. The political effect of this is found in the ambition to reconnect people to a ‘collective memory’ and thus a shared sense of community. This process is intimately framed by an interaction between the radical past and the memorialisation of the digital present and forms something that we call the schematisation of war” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 131).

People use mental shortcuts, or schemata, to understand the overwhelming flow of war imagery and narratives in the digital age. These mental models are influenced

<sup>16</sup> “9 May – Victory Day – has become the foundation of Putin’s war machine. What was once a day commemorating the end of World War II has transformed into Russia’s most dangerous weapon: a mythological cult that fuels aggression against Ukraine and threatens all of Europe.” In: Bohdanov Yurii (10.05.2025). “How Russia’s WWII propaganda machine turned Victory Day into a death cult.” Euromaidan. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/10/may-9-how-putin-built-a-war-machine-from-soviet-nostalgia/>

by older wars, like World War II or Vietnam, which act as templates for making sense of current conflicts, despite differences in context and complexity. The schematization of the war makes that war is accepted and meaning is given to, to contribute to its cognitive construction.

Whereas in Europe, as seen in the memes, which de-contextualize, in order to compare to dismantle the power the digital present runs over the past, digitalizes it.

“Instead, by schematising war through the imposition of templates of earlier conflicts, MSM offers comfort and continuity to those who prefer to understand the present through a kind of re-shooting of history. Thus, photojournalists, picture editors and other news workers assert a mainstream schematisation of what warfare looks like. This is not a new phenomenon, but what is of note is this persistence of twentieth-century icons of warfare amid the abundance of imagery produced out of participative war [...] as it is reproduced online” (Ford and Hoskins 2022:133).

This participative war creates a juxtaposition of the individual and the collective memory, the perspective of global mainstream media and national politics. And the impact of memory on politics is high. The radicalizing of political discourse consists out of governments, the Kremlin especially, and other actors such as appreciated national (Ukrainian) writers, Andrej Kurkow f.i., use memory to shape narratives, while the rapid churn of digital information allows competing and often contradictory interpretations of history to thrive.

“The radical past and digitising the memorial present come together to form part of the new war ecology. This is a space in which the past is being invoked and denied in response to a new post-trust form of politics. Supercharged through social media, older twentieth century schemata of war have to compete with online schemata, where national framings of war struggle for attention with wider transnational imperatives. In the mix between old and new, we see how recorded media constrained history to particular forms of representation” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 135).

The historicization that comes from the analogue media technology of the past is constructed in the social and digital media and at the same time nullified by media technology. The non-synchronous recording and broadcasting of the past harbours the distance and selectivity that gives rise to historical meaning. The current datafication, on the other hand, levels out and restages both the historical and reflexive distance.

“The radicalisation of memory has consequently brought out the dynamic interplay between history and memorialisation. Thus, this radicalisation of memory – where the past is being put to polarising and exclusionary ends – reflects the wider new war ecology where extreme views are rewarded and outrage is celebrated. This has proved to be a fertile place for state-backed organisations like Russia’s Internet Research Agency to manipulate social divisions through social media” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 139).

But even the old, analogue mode of commemoration can undergo an overexposure, an unintended counter-effect. There have been ‘memory booms’ throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, where societies turn to memorialization, especially of wars like the World Wars. These acts of remembrance serve not only to honor the

dead but to help societies process trauma and prevent future conflicts. However, the rapid digital memorialization of wars today complicates these efforts, creating overloaded and fragmented narratives. With regards to the decade for the centenary of WWI, but in general, too, it can be stated: “the cycle of commemoration had accelerated into a new fervour for remembrance” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 122), “from memorial denial through to overexposure” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 122). Even positive remembrance can have its negative, unintended side-effects, counter-acting it: “memorialisation of war is as much a process of creating emotional distance as it is an act of remembering the fallen” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 124). The memorialisation of war as process of emotionally distancing was practised in times of the Soviet Union by the big military parade to commemorate the victory and to celebrate the glory of the (actual) Russian army where “we can see commemoration as a way of managing blockage, as an effective strategy of forgetting” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 124). This stand in stark contrast to the commemoration of the “great patriotic war” by the march of the so-called ‘immortal regiment’.



Fig.1: Russian President Putin takes part in the march of the so-called “immortal regiment” with a picture of his father to commemorate the victims of the “Great Patriotic War”. (dpa / Alexei Druzhinin), source: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/weltkriegs-gedenken-in-moskau-putin-fuehrt-gedenkmarsch-100.html>

This form of re-personalization of commemoration, the kind of re-enactment of a marching regiment, can be perceived as the living deads of the Russian history haunting Russia as spectres of its past, using the old black-white photographs of that epoch in the old analogue mode walking as a physically present collective in the street. It is a blending of the past with the present, but its historical reference point remains clear, it’s World War II commemoration.

Commemoration in times of digitalization or more precisely put as digital memorialization have altered traditional commemoration practices. Global contributions to commemorate civilian casualties of the war come in. These digital memorials challenge national narratives and offer alternative perspectives on war, often faster and more contentious than traditional memorials.

“[T]he connective turn ushers in a new mediated memorial of events that runs alongside and goes on to reframe processes of national commemoration. Consequently, the radical past reshapes the bounds of national identity politics” (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 127). This was evident in the journalistic articles on the First World War commemoration, the great European convergence observed by the Lemel network (albeit with some national peculiarities, of course, *e.g.* for Italy, see Silletti 2022), whereas contrary to the journalists’ tweets the tweets reacting to the articles have to be taken as re-nationalization hence being more conditioned by actual political convictions. But as shown by us, firstly the Europeanization processes of journalism leads to a homogenization of peaks, topics treated at which time under which framework. Secondly, WWI and WWII are mainly European wars, tackling with non-EU countries, partially recognized as European countries: Ukraine for its willing to belong to Europe (Euromaidan) and Russia partially for its past, when European aristocrats ‘networked’ in the Russian empire. The demonstrated digital “churn” of history leads to fragmented and polarized memories, where past and present become intertwined. As argued the radicalization of memory, driven by social media and other digital tools, reshapes how wars are remembered and politicized, allowing for both the manipulation and the democratization of historical narratives. In the following conclusion, it is emphasized that a radical past-war commemoration in the digital era operates as a Foucauldian dispositive, a complex system where power, memory, and media intersect, shaping both public discourse and individual perceptions of history.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of "radical past" shows how the digital age transforms war memory, leading to a fragmented, rapidly evolving understanding of the past, where memory often overtakes history in shaping our perceptions of conflict. In case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, war memory becomes memory war (Simine 2013; Lotem 2018), too. The commemoration (of war) according to the concept of the "radical past" can be seen as a dispositive as defined by Foucault. Foucault’s dispositive applied to war commemoration as explored refers to a heterogeneous set of practices, institutions, discourses, and material structures. They organize and regulate society, such creating the collective memory. Individually, they impact on subjectivity by shaping behaviours, relationships, and they induce power dynamics. In Foucault's terms, online posting, be it the journalist’s tweeted articles, be it the users’ responses to it (re-tweets, likes) is indeed a dispositive because it operates as a system where power is exercised, discourses are shaped, and subjectivity is formed. It embodies the technological, social, and institutional practices through which knowledge and

power circulate in the digital age. Commemoration of war in the sense of the "radical past" functions as a Foucauldian dispositif because it acts as a mechanism for controlling and directing collective memory and users' subjectivity. In general terms one can state that it shapes how societies understand war, reinforces power relations, and reflects both the regulatory function of commemoration (remembrance days) and its capacity for resistance in the digital age (memes specifically). Through its structure, practices, and narratives, war commemoration becomes a key element in the broader apparatus of memory and power.

The main online posting power question is to what articles gave the journalists the relevance to be tweeted? Not primary to teach history lessons in general, but to counteract an ideological misuse of some eclectic references to the past made by the pseudo-historian Putin and the Kremlin's belligerent instrumentalization of popular narratives on WWII in order to create a time layer confusion, interpreting the actual war against Ukraine as in continuity with WWII, allegedly completing its moral legacy. Knowledge on History is transmitted via the journalistic articles, tweeting them by representatives of institutions, the newspapers, is launching it as cultural practice, is creating a discursive knot, by provoking emotional reactions, likes, dislikes, further communicative acts. A thread, several connected posts is a discursive strand, while linking it to one's own life it becomes memory culture, an appropriated history, an interpreted history, to which one consequently develops an attitude. Tweeting transforms it into a memory-cultural interweaving of Europe. As demonstrated, in this practice of tweeting institutions (the newspapers), scientific statements (the comments-outs by professional historians), discourses (the affirmative and contesting comments), moral propositions (to fight against) came in "the said and the unsaid" (Foucault 1977: 194) – in short, what Foucault called an apparatus. The dispositif regulating the relations of these elements, their interdependencies, makes that these heterogeneous elements figure one time as the programme of an institution – the journal's aim to dismantle the propagandistic use of history - and it functions as a means for orchestrating European voices via these parallel operations (of counteracting) in several European countries creating the new field of rationality which is Europe. As "its major function at a given historical moment [is] that of responding to an *urgent need*" (Foucault 1977: 195, emphasis by Foucault) on the one side, the social media user's side it can be observed that, to put it in words of Ford and Hoskins "[t]he urge to find an immediate sense of meaning leads to a relentless churning of war's representation, leading to a constant re-examination and repositioning of the past. This process is being driven by the availability and presence of war-related stuff, which in turn helps to underpin the impulse to commemorate" (Ford and Hoskins 2022: 140).

The acceleration and ubiquity as well as the cultural blending of all wars through the learned memory boom will make that the memory erases history and what remains is the media history of the posted historical references in an ever changing media infrastructures. But perhaps it is precisely the memes that provide an insight into

---

<sup>10</sup> NSC *cit.* Memorandum of Conversation: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia 21 March 1997: 2-64 <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569> (accessed 30 September 2023).

the re-use of war through the re-use of war images and thereby expose the referencing of history as an ideological fiction.

Secondly, the textual posts are also more like memes, which in a single moment, a punchline, shoot together a meaning that cheekily and disrespectfully evokes an anti-commemoration attitude. They are the counter-discourse to the (nationalizing) memory discourse in social media.

On the other side - the journalist's side - it can be observed that the urgent need is assimilating by processes of Europeanization. In a way, Europe is the end of the homogenizing nation state. Europe is therefore the apparatus, the dispositive, we have seen "there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection" (Foucault 1977: 195) of its past for the future of Europe.

## Bibliography

### Theoretical Works

- Assmann Aleida (2018). *Der europäische Traum. Vier Lehren aus der Geschichte*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Cvrtila Leon (2024). "Truth Politics and Social Media: Towards a Foucauldian Approach." *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 61/2, 7-28. <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.61.2.01>
- Ford Matthew, Hoskins Andrew (2022). *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault Michel (1971). "Orders of Discourse." *Social Science Information*, 10/2, 7-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201>
- Foucault Michel (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault Michel (1977). "The Confession of the Flesh". In: Colin Gordon (eds) (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 194-228.
- Gerhards Jürgen, Breuer Lars, Delius Anna (2017). *Kollektive Erinnerungen der europäischen Bürger im Kontext von Transnationalisierungsprozessen: Deutschland, Großbritannien, Polen und Spanien im Vergleich*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Gilroy Paul (2006). *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Columbia University Press.
- Khan Tauhid Hossain, & MacEachen, Ellen (2021). Foucauldian Discourse Analysis: Moving Beyond a Social Constructionist Analytic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211018009>
- Lotem Itay (2018). "Beyond memory wars: The *indigènes de la république's* grass-roots anti-racism between the memory of colonialism and antisemitism," *French History*, 32/4, 573–593. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/cry085>
- Jacobs Aletta (2003). "Symbolic urban spaces and the political economy of local collective memory: a comparison of Hiroshima and Nagoya, Japan." *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 31/2, 253–78. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45293742>.
- Le Elisabeth, Radut-Gaghi Luciana, Silletti Alida Maria, Wagner Hedwig (eds) (2021). *Media Discourse of Commemoration: The Centenary of World War One in Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Levy Daniel, Sznajder Natan (2006). *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Novick Peter (2015). "The Holocaust Is Not— and Is Not Likely to Become— a Global Memory." In: Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan (eds.). *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 47 – 55.
- Riley Sarah, Robson Mark, Evans Amy (2021). "Foucauldian-Informed Discourse Analysis." In: Bamberg, Demuth, Watzlawik (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 285-303.
- Roudometof Victor (2003). "Beyond Commemoration: The Politics of Collective Memory." *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 31/2, 161–69. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45293737>.

Silletti Alida Maria (2021). "Looking for a Collective Memory Inscribed in the Illustrations of French and Italian Newspapers". In: Le Elisabeth *et al.* (eds). *Media Discourse of Commemoration*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 189-218

Simine Silke Arnold-de (2013). *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Törnquist-Plewa Barbara, Sindbæk Andersen Tea, Erll Astrid (2017). "Introduction: On Transcultural Memory and Reception". In: Sindbæk Andersen Tea, Törnquist-Plewa Barbara (eds). *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1-24.

Wagner Hedwig (2019). "1918 / 2018 – November-Gedenken in Deutschland." In: Aleshina Ekaterina, Wagner, Hedwig (eds). *Die Darstellung der konfliktreichen Vergangenheit Europas in online-Medien*. Pensa: Universitätsverlag, 89-113.

Wagner Hedwig (2021). "Narratives of History and Europe." In: Le Elisabeth *et al.* (eds). *Media Discourse of Commemoration*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 103-136.

### Journalistic Articles

Assmann Aleida (21.06.2022). "Er will das Imperium zurück." *Zeit online*. <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2022-06/wladimir-putin-russland-sowjetunion-geschichtspolitik>

Bohdanov Yurii (10.05.2025). "How Russia's WWII propaganda machine turned Victory Day into a death cult." *Euromaidan*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/05/10/may-9-how-putin-built-a-war-machine-from-soviet-nostalgia/>

Brakel Alexander (15.04.2022). "Putins Geschichtsbild: Schwache Führungsfiguren verursachten das Ende von Zarenreich und Sowjetunion." *Tagesspiegel*. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/schwache-fuehrungsfiguren-verursachten-das-ende-von-zarenreich-und-sowjetunion-4322449.html>

Brössler Daniel (26.11.2008). "Wladimir Putins Geschichtsbild. Nein zu Jelzin, Ja zu Stalin." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/wladimir-putins-geschichtsbild-nein-zu-jelzin-ja-zu-stalin-1.837246>

Esch Christian (10.06.2022). "Putins Ahnen." *Spiegel*. <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/krieg-gegen-die-ukraine-wladimir-putin-vergleicht-sich-mit-zar-peter-dem-grossen-a-0bc438c8-2d92-4c12-afca-5cf96c2f6f59>

Kilb Andreas (29.06.2020). "Putin als Historiker. Stalins gelehriger Schüler." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Naß Matthias (27.03.2014). „Kampf um die Ukraine.“ Putins Vorgehen ist verständlich“. Interview Helmut Schmidt. *Die Zeit*; <https://www.zeit.de/2014/14/helmut-schmidt-russland>

Schmoll Heike (04.03.2022). "Putins Geschichtsbild. Mit Gott und Granaten." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Schulze-Wessel Martin (19.03.2022). "Die Ukraine ist längst eine Nation." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Schwedt Anna (10.06.2022). "Putin vergleicht sich mit Zar Peter dem Großen." *Zeit Online*. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2022-06/wladimir-putin-krieg-ukraine-russland-vergleich-peter-der-grosse>

Vulpus Ricarda (30.09.2022). "Russische Geschichtsbilder: Kampf dem Ukrainertum." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

### Tweets

The Hill, I. [@thehill]. (2022, June 9). "Putin compares self to Peter the Great, says he is taking back Russian lands" [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thehill/status/1535370487882485760>

u/username. (2022, June 9). "Unfortunately for him, he will be remembered as Putin the scumbag. Greatest Moron in the eyes of the world" [Comment on the post "Putin compares himself to Peter the Great..."]. Reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/v8vulo>

Berger, Miguel [@GermanAmbUK]. (2022, Juni 10). „Mr. Putin seriously comparing himself to Peter the Great. Tens of thousands have to pay with their lives for the megalomaniac dreams of a man who has lost touch with reality." [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/GermanAmbUK/status/1535147266780037122>

Stavridis, James [@stavridisj]. (2022, Juni 10). "Putin has taken to comparing himself to Peter the Great. A vastly better comparison would be Ivan the Terrible." [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/stavridisj/status/1535292108717932546>