Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Fortifying Border Memories

Memory Politics in the Post-Soviet Russian North

Artem Spirin

A dissertation for the degree of philosophiae doctor – November 2024

Cover: The monument to the Arctic Border Guards (erected in 2013), Murmansk, July 2024

Photo: Nataliia Strukova

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Abstract

Memory politics involves public efforts to shape and circulate certain representations of the past for political purposes. By engaging with memory politics, social actors participate in mediating the collective representations of the past and influencing historical consciousness. As a powerful tool for legitimation, identity building, and production of consent, memory politics is a usual part of the agendas of state actors. In contemporary Russia, the power elite has been actively involved in memory politics, particularly by centralizing memory institutions and promoting state-centric interpretations of the country's history while suppressing "inconvenient" initiatives. Over the last decade, these efforts have also expanded regionally, reflecting the federal center's ontological anxiety about memory repertoires in peripheral regions and a desire for greater control over them.

This article-based dissertation explores memory politics in contemporary Russia by focusing on a set of three regional cases exemplifying how the representations of the violent past have been perpetuated and reframed locally. First, it analyzes the monumental memory politics of the Great Patriotic War in the Murmansk region. Second, it scrutinizes the state-patriotic redevelopment of the Mudyug Museum in the Arkhangelsk region dedicated to a Civil War prison camp. Third, it unpacks the recent changes in the memory of the violent past, particularly the Stalinist repressions and the Finnish occupation of 1941-1944, in the Republic of Karelia. Through analyzing local and federal media discourses, consulting local history (*kraevedcheskii*) accounts, and interviewing the experts, the study identifies the mnemonic actors involved as well as assesses the narratives and memory infrastructure they utilize to influence local memory politics.

The findings highlight a diversity of local-level actors and agendas, revealing the complex strategies and discursive tools used for interacting with federal-level actors. Unlike previous research that largely explained Russia's memory politics by the Kremlin's expanded control over the production of representations of the past, this dissertation demonstrates a variety of modes of federal-regional interplay in this sphere. While interacting with local actors, the federal state may integrate, valorize, or securitize

local repertories of memory, depending on multiple parameters and characteristics of these repertoires. The federal-regional interplay also entails patriotic rebranding (representing regional cultural features as parts of the national patriotic heritage) and symbolic fortification (strengthening notions of defense and security) of local memory repertoires in the Russian North. The study provides new insights into the Russian regime's authoritarian memory-political practices by evaluating the effectiveness and limitations of their implementation in the peripheries.

Sammendrag

Minnepolitikk omfatter offentlige tiltak som har som mål å forme og spre fremstillinger av fortiden for politiske formål. Ved å delta i minnepolitikk bidrar sosiale aktører til å formidle kollektive forestillinger om fortiden og påvirke den historiske bevisstheten. Som et sentralt maktmiddel for legitimering, identitetsbygging og konsensusproduksjon, benytter statlige aktører ofte minnepolitikk i sine agendaer. I dagens Russland har makteliten aktivt sentralisert minneinstitusjoner og fremmet statssentrerte tolkninger av landets historie, samtidig som «uønskede» initiativer har blitt undertrykt. De siste tiårene har disse utviklingene også fått en regional dimensjon, med økende bekymring fra føderale myndigheter over minnerepertoaret i perifere regioner, samt et ønske om å utvide kontrollen over dette.

Denne artikkelbaserte avhandlingen undersøker minnepolitikk i dagens Russland gjennom tre regionale casestudier fra landets nordlige regioner. Avhandlingen belyser hvordan fremstillinger av den voldelige fortiden har blitt videreført og omformet lokalt. Først analyseres den monumentale minnepolitikken knyttet til Den store fedrelandskrigen i Murmansk oblast. Deretter studeres den statspatriotiske utviklingen av Mudyug-museet, tidligere borgerkrigsfangeleir, i Arkhangelsk oblast. Til slutt analyseres det endringer i minnet om den voldelige fortiden, særlig Stalins undertrykkelser og den finske okkupasjonen (1941–1944), i Karelia-republikken. Ved å analysere lokale og føderale mediediskurser, regionale historiske kilder (kraevedcheskii) og intervjuer med eksperter, identifiserer avhandlingen minneaktørene og vurderer de narrativene og den minneinfrastrukturen de benytter for å påvirke lokal minnepolitikk.

Funnene fremhever et mangfold av lokale aktører og agendaer, som bruker komplekse strategier og diskursive verktøy for å samhandle med føderale aktører. I motsetning til tidligere forskning, som i stor grad forklarte Russlands minnepolitikk gjennom Kremls utvidede kontroll over fremstillinger av fortiden, viser denne avhandlingen hvordan føderal-regional samhandling (interplay) finner sted. Når statlige aktører samhandler med lokale aktører, kan de integrere, verdsette eller sikkerhetisere lokale minner, avhengig av ulike parametere og karakteristikker. Føderal-regional

interplay innebærer også patriotisk rebranding (representasjon av regionale kulturtrekk som en del av den nasjonale patriotiske arven) og symbolsk befestning (forsterkning av forestillinger om forsvar og sikkerhet) av lokale minnerepertoar i Nord-Russland. Denne avhandlingen kaster nytt lys over det russiske regimets autoritære praksis innen minnepolitikk, ved å vurdere både deres effektivitet og begrensninger i landets periferi.

List of abbreviations

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

BfZ – Battle for Zapoliar'e

CPRF – Communist Party of the Russian Federation

CW – (Russian) Civil War

FSB – *Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, Federal Security Service

GONGO – government-organized non-governmental organization

GPW – Great Patriotic War

GULag – *Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei*, Main Administration of Correctional Labor Camps

KU – Karelian Union of Former Young Prisoners of Fascist Concentration Camps

MoC – Ministry of Culture (of the Republic of Karelia)

NARFU – Northern (Arctic) Federal University

NESH – (Norway's) National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities

NGO – non-governmental organization

NKVD - *Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del*, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

PetrSU – Petrozavodsk State University

POW – prisoner of war

RIO – *Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, Russian Historical Society

ROC – Russian Orthodox Church

RVIO – *Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, Russian Military Historical Society

USA – United States of America

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VChK – *Vserossiiskaia chrezvychainaia komissiia*, All-Russian Extraordinary Commission

WWI – First World War

WWII – Second World War

Language preferences and style conventions

This dissertation is article-based, so the language norms and referencing styles differ across the text depending on the preferences of the peer-reviewed publication channels used for each article (see Figure 1).

Part of the thesis	English standard	Cyrillic romanization system	Romanization example	Reference style
Introduction	American	ALA-LC	*Iunarmiia*	Chicago 17th
Article A	American	ALA-LC	*Iunarmiia*	Chicago 17th
Article B	British	BGN/PCGN	*Yunarmiya*	Harvard
Article C	American	Own (ALA-LC-based)	*Yunarmiia*	Harvard

Figure 1. Language and style preferences

Since UiT's Supplementary Regulations for PhD Programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences (2024)[1] do not specify which English language standard should be used, I prefer American English spelling and typographical conventions in Introduction, the introduction. The editions chosen for the publication of Articles A and C also use American English, while the journal for Article B uses British English.

The dissertation makes extensive use of Russian-language sources and renders Russian-language words and phrases. The Russian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet, and the spelling is usually Romanized in academic publications. However, standards for romanization may vary, leading to some inconsistencies. The journal Communist and Post-Communist Studies uses the Library of Congress system of transliteration into Roman characters, so Article A, which is published in this journal, follows this Romanization system. Article B is submitted to the journal using the BGN/PCGN transliteration system. Article C uses its own system, which is based on ALA-LC but has some differences. The Introduction uses the ALA-LC system.

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[1] Supplementary regulations - PhD programme in Humanities and Social Sciences (English). Available at: https://en.uit.no/regelverk#v-pills-668404. Accessed 19 November 2024.

As for the style conventions used, the Introduction and Article A follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, while Articles B and C follow the Harvard reference style.

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is article-based and consists of an overview article and three case-specific ones. The overview article, or *kappa* in Norwegian (Introduction), explains the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings of the three case studies of this thesis, formulates the main hypothesis and the overarching research questions, explains the source base and ethical considerations, discusses the main findings and provides a general conclusion. Articles A, B, and C are scholarly contributions at various stages of publication in peer-reviewed editions. Article A is published. Article B is a manuscript accepted for publication in an academic journal. Article C is proposed as a section of a scholarly book set for release in 2026.

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Introduction

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Introduction

1. Introduction. Memory politics in the Russian North: fortifying border memories

In May 2013, a new monument was unveiled in one of Murmansk's city parks. It comprised a bronze sculptural group of three Second World War-era soldiers, representing the land, sea, and air border guards, accompanied by a faithful dog. The monument, which combined a Soviet-inspired artistic style with the typical post-Soviet lack of attention to historical detail (like the anachronisms in depicting the Soviet coat-of-arms and rifle armament) was initiated by the non-profit fund the Arctic Border Guards, a local veteran organization. By erecting this monument, the fund's members not only praised the heroic deed of their comrades-in-arms from the past who defended the Soviet land, sea, and aerial domains during the war. They also enhanced the prestige of their service in the present, thereby entering the complex field of *memory politics*. Furthermore, it exemplifies the unequivocal yet multifaceted trends in Russian memory politics related to the increased attention to the war theme, particularly to the Great Patriotic War, expansion of state-centric notions of the past, particularly the "defense of the fatherland" narrative, and efforts to reinforce regional identities in border regions through the state providing them additional symbolic resources. In a manner similar to the metaphorical observation made by Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov about how the richness of the world can be *reflected* in a drop of water (Ilyenkov 1984), the manifold of features and trends of cultural memory production can be seen in one single monument – or, at least, that one monument can serve as a departure point for studying this magnetic manifold.

It is, however, somewhat paradoxical that the Border Guards monument pertains to a region that is highly militarized and securitized, yet in which the post-Soviet efforts to militarize and securitize national and local memories have not been pursued with the same intensity as in the two other Northern Russian regions that are examined in this study. In the Arkhangelsk region, local memory actors espousing patriotic views have sought to recreate the old Soviet memory museum to gain not only symbolic but also financial support from federal structures – and have succeeded in this endeavor. What

the resulting memory presents is not a Soviet-inherited ideologized vision of the particular episode of the local history, but rather a narrative that has been essentially remolded using the modern state-centric (and conveniently state-promoted) framing of Russia's past. In the Republic of Karelia, local tragic memories of the Stalinist terror have been subjected to ethnic and confessional categorization and, more recently, to a highly controversial intrusion by state structures. Driven by the urge to neutralize the perceived threats related to politicization and "foreign influence," these structures employed local academics and third-party activists to intentionally relativize the tragic memory of the state terror to another no less mournful memory – that of the war victims. In general, these peripheral repertoires of memory gained interpretations as episodes of patriotic defense of the Russian state from hostile foreigners.

The aforementioned changes in local memory landscapes have been caused by Russia's general authoritarian turn, which has also spilled over into memory politics. Since 2011-2012, the Putin state has intensified its attempts to engage with the historical past in order to legitimize its rule and reassemble Russia's national identity by underpinning it with the notion of a historically strong state. By establishing state-loyal institutions and promoting state-centric interpretations of the country's history, the federal authorities have also actively deployed them all over the country, including the three northern regions of Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and the Republic of Karelia, which are also border regions of high strategic importance.

This study's **hypothesis** is that over the post-Soviet years, regional memory politics in the Murmansk region, the Arkhangelsk region, and the Republic of Karelia have been subject to an intensifying influence from the federal center, with local memory repertoires being modified to align with federal priorities. Two features observed in the field of Russian federal memory politics over the past decade provide the rationale for this presupposition. These features are 1) the structural centralization and narrative transformation of the federal memory politics[2] and 2) the increased number of new memory projects and the increased state involvement in some existing ones. The objective of this study is to test the hypothesis by examining several selected

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[2] This aspect is detailed in Section 4.1.

cases of regional memory politics. In these case studies, I identify and clarify the specific local features of dealing with history and establish how federal actors and narratives influence these processes.

This introduction chapter explains the conceptual and theoretical considerations, evaluates the current research in the scholarly field of memory politics in Russia, explains the research methodology, provides a cross-case theoretical examination of the studied material, and briefly discusses the findings.

2.   State of the art and contribution of this study

So far, studies of Russian memory politics have developed into a solid scholarly field, with a variety of approaches employed and cases analyzed. Indeed, this development has been supplied by a rich material that emerged as a result of the Vladimir Putin regime's tremendous attempts to engage with history while tightening its grip on power since the early 2010s. The practices of state agents in manipulating historical facts and expanding the state's control over history research and teaching have attracted the interest of many scholars (Edele 2017; Koposov 2017; Krawatzek and Soroka 2021; Kurilla 2021; McGlynn 2023). However, research on the construction of official narratives from the Yeltsin era to the late Putin period demonstrates that the Russian state has always been interested in influencing public discourses on history (Malinova 2018a; Smith 2002; Titov 2017). The undeniable importance of the multifaceted memory of the Great Patriotic War has been recognized by scholars, resulting in thematic volumes (Gabowitsch 2020; Hoffmann 2021; Tumarkin 1994) and separate case studies (Bernstein 2016; Gabowitsch 2014; Konradova and Ryleva 2005). Numerous studies also address other key parts of Russia's violent past,[3] such as the Revolution and Civil War (Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020; Malinova 2018b, 2019) and the Stalinist repressions (Bogumil 2018; Etkind 2018; Klimenko 2023; Sniegon 2019).

In parallel with studying official policies on historical memory, several works examined the role of non-state actors (Adler 1993; Bogumił, Moran, and Harrowell

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[3] By violent past I mean (representations of) historical events related to episodes of mass state or social violence (wars, revolutions, political terror, etc.). For the most comprehensive overview of the memory of the violent past in post-Soviet Russia, see Blackburn and Klimenko (2024).

2015; Klimenko 2024; Miller 2013; Veselov 2020) and various grassroots memory initiatives, also considering their complex relations with the state (Dahlin 2017; Goode 2020; Kurilla 2021; Ponamareva 2020). Another strand of reviewed literature considered the circulation of historical narratives and the perception of key historical figures among Russia's general public (Blackburn 2018; Blackburn and Khlevnyuk 2023; Molotov and Khlevniuk 2024). A very important study by Wijermars (2018) explores how the state and its clientele construct the imagery of the positive historical past through mass media. An indicator of the field's disciplinary maturity was publishing the edited volumes and collective monographs on Russian memory politics (Lapin and Miller 2021; Miller and Efremenko 2020; Weiss-Wendt and Adler 2021), featuring a programmatic effort to encompass diverse study objects, methodologies, and scholarly positions within a single conceptual framework.

The same tendency can be observed in one of the most promising domains in terms of gaining knowledge on memory politics under Putin – regional memory politics. This subfield has been hitherto represented by a number of subject-specific case studies. Taking the case of the Russian European North, several works should be mentioned. Zhurzhenko (2021) demonstrated the diversity of memory repertoires of the Great Patriotic War in the Murmansk region and elucidated the role of the local media as conduits of these diverse memories. Golysheva (2024) presented her views on the recent patriotic reappropriation of the Mudyug Camp Museum being an important part of the Civil War memory in the Arkhangelsk region. Slightly more scholarly attention has been given to the violent past in the Republic of Karelia. Khlevnyuk (2018) provided a comparative view on the representation of Stalin's victims in Solovki (Arkhangelsk region) and Karelia's Sandarmokh. Bogumil (2018) contextualized her detailed account of the Sandarmokh memorial cemetery within a comprehensive ethnographic study of the GULag memory culture in contemporary Russia. Flige (2019) accurately chronicled Sandarmokh's history from the initial moment to the recent ordeals related to the controversial state-backed incursion. Different post-Soviet narratives of the wartime Finnish occupation of Karelia were analyzed in Golubev's (2015) study. Yet, no study has dealt with memory politics in the Russian North as a complex process of interaction between state-backed and grassroots activists invoking the violent past in line with their

agendas. In the most recent comprehensive monograph on Russian regional memory politics (Miller, Malinova, and Yefremenko 2023), the Northern regions were not included in the subnational selection of cases. Meanwhile, the examination of three regions as parts of a single macro-region ("South Russia") united by shared (and usable) past was previously conducted in a study by Miller and Kamentsev (2024).

This dissertation, which is composed of three cases of memory politics in the Russian European North, contributes to the ongoing research on Russian memory politics in several aspects. First, it geographically spans three Russian regions the research on which has hitherto been scarce. For example, Miller, Malinova, and Efremenko (2023) did not examine these regions either within separate case studies or as parts of a single macroregion, as they did with other subnational instances. This study complements this geographic gap by examining memory politics in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions as well as the Republic of Karelia. Second, it contributes to local memory studies by introducing into scholarly context the newly observed memory repertoires and actors, thereby helping to overcome reductionist distortions related to Kremlin-centrism. Implementation of memory policies in Russia heavily relies on informal networks of subordinates and political entrepreneurs (Blackburn and Klimenko 2024, 6). The study deals with these important issues by assessing the agency of local actors in constructing local memory repertoires as well as the extent and limits of federal impact on these repertoires. Third, by analyzing regional and local memories of the tragic and violent past, the dissertation provides yet another account on how a broad range of actors, from federal authorities to local civil communities deal with the most traumatic events in Russia's difficult history (the Great Patriotic War, the Civil War, and the Stalinist repressions). Fourth and last, the study ventures into taking a relatively new research perspective involving the analysis of the *interplay* between federal and local memory actors. The interplay perspective on memory politics explores how regional memory initiatives impact federal (national) priorities and how federal (national)-level actors use and influence local narratives and networks ("Memory Politics of the North 1993–2023" 2024). Employing the federal-regional interplay perspective thus allows to go beyond both traditional national and local levels of analysis by synthetizing the two into a single methodology which has proven effective in dealing with multi-level

policies related to opinion-making regarding the (violent) past (Markussen 2021). Using this perspective while exploring the aspects of top-down and bottom-up agency in the sphere of memory politics offers a clearer view of the priorities, intentions, and behavior of all actors involved (see Section 4.2. of this introduction).

3.   Concepts

Concepts are "theoretically loaded elements of theories" (Sohlberg and Leiulfsrud 2017, 1). In research practice, the selection and use of concepts are crucial for constructing theories, defining a scope of study, and identifying and approaching an object of inquiry. The understanding of concepts has changed since Durkheim's positivist view of them as irreducible, formal, and essentially static means of logical thought and social communication (see Durkheim 1995, 434-438). Rather than entities that are fixed in time and space or detached from the practices of observation and explanation of research material, research concepts are results of social processes of the construction of research objects (Leiulfsrud and Sohlberg 2021, 2-3). Therefore, to obtain a realistic and scientifically valuable representation of an object, it is essential not only to carefully select relevant concepts from a broad range of tools available to social scientists but also to reflect upon the very way in which these concepts have been invented and constructed. In the following section, I will present a brief critical overview of the main concepts I use in my study and how I choose to define these concepts.

3.1.   Social memory

A conceptual core of the research field of memory studies, the notion of *social* (or originally *collective*) *memory* rests upon a rich scholarly tradition that ascends to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. A staunch follower of Émile Durkheim, Halbwachs pointed out that individual memories are mediated by specific features of social consciousness – *social frameworks*, with storage, circulation, and transformation of the content of the individual being determined by these socially based structures (Halbwachs 1992). By pointing out the socially constructed nature of the past and the

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pervasiveness of a presentist approach towards constructing it (Coser 1992, 26-27), Halbwachs preempted the programmatic views of memory studies as studies of social practices related to constructing and using memories as well as indicated the link between structuring the past and sustaining collective identities. The chief cause Halbwachs is regarded as a founding father of memory studies[4] is that for the notion of social memory, he initiated an epistemological break (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991) from the contaminations related to everyday language and ideology. He attempted to transform the concept of memory from a speculative category related to experience into a heuristic term of (formal) sociology. Yet, the complete epistemological transition from the everyday understanding of memory as an ability to store information to memory as a metaphor referring to all modes of use of the imagined past in non-academic contexts was achieved only in the following decades.

A significant challenge inherent to this concept has been the indistinct delineation between it and other related concepts, including (social) consciousness, knowledge, and history. As my study mostly deals with the conceptual distinction of social memory from (academic) history, I will take a closer look at it. As Wertsch (2008b, 145) observes, although Halbwachs is credited with articulating this distinction, the incompatibility between the growth of historical knowledge and the integrity of national communities was already identified by Ernest Renan over four decades earlier. A significant contribution to the debate on collective memory's external demarcations and internal varieties was made by Jan Assmann. He distinguished between two "*modi memorandi*, ways of remembering", namely between *cultural memory*, which is embodied in artifacts and practices, and *communicative memory,* which is unable to overwhelm the personal level and does not sustain in the society after the death of its vessel (Assmann 2008). This distinction between two types of social memory, one ossifying and transmittable, and the other vivid and nonpersistent provided a profound taxonomical tool capable of attributing diverse objects of collective memory studies to their particular places within the discipline.[5]

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[4] For the critique of this view, see Gensburger (2016).

[5] Still, it is unclear how one can distinguish memory as a "form of historical consciousness" from actual knowledge about the past. Although Assmann contrasts memory, which is "local, egocentric, and specific to a

One of the most notable contributions to the dialectics of history and memory was made by Pierre Nora. In his attempt to draw upon an ontology of social representations of the past, Nora postulates the deterioration of "real environments of memory" (*milieux de mémoire*) and their transformation into "*sites of memory*" (*lieux de mémoire*) that preserve "a sense of historical continuity" (Nora 1989, 7). The modern rapid societal transformation launched a process of "anchoring memory" and "memory boom," which manifested in a drastic numerical growth of "sites of memory". These sites are of an incomparably greater significance than history, which is understood by Nora as an "intellectual and secular production" bound to "temporal continuities" and "progressions and relations between things" (Nora 1989, 9). In Nora's view, history does not produce representations of the past to the same extent as memory, which is expressed in the multiplicity of its "sites." While gaining attention among scholars, Nora's concept also faced significant criticism for being ahistorical, reductionist, particularist, and even gallocentric and imperialist (see Rothberg 2010). Subsequent theoretical considerations on the ontological underpinnings of social memory posited a processual and mutable nature of various practical manifestations of memory. Michael Rothberg (2010, 7) suggested the explanatory model of *"noeuds de mémoire" (knots of memory)*, characterized as an open-ended rhizomatic network able to bypass territorial or identity exceptionalisms. Rather than being constituted as a social framework attached to some group or identity, collective memory is a network open to many social actors, including its radical opponents.[6]

Assmann's notion of cultural memory and Nora's concept of "sites of memory" both argued that social memory is part of the cultural production process and thus subject to some logic of selection. In other words, some representations of the past are deemed

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group and its values" and therefore particularistic, to knowledge, which has "a universalist perspective, a tendency towards generalization and standardization," he claims just in the next paragraph that "memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself" (Assmann 2008, 113-114). Such ambiguity is presumably inherited by Assmann from the Neo-Kantian epistemological distinction between *"Natur"* and *"Kultur,"* according to which collective memory is subject to the psychic-general while cultural memory is subject to the cultural-specific.

[6] Indeed, processes of creating, renegotiating and contesting social memories typically involve varieties of actors, narratives and environmental factors, rather than revolve around robust sets of physical sites and meanings. Accordingly, in this study, I prefer to ontologically conceive social memories in Rothberg's way, not Nora's.

worthy of perpetuation, whereas others become marginalized for various reasons. Ann Rigney attempted to resituate social memory studies by detaching it from the traditional binary it had used to constitute jointly with traditional ("formal") historiography. She suggested instead adopting a cultural understanding of memory as a process of the transfer of meaning(s) explained by the Foucauldian logic of culture as the production of meaning through selection, representation, and interpretation. The scope of social memory studies, she concludes, ought to be shifted towards *the means of media* through which the products of memorial practices are "communicated, circulated and exchanged" (Rigney 2005, 11). Similarly, Olick and Robbins (1998, 133-134) conclude their comprehensive overview of the evolution of social memory studies by emphasizing that "memory is *a* central, if not *the* central, medium through which identities are constituted," also advocating for conceptualizing memories and identities as processes, not as possessions or properties.

Another stream of criticism has been directed against the metaphorical nature of this concept. Duncan Bell (2008) argues that "collective memory" has been used mostly as a metaphor rather than a literally understood concept. The tradition of regarding social and collective memory in a metaphorical manner has existed for almost as long as the concept itself (see Bloch 1925). Importantly, in the structure of this metaphor, the vehicle is memory as a body function storing information. If we consider the concept of collective/social memory at face value, it posits that the society or social groups are constituted as human bodies, with diverse ways of producing representations of the past being subject to biologizing and personalizing reductionist interpretations. This has made scholars from memory studies introduce the other metaphors taken from psychology and natural sciences as "trauma" and "healing" into the discipline's vocabulary[7] from where they came into the everyday and ideologized discourses.[8] By adopting biologizing and personalizing metaphors, social research is vulnerable to non-scientific contaminations brought by "spontaneous sociology" and meaningless

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[7] For the insightful yet non-critical scholarly adaptation of these and similar metaphors see Etkind (2018). For the critical reflection of the use of trauma metaphor in social memory studies, see Olick (1999).

[8] For instance, my interviewees often used this set of metaphors ("the trauma of the Stalinist repressions should be healed through the practices of remembrance") to explain their positions.

language games (see Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991, 20-24). To address the ambiguities of sociological metaphors, Swedberg (2020, 252-253) suggests looking at their substitution meaning. In the case of social memory, the substitution meaning refers to *all modes of non-scientific treatment of the past*.

From there emerges a contradiction between the microlevel and macrolevel of the theory of social memory. Traditionally, various conceptual frameworks and approaches related to social memory are used for assessing the logic and contingency of how the past is used by small groups and local identities, or for understanding particular cultural trends and products. However, the same frameworks and approaches are also used to deal with large and complex entities such as national identities, grand historical narratives, and national memory policies. As a result, to designate research objects that are associated with the non-scientific treatment of the past, we traditionally use concepts such as "collective/social memory," which are internally contradictory and lack the relevant tools for analyzing the chosen objects. As a result, we are forced to borrow theories and methodologies from neighboring yet other scholarly disciplines such as political science, history/sociology of ideas, cultural history, media studies, etc. Truly, the regularities related to the emergence and persistence of groups commemorating certain mythologized past events are very different from the regularities of the state structures instrumentally using elements of discourse on history; yet they are approached using the same concept of social memory. Bell (2008) criticizes the model of communal memory construction in which memories of small groups ascend to the national level being driven by the ethical obligations of their members. In his radical rejection of social memory for being a mere confusing metaphor, he argues that academic accounts of it tend to neglect the political logic behind the selection and transformation of collective representations of the past (or "myths"). While being engaged in mediation of these representations, institutions possessing social power prioritize the certain ones, by so alienating the entire groups whose representations have been omitted or rejected.[9] In turn, underrepresented or marginalized groups can counter these efforts through practices of cultural contestation of dominant discourses about the historical past

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[9] On several types of social forgetting involving various agents, including power elites, corporations, social groups, cultural communities etc., see Connerton (2008).

(Foucault 1977, 160). Thus, the reproduction of group representations of the past is conditioned not only by cultural mechanisms of value-based verification but also by the political choice of power institutions. Therefore, the *mediation* of memory by those who possess the power of giving value to objects represents a crucial research object for a researcher of social memory.

To explore the role of social memory in social *mediation,* one ought to consider its structural position in the system of social reproduction. In Althusserian terms, memory is definitely a part of the "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser 1970), thereby serving as a mediator between the social self and the Self as well as between the (imagined) single and the (imagined) collective. At the individual level, social memory serves as a mediator between the individual consciousness and the understanding of how the present social order has been formed in the past, thereby functioning as a method of ideological control. In light of the theory of social metabolic control by István Mészáros (1995), social memory may be conceived as a derivative phenomenon emerging from the practices of the civil society/political state dialectical couple, which is, in turn, a specific form of the "second order mediation" of the capital system. Just as the other "second order mediations," such as nuclear family, alienated production, the world market, and nation-states facilitate the reproduction of the capital system and, in turn, social cohesion (Mészáros 1995, 108-109), memory, uncritically adopted by groups and purposefully manipulated by power institutions, sustains the current ideological order at the cost of alienation of the masses from the actual retrospective knowledge about the society. It can also serve as a medium for "soft forms of domination" that operate implicitly and without coercion while reproducing inequalities (Sawyer 2017, 109) and ultimately policing the current social order.

To sum up this overview, I will synthesize the theoretical reflections described above into an operational definition of social memory I use in this thesis. With sociology having moved from studying facts and systems to studying practices (see Bourdieu 1990), the concept of social memory has made a long transformational way from a thing or a reified "mystical group mind" to "distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various

social sites" (Olick and Robbins 1998, 112). My understanding of social memory can be demonstrated by several basic assumptions:

- First, social memory as a research object is thereby understood as a social process of constructing and mediating representations of the imagined past.
- Second, the construction and mediation of memory are conditioned by concrete cultural and political logics of reproduction and transfer of meanings.
- Third, there should be a distinction between the mediation of memory and memory as a mediator. Mediation of memory is associated with cultural and political practices through which the imagined past is selected and transferred. Memory as a mediator refers to social functions of memory as mediation between the subject and the object of history.

Having considered these assumptions related to the general theory of social memory studies, I proceed to the specific conceptual framework of memory politics. According to Olga Malinova (2024, 18), "a stored part of cultural memory could easily move to its functional part." Memory politics thus deals with practices of enabling memories, or the processes of their intentional movement from *reservoirs* to *repertoires,* and reveals the power dynamics within the production and utilization of meanings of the past.

3.2. Memory politics

The political processes behind the practices of (re)mediation of social memory thus constitute the matter of this study. *Memory politics* (or *politics of memory*)[10] is usually understood as a set of public efforts by the state and other social actors to propagate and circulate certain representations of the past for political purposes (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b, 7; Lebow 2006, 13; Malinova 2020, 27). In scholarly literature, the concept of memory politics often neighbors upon or is interchanged by other relative concepts such as "(political) use of the past"(Malinova and Miller 2021), "politics of history" (Zinn 1990), "mnemopolitics" (Sakwa 2021) or even "falsification

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[10] Both terms are interchangeable.

of history" (Weiss-Wendt 2021). The latter term in fact pertains to an extremely limited number of cases where social actors deliberately (and typically covertly) distort or damage the most general accounts or documentary sources of a historical event. In both democratic and authoritarian polities, the risk of being exposed for those engaged in such actions is very high, therefore actors typically refrain from *falsifying* history but instead resort to *manipulating* it. Similarly, while those possessing power do practice effacing undesirable artifacts of social memory, repressive erasure or prescriptive forgetting of "sites of memory" are not the only ways of dealing with them (see Connerton 2008). Although the terms "memory politics" and "mnemopolitics" are generally synonymous, the latter is more closely associated with the endeavors of "big" actors, such as nation-states or supranational structures, to maintain ontological security by mobilizing relevant historical narratives (Mälksoo 2018; Sakwa 2021). The term "history politics/politics of history" has been employed in a multitude of contexts, ranging from the academic discussions on the ethics and responsibility of historians as producers of knowledge (see Zinn 1990) to the attempts by conservative historians to institutionalize certain historical narratives (Hackmann 2018). The concept of "political use of history/the past" is more concrete in delineating the *observandum* and is better entrenched in the reviewed literature. However, it refers to a broader range of practices of political appealing to the past, regardless of whether they are part of some coherent strategy (Malinova and Miller 2021, 14-15).

In this thesis, I prefer the term "memory politics" to "political use of the past" for two reasons. The use of the past in any form, if understood in any but metaphorical way, is hardly possible since the past has already *passed*. Consequently, actors do not engage with the past in its original form but rather with its *representations*, which are shaped by cultural and political influences. Secondly, social and political actors may not always be aware of themselves developing their strategies deliberately. However, this does not imply that they act without any strategic vision concerning their actions.[11]

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[11] In stating this, I do not intend to deny the usefulness of the term "political use of the past." Rather, it is my contention that such cases (or, at the very least, those that I examine in this thesis) are part of the wider field of memory politics and can be approached and understood using the respective conceptual framework.

As memory is a preeminently powerful binder for identities, memory politics often serves as a useful way to construct or reinforce identities of various kinds. The notion of "common historical memories" being a criterion of nationhood emerged as early as the mid-nineteenth century (Mill 1910, pp. 359-366, cited in Hobsbawm 1990, 20). Similarly as mass historical indoctrination (Ferro 1984), invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and industrialized cultural communication (Anderson 2006), memory is constitutive for national identities, which is why it is commonly used by national elites and their accomplices to strengthen the sense of commonality among their citizenries. Another potential dividend for them in dealing with memory is the legitimation of their rule. For similar reasons, memory can be employed not only as part of top-down manipulation but also in bottom-up efforts to strengthen local identities, claim resources from central institutions, or solve other local issues. In addition to being a symbolic resource for certain social and political actors, memory ultimately contributes to the production of social consent and the maintenance of current hegemonic relations in culture and politics. In Putin's Russia, all the mentioned functions of memory politics, namely legitimation of the political regime (Bürger 2016; Malinova 2021), construction of national identity (Blackburn 2018; Klimenko 2018; Sakwa 2021), and production of consent (Gjerde 2015), have also become crucial tasks for the power elite's memory policies.

Similarly to other areas of public politics, memory politics is exerted at various *levels* of decision-making, which may also align with the levels of political analysis. The specific configurations of levels may vary depending on the types of polity and parameters of center-periphery relations, but in most cases, one can distinguish between the *national* (or *federal* in Russia's case) and *local/regional levels*. To gain a comprehensive understanding of memory-political processes, it is also important to examine the interactions between the actors at different levels and identify conflicts in their respective agendas or narratives. A useful conceptual framework in this way is the perspective of interplay between the levels which is briefly explained above in the "Contribution of this study" section and below in the "Regional memory politics and the interplay between federal and regional actors and narratives" section. Russian

memory politics at the federal and regional levels, as well as the interplay between these levels, are explained in more detail in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 of this thesis.

As seen, memory politics is usually associated with the activity of a specific type of political actors, i.e., *mnemonic actors*. While instrumentalizing memory repertoires and legitimizing their own activities, mnemonic actors employ and/or construct various *narratives* as well as use and/or develop *sociocultural infrastructure of memory*. These terms will be explained in the subsequent sections.

3.3.   Mnemonic actors and memory regimes

The concept of *mnemonic actors* is a common designation of social and/or political actors in memory studies. According to one of the most used definitions by Bernhard and Kubik (2014a, 4), mnemonic actors are "political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past." The definition is sufficiently inclusive to permit the designation of any social actor who is purposefully invoking memory repertoires as a mnemonic actor. To differentiate between mnemonic actors, Bernhard and Kubik (2014b, 11-15) propose a typology that includes mnemonic "warriors," "pluralists," "abnegators" and "prospectives." These pure Weberian types are undoubtedly useful for orientating ourselves within a complex field of practices and strategies, as well as mapping the actors in accordance with the authors' delineations. However, they may also fail to provide non-simplified analytical accounts of borderline cases.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, in this thesis, mnemonic actors are classified primarily by the main domain of social engagement or another subject relevant to each particular case. Some actors can also be conveniently characterized as "mnemonic/memory entrepreneurs." As "influence entrepreneurs" (Laruelle and Limonier 2021, 318-319) in the memory sphere, "mnemonic entrepreneurs" are actors who assume risks and invest material resources into memory initiatives, intending to attract stakeholders who would provide a return on their investments. They typically (and rightly) attract public and academic interest, given their ability to combine access to larger resource flows with a high level of engagement in processes of infrastructure and/or narrative change. Crucially, even if "memory entrepreneurs" initially use their

own resources, they usually seek to obtain more substantial and stable funding and support, and, if successful, to become investees of the state or large corporations themselves. For a memory researcher, the interaction between such entrepreneurs and other actors is of particular interest, especially the parameters, conditions, and outcomes of such interaction.

Putin's Russia, with its booming memory politics, features a large variety of mnemonic actors. Although the federal-level Russian memory politics is highly centralized and relies on the state and its clientele, several non-state actors like the International Memorial or the Russian Orthodox Church are also influential, engaging in both large federal and regional memory projects. At the regional level, there are sets of local actors, including dedicated and reputable activists as well as those who participate in memory politics on an occasional or opportunistic basis. The most general accounts of federal and regional mnemonic actors are provided in Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

Originally, the concept and typology of mnemonic actors are parts of the *memory regime* theoretical framework. A memory regime is "a set of cultural and institutional practices that are designed to publicly commemorate and/or remember" a single historical event or process (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b). Just as the actual dispositions and strategies of mnemonic actors may involve mixed or borderline cases that fall outside the proposed typology, memory regimes may sometimes deviate from the ideal types outlined by the authors.

Memory regimes are generally understood as dynamic entities shaped by rivalries of actors, narratives, and political cultures (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b, 14, 16; Dujisin 2024, 108-109). In post-Soviet Russia, the relationship between federal and regional memory regimes may vary from compatibility to incompatibility, although the federal state often seeks to reduce the incompatibilities between national and local memories. Both the state and other actors frequently act as mnemonic warriors, which eventually leads to establishing antagonistic (Bull and Hansen 2016) or fractured modes of remembrance (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b).

In my study, I will not draw extensively on the memory regimes framework, as it is better suited for analyzing larger objects and processes. I give only brief

characteristics to memory regimes in each of the three case studies, as they summarize some important changes in local memories caused by federal impact (see sub-section 7.2). My research is focused on actors and their strategies and behavior, as well as their interaction with narratives and memory infrastructure. Given the pivotal role of narratives in mediating various representations of the past, also in the domain of sociocultural infrastructure, I give particular attention to them by assessing the aspects of their pervasiveness, contestation, and change.

3.4. Narratives

Following the "discursive turn" in studies of historiography (Ankersmith 1994; White 1973) and memory politics (Verovšek 2016) which highlighted the significance of how societal ideas are communicated, narratives gained prominence as units of analysis within memory studies. The term "narrative" usually refers to a concise and coherently structured account of a specific event or sequence of events that follow some basic templates that are integral to how the human mind makes sense of reality – romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire (see White 1973). Narratives serve as social conduits for personal experiences (Olick 1999, 345), as "textual resources for collective memory" (Wertsch 2008b, 122), and as basic organizing structures for representations of the past (Malinova 2019, 223; Wertsch 2008b). Narratives are considered to be extremely expedient tools of memory politics for several reasons. Firstly, they have a simplified structure which makes them easily comprehensible for mnemonic actors and accessible to the general public (De Fina 2017, 236). Secondly, they possess both retrospective and prospective aspects, thereby conveniently facilitating the delivery of usable references to the past and the drawing on implications in the present or future (Malinova 2019, 223; see also Article B). Thirdly, narratives are highly resilient structures that are able to simultaneously resist contestations and adapt to inputs that cannot be overcome. Narratives are structural features of memory politics; rather than being merely useful tools, they are practical operators of discursive struggle. Consequently, mnemonic actors are unable to forego using narratives in their endeavors.

Speaking on varieties of memory narratives, (Wertsch 2008a, 140) differentiates between two categories: specific narratives, which are concrete, detailed, and expressed, and schematic narrative templates, explained as "more generalized structures used to generate multiple specific narratives with the same basic plot." Specific narratives evolve and change, whereas narrative templates, which are products of "deep collective memory," reveal striking conservatism and resistance to change. Although the notions of narrative templates and "deep collective memory" seem rather speculative, the heterogeneity between narratives in terms of persistence, comprehensiveness, and relatability is undoubtedly the case. Narratives can at least be subdivided, as suggested by Anna De Fina (2017, 233), into grand or master narratives, which are "public dominant discourses about particular social issues" that also serve as "frames through which other discourses […] are interpreted," and specific narratives centered around particular places and events. This distinction allows access to the interplay between strategic grand narratives and local narratives that interpret specific historical events. I therefore use it in my work on analyzing the interplay between federal and local narratives in the Russian North. In particular, this distinction is useful when assessing the interaction between the *longue duree* master narrative of the thousand-year-old Russian statehood (Malinova 2018a; Mjør 2019) promoted by the federal center with local narratives that are constructed by specific actors to interpret specific events. While the former provides a generalized interpretative framework for the latter (Wertsch 2008b), the entire process is made possible through the exercise of power, which is basically the subject of memory politics.

3.5. Memory infrastructure

In a more expansive sense, *memory infrastructure* is defined as "backgrounded resources for practicing memory" (Johnson 2020, 4) and "social practices and technological affordances used for the production, storage, and transmission of the information about the past" (Makhortykh 2023, 1502). In the context of memory politics, memory infrastructure refers to various sociocultural and technical devices that enable mnemonic actors to propagate their narratives. In this narrower sense, it may

encompass public institutions (museums), works of visual, musical, or narrative art (monuments, memorials, films, songs, literature), public holidays, commemorative rituals, and toponyms (Malinova 2024, 18). Certainly, objects of memory infrastructure cannot be considered the most authentic vessels of memory as they "explicitly obfuscate social issues related to memory because they are built to do just that" (Johnson 2020, 4-6, 13). In this regard, the memory politics perspective offers significant promise, as it is attentive to the processes of both developing infrastructure and contextualizing them using narratives or other objects of infrastructure.

I use this concept mainly for memorials, monuments, and museums, which are the most common memory referents in Russian built environments.[12] Objects of memory infrastructure are often physical and thus require maintenance and care to prevent them from deteriorating over time. This is particularly evident in the Russian North, with the local infrastructure suffering from extreme climate conditions and a meager economic situation. Poor maintenance may place responsible actors at a disadvantage or, conversely, give them or other actors a handle to claim stewardship and, if performing well, gain (memory-)political capital.

The concept of memory infrastructure is related to that of cultural heritage, although there is a clear distinction between the two. Cultural heritage is a generic term referring to cultural artifacts that are publicly recognized as having a specific value. In contrast, memory infrastructure encompasses objects used by mnemonic actors. Both concepts have overlapping referents; yet, in this study, the concept of memory infrastructure is preferred due to its compliance with the other concepts used.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1. Federal memory politics in Russia

By federal memory politics, I mean those elements of memory politics that are produced, initiated, formulated, and articulated at the federal level of Russia's politics. The Russian state plays a central role in federal memory politics. Following the

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[12] To designate all monuments pertaining to a certain locality, I sometimes use the concept "memoryscape".

perestroika the state in Russia has lost most of the former institutional capacities for securing ideological control over the society; yet the importance of building a new national community and legitimizing the new political regime made the Russian power elite draw on the historical past (Golubev and Nikolai 2023; Koposov 2017; Malinova 2018a, 2021; McGlynn 2023; Pearce 2021; Titov 2017; Weiss-Wendt 2021).[13] By abandoning the old Soviet ideologized metanarrative, which was preoccupied with visions of the future rather than those of the past (Malinova 2020, 36; Sevast'ianova and Efremenko 2020), the post-Soviet Russian state as a mnemonic actor transformed, using the typology suggested by Bernhard and Kubik (2014b), from a "mnemonic prospective" into a "mnemonic warrior," with significant implications.[14] The state is represented by its numerous offices and agencies as well as individual officials. In addition to direct exertion, the Russian state engages in memory politics through a complex network of government-sponsored non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) and umbrella organizations, as well as state-loyal public politicians and experts. The two memory-political GONGOs with the closest ties to the state (and therefore the most extensively researched) are RIO (*Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*) and RVIO (*Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo*). While RIO is mainly a coordination network for a range of research, educational, and cultural institutions, RVIO largely functions as a typical post-Communist "national memory institution," with even greater functional flexibility (Lapin 2020). Two major non-state federal mnemonic actors are the International Memorial Society, an NGO researching and commemorating the victims of Soviet mass repressions (Adler 1993), also performing as a political opposition actor, and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which is traditionally state-aligned in defining memory policies, although enjoying a certain degree of autonomy (Bogumil 2018; Klimenko 2024; Miller and Pakhaliuk 2023, 20). Additionally, expert associations, whether affiliated with or independent from the

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[13] For a succinct overview of the post-Soviet memory politics in Russia, see Golubev and Nikolai (2023).

[14] The researchers traditionally outline three periods for this process: (1) Boris Yeltsin's presidency of the 1990s, with the particularly critical official attitude towards the Soviet past; (2) early Vladimir Putin's presidency of the 2000s, with elaboration of a more conciliatory and "eclectic" historical master narrative; and (3) late Putin of the 2010s, with a more consolidated and proactive official memory politics that also was not immune to the use of conflicting narratives (Golubev and Nikolai 2023; Malinova 2018a; Titov 2017; Wijermars 2018).

state, perform in federal memory politics as policy advisors and knowledge producers (Miller 2013).

Overall, over the last decade, federal memory politics has been characterized by *centralization*, both financial and organizational, which particularly manifested in strengthening memory institutions. In addition to establishing GONGOs, the Putin state has sought to streamline decision-making processes by introducing legislative regulations pertaining to memory politics, with a particular focus on the memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) (Koposov 2017). The state has been reaffirming its claims to the symbolic legacy of the Great Patriotic War, with strong references to the experience of national unity and defense of the fatherland (Kurilla 2020), as well as other wars in which the Russian Empire/Soviet Union participated. The GPW has also become organically inscribed into the official master narrative of Russia's history centered on the ideas of a (strong) state and statehood. Military history in general, despite its established divisive potential (Bækken 2021), is seen by Russian federal decision-makers as a valuable resource for achieving social consensus and state consolidation through creating a positive and even glorious vision of the past (Gjerde 2015, 154), for what it patronizes military-patriotic organizations like RVIO. With regard to the major non-state actors, namely Memorial and the ROC, the centralization has affected them as well; the Memorial was dissolved by a court order for its both historical position and civic activity (Torbakov 2022), and the church effectively became a de facto instrument of the state in formulating its memory policies (Klimenko 2024).

Driven by the statist orientation of the Putin regime's discourse (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b, 26; Blackburn 2021), federal memory politics has sought to *consolidate the official narrative* by reassembling it from fragmented elements of patriotic historical discourse into an eclectic yet functional *longue durée* narrative, which is explicitly statist ("a thousand-year Russian state") and has a sound "civilizational" ambition (Blackburn 2021). War triumphs and economic achievements became emphasized while other parts of the country's history that are significant for the society but "inconvenient" for the state (revolts, revolutions, repressions) became essentially reframed in state-centric

and/or national-patriotic ways (Klimenko 2023; Kolonitsky and Matskevich 2019; Malinova 2018b; Mjør 2019).

In light of these and other authoritarian tendencies in official memory policies, routinely interpreted as manifestations of the "failed post-communist transition" (see Blackburn and Klimenko 2024), a body of reviewed literature places the Russian case alongside other, consolidated or evolving, past or present, autocracies (Koposov 2011; McGlynn 2023; Stallard 2022; Weiss-Wendt 2021), In addition to such political regime-based approach towards macroregional mapping of Russia's case, there is another view that situates Russia in Eastern European context, acknowledging not only certain aspects of common geography and legacy shared by Russia and its closest neighbors to the West but also the interconnection and likelihood of the state and popular practices in both instances (Blacker, Etkind, and Fedor 2013; Krawatzek and Soroka 2021; Malinova and Miller 2021; Miller and Efremenko 2020; Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2015). It has to be said that, in addition to domestic incentives, the Putin state's behavior in the realm of memory politics has been shaped by the dynamics of international relations. The formation of post-Soviet national identities has been associated with "ontological anxiety" which has resulted in confrontational state-driven memory politics (Dujisin 2024; Mälksoo 2015; Sakwa 2021). As national identities became inextricably bound up with official narratives on history, consolidation of nation-centric (in the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine) and state-centric (in Belarus and Russia) narratives legitimized power systems within these countries while simultaneously limiting opportunities for dialogue between them. As a result, memory politics in Eastern Europe, manifested by the "war of monuments," official discourses of victimhood and guilt, and persistent instrumentalization of historical legacy arguments has become a paradigmatic case for an interstate memory conflict, which in turn influences national memory politics at all levels. An essential aspect of this process is the formation of networks that bind together memory institutions, historiographers, politicians, and post-communist archives that manage (or manipulate) historical memory of the tragic and violent past (Dujisin 2024). That said, in studying memory politics in Eastern Europe, it is essential to consider both internal and external factors influencing the dynamic of political regimes. In doing so,

studying networks involved in the production of "national memory" discourses ought to be complemented by assessing the interstate relations in this European macroregion.

4.2. Regional memory politics, mnemonic actors, and the interplay perspective

For a researcher, regional memory politics is an almost inexhaustible repository of prospective case studies. Prior to defining regional memory politics as "memory politics in the (Russian) regions," it seems reasonable to clarify the notion of a region and regionality. Traditionally, regions have been referred to as time- and space-specific entities that are institutionalized through numerous practices and discourses related to governance, politics, culture, and economy (Paasi 2011, 11). By considering the constitutive role of cultural and political practices and discourses for regionality, we can think of certain geographic zones that are interconnected by common historical experiences and political practices of their instrumentalization as regions of memory. Another important question is the selection of constitutive criteria for delineating the imaginary boundaries of such "regions of memory." Such criteria can be specific locations or characteristics of interaction with the center. Using these criteria, Miller and Pakhaliuk (2023) suggest uniting several regions into clusters, thus enabling the perspective of interrelated processes and transfers within these regions. In particular, a cluster "region of memory" composed of several territorial regions is by no means an ideational construction embedded in social consciousness, but a conceptual tool used by a researcher to delineate the regions' common features of local memory settings and patterns of interaction with the federal center. Clustering transcends both national and local levels of memory politics by analyzing them *at the mezolevel*, aiming to capture federal-regional interaction by identifying its key modes and features and assessing the regularities between these modes and features (Miller and Pakhaliuk 2023, 10-12). The analysis of this interaction also helps identify and assess the asymmetries between federal and local mnemonic actors, with the former typically possessing more resources and thus enjoying more favorable positions.

In this thesis, I examine regions as parts of the country (see e.g. Donovan 2019, 13). The primary study object is therefore regional memory politics as a set of processes related to the political use of history that take place within three territorial units of the Russian Federation. Regional memory politics is usually understood in two ways: 1) in a narrow sense, as implementation of agendas of federal actors (e.g., RVIO or ROC) in regional and local domains; 2) in a broad sense, as an assemblage of narratives, actors, infrastructure, etc. of the regional scale or significance. To provide a more comprehensive account of the uses of the past in the Russian periphery, I use the second, broader definition.

The types and configurations of local mnemonic actors vary across regional settings, although some categories can be observed more or less regularly. *Regional authorities and municipalities* often act as mnemonic actors, driven by their official duties and public demand, while participating in commemorative practices. They may initiate commemorations, provide funding, communicate with higher levels of power, or even follow federal directives, as demonstrated by the controversial official incursion in Sandarmokh (see Article C).

Among the key regional actors analyzed in this thesis are the *search and recovery squads (poiskoviki)*, which are volunteer organizations that locate and rebury the remains of victims of past atrocities, typically of wars but sometimes also of mass repressions. The term *poiskoviki* is in large grade an umbrella construction united by a common type of commemorative activity but scoping diverse and fragmented groups and organizations whose agendas, incentives, sources of funding, and relations with the authorities vary considerably. They are often misinterpreted as figureheads in the Kremlin's mastermind effort to marginalize the memory of the state terror or indiscriminately labeled as yet another vessels of "patriotic education" (e.g. Koposov 2017, 223-224). In reality, while some *poiskoviki* may interact with the authorities or even be patronized by them, others act on their own or even openly criticize state policies (Britskaia and Artemieva 2023). In 2013, separate regional *poiskoviki* groups were co-opted into a centralized "Russian Search Movement," with increased funding and activities (Kurilla 2023, 1269-1270) receiving more media coverage and official

mentions in the speeches of Russia's top officials (Goncharova 2020, 158-160). However, while *poiskoviki* have mostly responded positively to federal centralization and funding efforts, some have tended to be dissatisfied with other changes related to increased state involvement. For example, many of them have criticized the RVIO's approaches to locating and commemorating the dead and official patriotic initiatives such as *"Iunarmiia"* (the Youth Army) as manifestations of *"ura-patriotizm"* ("patriotism for show"), as opposed to the *poiskoviki*'s own notion of authentic patriotism embedded in search and reburial practices (Dahlin 2017; Goncharova 2020; Shokova, Glushkova, and Dereviankin 2020). Overall, for regional poiskoviki, being loyal to the state does not necessarily mean adhering to state-promoted frameworks of patriotism and national history.

Another important regional actor is the *local lore experts (kraevedy)*. Like *poiskoviki*, the term *kraevedy* is overly inclusive and may refer to amateur or professional historians, ethnographers, museum workers, or journalists having expert knowledge of local backgrounds and affairs. The pursuit of *kraevedenie*, an idiographic approach to local history, represents a specific intellectual occupation that has emerged from the post-Stalin revival of both bottom-up and local elites' interest in local heritage as a new source for producing knowledge and strengthening regional identities (Donovan 2019, 20). In addition to knowledge, *kraevedy*'s crucial resource that enables them to influence local memory issues is their reputation. Most reputable *kraevedy* provide inputs into narratives on local history and memory that often challenge official frames and interpretations. Although these contributions are no less often not free of fictitious facts or subjective renditions, lest they become objects of public criticism, *kraevedenie* links national and local patriotisms for which it has been promoted by authorities (Benovska-Sabkova 2009, 124). Nevertheless, as with the case of poiskoviki, the relationship between *kraevedy* and authorities is characterized by a spectrum of interactions, ranging from the closest form of collaboration to a complete breakdown in trust. These grassroots activists play a pivotal role in influencing the narrative of local memory. Through their engagement in discursive conflicts over the interpretation of historical events, they contribute to the evolution of local memory cultures and politics.

Patriotic organizations, including local military-patriotic clubs, the Youth Army branches, or even the activists of the "military-historical reenactment" *("voenno-istoricheskaia rekonstruktsiia")* movement are also engaged in regional memory politics. Rather than functioning as independent actors, these organizations serve as reliable sources of manpower for more resourceful actors, such as RVIO regional branches or regional authorities, as extras at commemorative ceremonies and other patriotic events. More independent in terms of resources and agency are *veteran organizations*, uniting veterans from various military or civil service branches. Initially social support and networking organizations, veteran organizations also serve as conservative "moral watchdogs" of war memories and frequent initiators of war memorials. Furthermore, many affluent ones have been serving as conduits for Russian influence in neighboring countries (Myklebost 2023b).

The last but not least important group in this list are the *occasional activists*, all of whom are included in this category because their participation in local memory politics is not part of their normal activities. The range of these mnemonic amateurs is extremely broad, from civil activists engaged in human rights or environmental activism to a host of professional and local collectives. No less vast is the variety of their incentives to engage with commemorative practices, be that the sense of civic duty, the need to articulate local identity, or just the desire to diversify the practices of everyday life (see Article A about the Murmansk region war memorials). Such grassroots "citizen-based commemorative activism" (Danilova 2015, 212) is contingent upon external sources of funding and administrative support. Consequently, it is susceptible to influence from powerful counteragents such as authorities or private corporations on many matters.

When discussing the federal-regional *interplay* (see Figure 2), it is reasonable to distinguish between the *top-down* impact on local memories made by federal actors and the *bottom-up* agency of local actors. Considering the *top-down* impact, with the current aggravation of the international situation, the borderland character of regions attracts federal actors as the federal center sees more challenges for itself there (Miller and Pakhaliuk 2023, 12). There is evidence that the Russian state has sought to enhance the

structural control and conceptual coherence between federal- and regional-level memory initiatives more actively than was evident prior to 2012 (Malinova 2018a, 98-100; Titov 2017, 87-89; Wijermars 2018, 3-4, 8). As part of this effort, one can observe the creation of new federal mnemonic institutions with an articulated regional focus (Lapin 2020; Weiss-Wendt 2021), "taming" and incorporating the existing regional initiatives and scaling them up to the national level (Fedor 2017; Goode 2020; Ponamareva 2020), providing new symbolic resources to the regions (Song 2018), funding convenient regional projects from federal sources (Miller and Pakhaliuk 2023, 10, 16-18), promoting official historical interpretations in the regions through new dissemination channels (Kaz'mina 2020; Konkka 2021), etc. Strengthening the federal center's influence at the peripheries legitimizes the current political regime, produces consent, consolidates national identity, and fortifies state borders, which are all crucial tasks for the Putin state.

As part of the *bottom-up* activity, local actors respond to the federal impact in multiple ways. Some of them try to adapt to Kremlin-supported narratives to get from it the resources that might not otherwise be available to them (see Article B about the memory of the Mudyug camp). By engaging in narrative competition, these actors may address a range of challenges, including securing political legitimacy and territorial integrity, expanding state funding, enhancing tourist appeal, stimulating economic activity, and addressing local development issues (Miller, Malinova, and Yefremenko 2023, 13). Others resist the federal influence, trying to offset resource disparities by relying upon grassroots mobilization or better knowledge of local contexts (see Article C). Extensive discussions on local heritage matters, such as poor condition of monuments, bureaucratic inflexibility in managing them, and confounding narratives they convey often crystallize into a cross-regional "infrastructure contest" between the official and grassroots actors. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for local activists to perceive the federal state's interest in local memory repertoires as a means of advancing their agendas. In return, for federal actors, the most interesting heritage objects and narratives are those related to the war memory, for what they serve as resources for patriotic (re)branding of regional identities, particularly in the border regions (Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Wójcik-Żołądek 2022).
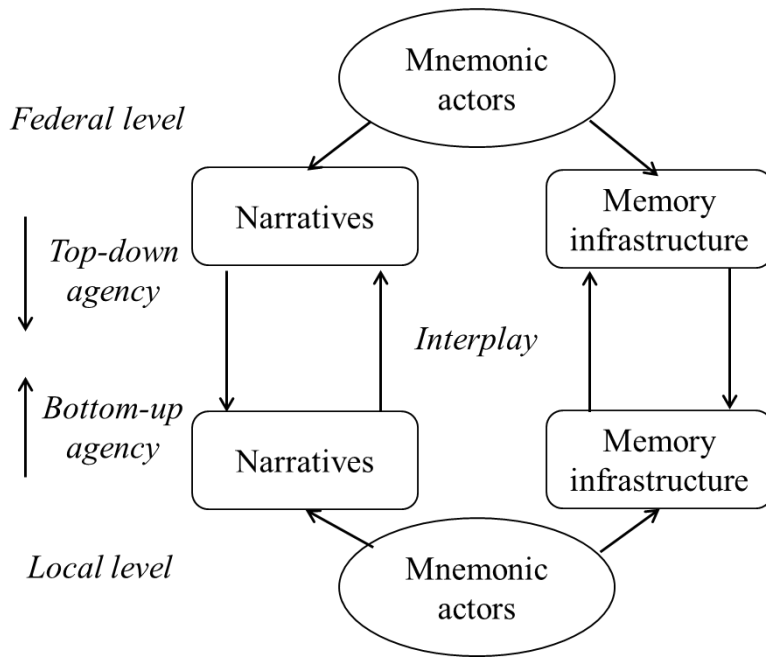
Figure 2. The interplay perspective.

4.3. Regional memory politics in the Russian North: understanding the region and selecting the cases

As previously discussed, discursive practices create regional imaginaries; consequently, academic discourses may also influence and modify the understanding of regions (Zachariassen 2008). In turn, regions may serve not only as valuable sources of insights on the peripheral matters that have been overlooked but also as conceptual tools that facilitate the specific mode of examination and interpretation of social phenomena. The findings of regional-level studies can also be conveniently generalized to other regions (Donovan 2019, 15) or inform our knowledge of national experiences (Oushakine 2009, 7). In this thesis, I analyze memory politics by particularly dealing with memory actors, narratives, and infrastructure at the local level, by focusing on a particular region and/or part of memory repertoire. To generalize the findings from observing and analyzing the three local cases, I ascend to the mezolevel of analysis by using use the regional construct of the Russian North. It serves as a conceptual device for a more nuanced understanding of the common features of local memory politics and its interplay with the federal center.

Although the established notion of the Russian North is not barred from geographic blurredness and is characterized by a considerable context sensitivity (see Podvintsev 2016), in this study I permit myself to limit the scope to three administrative regions: the Murmansk region, the Arkhangelsk region, and the Republic of Karelia. This choice is the result of several factors, some of which are rooted in the *common historical experiences and identity-forming parameters* such as the shared legacies of wars and contacts with neighbors as well as the common Northern dimension and borderland position. Other factors pertain to the *specific characteristics of memory politics*, which are shaped by shared experiences and the borderland nature of these regions but are also significantly influenced by federal priorities. On the one hand, the Russian state has long viewed Arkhangelsk, Karelia, and Murmansk as "northern outposts" of the country's statehood, considering these regions as vital to national integrity and developing their military, naval, and transport infrastructure when necessary. On the other hand, throughout their histories, these regions have been perceived, both officially and by the general public, as remote peripheral areas of low priority (apart from mere security considerations) for the central government's social and economic policies. By examining relevant instances of memory politics, the present study illuminates this striking contradiction in the state's stance towards the Russian North between the concepts of "borderland" and "periphery." It demonstrates how there has been a gradual shift towards the former notion. State actors strongly prioritize those local memory initiatives that emphasize the historical role of their regions as defenders of Russian statehood on its northern borders (see Sections 7.2. and 7.3).

The regional cases selected are related therefore to the memory politics of the Great Patriotic War in the Murmansk Region, the Civil War in the Arkhangelsk region, and the Stalinist repressions in the Republic of Karelia. These cases are (1) the Battle for Zapoliar'e memorials in the Murmansk region; (2) the Mudyug Museum in the Arkhangelsk region and (3) the Sandarmokh Memorial Cemetery in the Republic of Karelia (see Figure 3):

Figure 3. The geography of the cases.

The selection was based on two main criteria: their *significance for local memory repertoires* and the *recent character of* changes (see Figure 4). As for the first criterion, all three cases refer to the highly traumatic events in the history of each region. The Battle for *Zapoliar'e* of 1941-1944 was a truly formative experience for the "newcomer" Murmansk regional identity (Fedorov 2019; Podvintsev 2016, 30-31), whereas the Mudyug Museum has long been a "memory-patriotic brand of the [Arkhangelsk] region" (Beletskiy et al. 2017, 42), and the Sandarmokh Memorial Cemetery has gained national and even international recognition due to the number and national diversity of those buried there (Flige 2019, 111). At the same time, all three "sites of memory" over the last decade have undergone crucial transformations initiated by either local or state-backed mnemonic actors.

Region	Case	Historical reference	Long-standing significance for local memory repertoires	Recent changes in local memory politics
Murmansk	The Battle for *Zapoliar'e* monuments	The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945)	The Battle as a "formative experience" for the region's identity	The Valley of Glory redevelopment (2018-p. d)
Arkhangelsk	The Mudyug prison camp museum	The Civil War (1918-1922)	A local case of (Soviet/Russian) patriotic martyrdom	The national-patriotic reconstruction (since 2020)
Karelia	The Sandarmokh memorial cemetery	The Stalinist terror (1930s)	Nationwide and international recognition	The state-backed incursion (2016-2023)

Figure 4. The case selection criteria by region.

Due to the mentioned common legacies of the past, the three regions are closely historically connected to each other. For instance, the Murmansk GPW memory is associated with that of Karelia since the Battle for *Zapoliar'e* was partially fought in North Karelia (the Kandalaksha Direction). The Arkhangelsk memory of the Civil War is part of the larger historical framing known as the "Civil War in the North" that geographically encompasses Karelia and the Kola Peninsula; the storylines of the Mudyug prison camp and its hereditary Iokanga military prison are interconnected. The history of the Sandarmokh execution site is inextricably linked to that of the Solovki prison camp, which was situated in the Arkhangelsk region. These and other common violent pasts of these regions, reflected over time by generations, serve as important pathways for strengthening the symbolic ties between them.

The sub-sections below provide a brief description of each of the selected cases.

4.3.1. Case 1: The Battle for Zapoliar'e memorials (Article A).

The case study deals with Russia's regional memory politics of the Great Patriotic War by tracing the process of creating memory infrastructure of the Battle of *Zapoliar'e*,

the Murmansk region's war narrative, in the post-Soviet period (1992-2021). Through the analysis of local sources - *kraevedcheskii* literature, reference books, media reports, etc. - the case study maps the war memorials erected during this period. It also identifies the mnemonic actors who initiated them and analyzes their agendas and the narratives they convey through the memorials. The study pays particular attention to the redevelopment of the Valley of Glory, the region's quintessential war memorial, which was initiated by regional officials but protested by local heritage activists and residents. It also assesses the federal influence on local war memorials by analyzing the involvement of federal memory institutions, officials, corporations, and political parties.

4.3.2.   Case 2: The Mudyug Museum (Article B).

This case study examines the changes that have occurred in the field of regional memory of the Russian Civil War, focusing on the case of the Mudyug Prison Camp Museum near Arkhangelsk. By examining regional and federal media as well as historiographical discourses on the Mudyug prison camp, it analyzes the competing narratives and strategies used by local mnemonic actors in the conflict over the historical and symbolic significance of this place, revealing a profound discursive struggle involving local patriotic intellectuals and heritage activists, state-backed *poiskoviki*, as well as BBC journalists. The federal impact is measured by analyzing the narratives and strategies of local "memory entrepreneurs," especially their fundraising and resource mobilization agency. The study also questions the continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet narratives and commemorative practices.

4.3.3.   Case 3. Sandarmokh Memorial Cemetery (Article C).

The study provides an account of recent changes in the regional memory of Stalin's terror of 1937-1938 by analyzing the state-sponsored intervention into the Sandarmokh memorial cemetery in the Republic of Karelia, which began in 2016. Because the conflict over Sandarmokh took place between federal actors, the Russian Military Historical Society and the International Memorial, the case study is particularly revealing in terms of federal-regional interplay and the transformation of regional

memory regimes. I trace the development of the memory conflict over Sandarmokh. I show how the federal center, through its local clients, challenged the memorial's narrative of Sandarmokh by proposing an alternative hypothesis of Soviet POWs killed and buried in Sandarmokh alongside Stalin's victims. To explore the connection between two tragic memories of the violent past, I also analyze how the memory of the Finnish occupation of 1941-1944 changed in the post-Soviet period by taking a closer look at Karelia's narratives and memory infrastructure that emerged during this period. I examine academic and non-fiction texts, media reports, official documents, audiovisual sources, and expert interviews.

5. Research questions

After having discussed the conceptual and theoretical framework, I formulate the following research questions:

1. How is the memory of the violent past (the Great Patriotic War, the Civil War, and the Stalinist repressions) articulated at the local level in the three regions? What are the key mnemonic actors? In what ways do they engage with narratives and memory infrastructure to pursue their stated goals?

2. To what extent and in what ways do the federal memory policies and trends (centralization and promotion of state-centric narratives) exert influence over local actors, as well as narratives that are locally circulated and memory infrastructure that is locally maintained?

3. What are the main outcomes of the federal-regional interplay for memory politics in the three case studies presented in this thesis?

How these overarching research questions relate to the three case studies of this dissertation, is detailed below in Section 7. The hypothesis that the intensification of federal influence can be observed in all three case studies will be tested in the conclusion.

6. Sources, research methodology, limitations, and ethical considerations

6.1. Sources

The source base comprises *primary sources* (first-hand accounts by participants in the processes under observation) and *secondary sources* (descriptive, analytical, or explanatory reflections on both processes and their immediate observations).

Primary sources include media sources, interviews, and archival records. As the study deals with the public activity of mnemonic actors as well as their strategies and uses of narratives and memory infrastructure, the research methodology is focused on the analysis of public discourse. For that reason, *media sources* are a central element of the study's empirical foundation. To retrieve the important information about my cases – for example, commemorative events and ceremonies, key decisions on local memorials and museums, or public reactions on these memory issues – I used local web and print media outlets from the three regions. On the one hand, local outlets benefit from the hybridization of printed and digital media that facilitates broader reach and involvement of the general public in web discussions (Miazhevich 2023). On the other hand, local outlets are usually less affected by state censorship and other forms of state control, making them good conductors of diverse public opinions about memory issues (Zhurzhenko 2021). I accessed most of these media through the *Integrum* database, which is particularly useful as it scopes earlier materials from the period between the 1990s and 2000s. The other important media sources are social platforms like *Vkontakte*, Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal, as mnemonic actors usually report on their activities or present their ideas there. In addition, published *official documents*, such as regional authorities' decisions, references, programmes, etc., are used to provide insight into the authorities' agendas, behavior, and feedback on public reactions to memory issues.

Interviews serve both as methods of collecting data (see below) and sources of insider information about the activities of local mnemonic actors. Such information is extremely valuable in assessing the impact of conflicting media agendas and providing the missing links between the facts and events mentioned by the public media, which is

particularly important in the Russian context where speakers often resort to self-censorship. To obtain such information, I questioned several researchers and journalists who are "highly knowledgeable informants who view the focal phenomena from diverse perspectives" (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, 28). Due to the impossibility of traveling to Russia, I had to conduct the interviews remotely. I used several messengers (Facebook, Microsoft Teams, Telegram, WhatsApp) for conversations with interviewees, with the choice of messenger depending on the interviewee's preferences. The interviews were in-depth (designed to explore in detail the interviewee's personal perspective on and/or commitment to a subject of study) and semi-structured (based on a set of questions but including unplanned questions). The sets of questions offered to each interviewee were tailored to the interviewee's area of expertise and/or specific experience as a mnemonic actor. A very important condition for successfully obtaining the necessary information relevant to the cases was the development of rapport, a relationship between an interviewer and an interviewee based on "mutuality of trust and sense of reciprocity" (Gray et al. 2007, 153). Building rapport could be hindered by the remote format of the interviews and external challenges related to the current situation in Russia. To overcome this, I promised to keep the interviews anonymous in most cases and to provide as much information about myself and my PhD project as possible, as well as my intentions behind the interviews and plans to use them in my work. Ethical considerations for conducting interviews during the period of war and repression in Russia after February 2022 are addressed in Section 6.4.

Archival records mostly serve as auxiliary sources to assess historiographic arguments espoused by mnemonic actors in constructing narratives. Indeed, academic history and social memory are closely intertwined, as the former informs the latter with "firm facts" to be used by mnemonic actors to legitimize their efforts. Thus, in Article B which addresses the memory of the Mudyug prison camp, the dearth of documentary sources pertaining to the camp's purpose, living conditions, and the number of deaths has resulted in ambiguities, thus giving rise to conflicting narratives and memory conflict. Due to that, I conducted my own documentary scrutiny, also using unpublished records from the British National Archives and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, which I accessed during my short stay in London in March-April 2024. There,

I investigated records of British persons in charge and military units that operated in the North Russia intervention campaign (March 1918 – September 1919) during the Russian Civil War and were involved in the Mudyug camp's operations. The material I obtained sheds light on British intentions and agency as well as on the camp's high mortality and deplorable conditions and could be useful in studying Mudyug's history and memory.

Secondary sources include relevant theoretical and case-specific *research literature* predominantly in English and Russian but also in Norwegian and Finnish languages. Given the multidisciplinary character of the study, the scope of research literature is wide, including theoretical works in history, political science, social sciences, and other disciplines. An important element of the case-specific secondary sources also encompasses the *kraevedcheskii* literature, serving as reservoirs of local history and chronicling local memory practices. Local *kraevedcheskii* accounts of "sites of memory" are often detailed and less impacted by federal junctures, sometimes even resisting them. Through surveying case-specific literature, I study narratives utilized by mnemonic actors and receive key information on local memory infrastructure.

6.2. Methodology

Disciplinarily, the thesis belongs to the field of memory studies, which itself lies at the intersection of history and social sciences. The thesis is methodologically grounded as a case study, or the intensive study of a specific spatially delimited phenomenon observed within a certain timespan with the purpose of shedding light on a larger number of comparable cases (Gerring 2007, 19-20). As the cases were in part selected based on whether a conflict interaction over memory matters has taken place, I trace the evolution, identify the key actors involved, analyze their agendas and instruments as well as assess the outcomes of the memory conflicts. In examining the cases, I explore the networks that emerge in the course of these conflicts, knitting together textual, social, and material elements, such as memory infrastructure, narratives, experts, memory activists, norms, and the media (Rothberg 2010). To approach each element of these networks, a range of specific methods are employed to retrieve the information required to access the research objects. The units of observation

vary from memorials and media accounts to qualitatively analyzed narratives and actors' practices.

In this description of the thesis methodology, I differentiate between *methods of gathering information* and *methods of analyzing information*. As methods of gathering information, I employ *qualitative survey* of open sources and databases, *archival search*, and *semi-structured interview*. Through textual and visual analysis of sources, I furnish my case studies with pertinent data, which I then enter into databases (in the case of Murmansk war memorials) and textual samples (in the case of Arkhangelsk Mudyug camp museum) for subsequent qualitative analysis. I also use relevant records from the archives I have visited throughout my PhD period to verify some arguments used by mnemonic actors.

As for the methods of analyzing information, I mainly use *qualitative analysis* and *comparative narrative analysis*. While dealing with the agendas and strategies of mnemonic actors, I qualitatively assess their priorities and practices to explore how they contribute to regional memory politics. In Article B, I conduct a comparative analysis of specific narratives by applying the framework employed by Malinova (2019, 229-230) to delineate key structural characteristics of narratives used by mnemonic actors. This framework identifies 1) the main idea (the conceptual core related to the manifesto and/or mission); 2) the storyline with element-events (the content explicated in a causally linked set of selected real or claimed events); 3) the main characters (historical protagonists and antagonists as well as their contemporary descendants); and 4) the lessons (the implicative part). In addition to other features of how the imagined past is represented by the actors, I draw on these characteristics to assess the key similarities and differences, as well as the contradictions, that the narratives analyzed reveal.

6.3. Limitations

The study has several limitations related to the research design and implementation. First, it explains only three regional domains of Russian memory politics. It does not address questions of how memory politics is defined, or how modes of memory and networks of mnemonic actors are formed at the federal level. The related

issues of patriotic education, school curriculums, state-driven nationalism, changes in the legal framework, etc. are also beyond the scope unless particular aspects of these issues are relevant to the case studies. The dissertation also does not attempt to provide a comparative view of three regional memory regimes. Instead, it approaches three local cases as case studies to analyze the memory of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 caught the author off guard and plans to conduct a field study in the three regions in the spring and summer of that year went up in smoke. Due to the inability to conduct field observations, the source base of the study was limited to relevant literature, media reports, and other digital traces of mnemonic actors, as well as interviews with selected actors and experts, as well as open-source materials still accessible to scholars outside Russia. Indeed, no desk-based research can fully substitute for on-site fieldwork. Fortunately, as public space and communications in Russia are highly digitalized, I managed to gather multiple valuable materials and conduct interviews with local participants online. Moreover, the most important "sites of memory" of my interest were also digitalized, with interactive web resources created for online observations; in other cases, I utilized visual and written accounts. Additionally, the study does address the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian military conflict directly, as such a task would require a specific analytical perspective, although several observations assess the changes that occurred following the invasion.

6.4. Ethical considerations

Research on Russian society and politics has become considerably more challenging in the wake of the Ukraine invasion in February 2022. With the Russian security state launching vigorous oppressive measures against journalists in Northern regions (Myklebost 2023a) and international restrictions severely affecting research cooperation within the field of memory politics (Blackburn and Klimenko 2024, 9-10), personal risks for those involved in the study has ratcheted up considerably. As prescribed in the Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities given by Norway's National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social

Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) ("Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities" 2024), "researchers are responsible for assessing their own safety and for not exposing partners and participants to unacceptable risks," also while "communicating controversial themes and results." In two case studies, Article B and Article C where I interviewed highly informed researchers and journalists, I followed two different ways of handling the data obtained from interviewing the participants. In Article B, I interviewed Vladislav Goldin, who is a leading historian of the Russian North and NARFU professor. For this participant, I assessed the risk possibility as low, considering the subject of the interview – the history and current situation with the Mudyug Museum – being not politically sensitive, same as the information appeared during the interview, and the participant not under state pressure. By contrast, the interviews I conducted for Article C, studying Sandarmokh, were handled completely differently. Given the politically sensitive nature of Sandarmokh, which also involved opposition activism and criminal persecution of activists, I deemed it necessary to assess the potential risks to my informants, some of whom stay in Russia, as high. Consequently, I decided to anonymize the interviews, with only the respondents' occupation and the date of the interviews being indicated. This ethical decision is aimed at ensuring the security and identity of the interviewees and circumventing the potential impediment related to self-censorship.

7. Discussion of the main findings

In addition to the findings yielded from the analysis of each of the three case studies, several overarching key points address the research questions. These key points are explained and discussed in this section.

7.1. Research question 1

How is the memory of the violent past (the Great Patriotic War, the Civil War, and the Stalinist repressions) articulated at the local level in the three regions? What are the key mnemonic actors? In what ways do they engage with narratives and memory infrastructure to pursue their stated goals?

Question 1 concerning local articulations of the violent pasts calls for an examination of the interplay between local actors, narratives, and memory infrastructure. The most proactive types of actors in the three regions observed are the *poiskoviki*, *kraevedy,* and regional/local authorities. The reason for their prominence is their possession of particular knowledge or administrative capabilities that enable them to influence representations of the past. Most of the resource potential for these groups comes from their reputation as well as both material and symbolic roles in commemorative practices. *Poiskoviki* perform as "ferrymen" shuttling between archaeological "repositories" and ritualized "enactments" of the tragic memory. *Kraevedy* are mainly regarded by the local communities as custodians of authentic knowledge about the past. In most cases, authorities serve as conduits for popular initiatives or as implementers of official commemorative policies. Their support is often a crucial factor in many processes within memory politics. There is significant diversity among these actors in terms of the scope of their activities, their respective agendas, or political commitments. The cross-case observation shows that *poiskoviki* may cooperate with state structures (as in the case of Civil War memory projects in the Arkhangelsk region), be generally loyal to the state but overtly criticize some official policies and initiatives (as in the case of the war commemoration in the Murmansk region) or even openly defy the state's course of actions (as in the case of Yurii Dmitriev in Karelia). A similar observation can be made about *kraevedy*, whose political alignments encompass a wide range of positions that may even manifest in hardened discursive reproductions of the Civil War rivalries, as evidenced by the Mudyug camp debate. Overall, the study's findings generally confirm the earlier observations made in other regions, evidencing the profound diversity of political positions within the named groups of mnemonic actors.

With regard to the ways of engagement with basic means of mediation, physical sites of memory such as memorials and museums are perceived by the actors as the most effective means of conveying their narratives from silence into salience. The debates on commemorative forms and formats, messages and narratives conveyed as well as issues of financing and care are integral aspects of local memory politics. No less important is that a significant part of these discussions take place in the digital space, thereby making

these discursive procedures more engaging for the general public. The study confirms that, because of its openness and vast capacities for outreach, the digital space (media, interactive platforms, and social media) is also used by those actors who are deprived of access to (physical) memory infrastructure to express their views and/or contest the existing narratives. This makes "digital memory" particularly crucial in autocratizing polities.

7.2.   Research question 2

To what extent and in what ways do the federal memory policies and trends (centralization and promotion of state-centric narratives) exert influence over local actors, as well as narratives that are locally circulated and memory infrastructure that is locally maintained?

Overall, the case studies demonstrate a variety of forms exemplified by the interaction between federal and local-level actors. Monumental war memory politics in the Murmansk region demonstrates a significant diversity of local mnemonic actors with relatively limited involvement from the federal level. The reconstruction of the Mudyug Museum shows how local memory entrepreneurs may assume the initiative and engage with federal structures. While in these two cases the local actors did not challenge the state-approved narratives and policies, the state-backed incursion into the Sandarmokh memorial site exemplifies how federal structures can respond when memory activism is perceived as a threat to national integrity.

To assess the federal impact on local memory politics, one must observe the interactions between the key actors, narratives, and the infrastructure. The set of federal actors involved in local memory issues is broad and diverse, ranging from memory institutions (RVIO) to opportunistic actors like political parties and corporations. In contrast to opportunistic actors, which engage in memory politics on an *ad hoc* basis and typically without a discernible strategy, the role of the RVIO is different. In the case of routine commemorations occurring on patriotic holidays, the regional branches of this GONGO serve as sources of human resources, mobilizing activists from affiliated organizations like Iunarmiia or military-patriotic clubs. The organization provides a

forum for local historians, both professional and amateur, and facilitates their communication with the federal level, typically within the context of various patriotic initiatives Finally, as evidenced by the Sandarmokh excavations in 2018-2019, RVIO may, relying upon its extensive network of affiliates, directly manage initiatives that are deemed a priority within its organizational agenda. Overall, the case studies have revealed that RVIO possesses comparable mobilization capacities, networking opportunities, and organizational flexibilities to those demonstrated by this organization in other regions.

Since federal hegemonic narratives possess considerable symbolic capital, local mnemonic actors often seek to trade (locally) accessible symbolic assets for federal funds, along with organizational support and media attention. In turn, the treated local memory repertoires become reframed according to federal preferences. Overall, based on the material gathered from Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, and Karelia, three forms of top-down agency can be identified, each characterized by a distinct mode of engagement with local projects: (i) *integration* (co-optation of local projects into the national context without interference into these projects); (ii) *valorization* (investing material and symbolic resources into "devalued" projects) and (iii) *securitization* (making changes to local initiatives that are guided by security considerations). Local projects that have already received consensus-based public endorsement and whose message does not contradict the state-approved narratives are typically *integrated* into the state-promoted frames. A good example of integration is the Murmansk war memory ("the Battle for *Zapoliar'e*" narrative), which reserves its decent place within the "league of regional war memories" while remaining firmly entrenched in the region's memoryscape and resonating with the public. *Valorization*, or providing additional symbolic value to a previously devalued memory project by the state or pro-state actors, often entails considerable financial or material support and state-patriotic recontextualization of the underlying local narratives. In Arkhangelsk, memory entrepreneurs were able to enhance the symbolic value and restore the material integrity of a Soviet-era project that had previously been devalued by using federal funds through purposive adaptation to the official state-patriotic framing of history. The situation proved less favorable for mnemonic actors in the Republic of Karelia, where the local state-sponsored cultural

products failed to resonate with the broader public. Last, federal mnemonic actors resort to *securitization* when a memory project seems to them to be virtually or potentially undermining national security. With the state becoming increasingly suspicious of the "foreign influence," this may occur in cases where foreign actors or opposition and, therefore, allegedly disloyal domestic actors are involved.

The bottom-up agency is mostly represented by either the submission of local initiatives to the federal level or the protestation of federal interference in local memory affairs. For many local mnemonic actors, it is essential to get for their projects an endorsement from federal actors and structures. The study indicates that in seeking funding opportunities, mnemonic actors in the Russian North more often approach *Fond Prezidentskikh grantov* (the Presidential Fund), which corresponds with another important subnational trend manifesting the expanded cultural influence of the federal center in the peripheries (Miller and Pakhaliuk 2023, 17-18). However, rather than seeking state tutelage, local actors tend to pursue a balance between aligning with federal preferences and advancing their own, often intricate agendas. Consequently, the strategies employed by these actors are diverse, ranging from accommodation with the state to overt opposition to it.

More on federal priorities, one of the principal avenues for local actors to secure the Presidential Fund grant is to emphasize "*deiatel'nyi patriotizm*" ("active," "practical" patriotism) in their grant application. *Deiatel'nyi patriotizm* is a positively connotated cliché that is understood to link patriotic sentiments with tangible civic actions and is usually contrasted to *ura-patriotizm* (pinchbeck patriotism without practical action) (Sherlock 2016, 54). In advocating this kind of public action, local actors posit that their projects would cultivate patriotism by engaging the audience— particularly the younger generation—in commemorative practices. In addition to serving as a catchy keyword useful when "pitching" potential donors, "practical patriotism" represents a crucial juncture point for the harmonization of official identity-building efforts with the agendas of local mnemonic entrepreneurs.

It is important to note that federal and local memory initiatives are often closely intertwined. While regional memory conflicts most often manifest as instances of actors

exhibiting clear polarization, these conflicts cannot be wholly attributed to the two-sided struggle between the mnemonic actors advocating for instrumental persistence and instrumental change (Bernhard and Kubik 2014b, 10). Rather they occur within the established networks whereby all actors are interconnected and communicate behind the conflict. The motivations for conflict stemming from structural reasons, namely funding and administrative resources, are significant but are predominantly driven by "occasional memory activists" and opportunistic actors. The conflict between the major actors occurs in the narrative space, where they attempt to persuade the public that their narrative is the most accurate and valid. This inevitably gives rise to antagonism, thereby rendering the "mnemonic warrior" type prevalent, though not exclusively, among them.

Several earlier assertions and claims have also been checked based on the material from the three regions. The case of Murmansk monumental war commemoration shows the impact of the state-centric GPW cult to be delimited to a small share of the overall number of monuments whereas the biggest number of memorials were installed by grassroots *poiskoviki* groups and local communities separately from the Kremlin and for a variety of purposes. However, the persistence of the Soviet patriotic narratives and memory traditions can be observed in the Murmansk war memory infrastructure, as it essentially inherits Soviet aesthetic forms and rituals of remembrance. To a certain extent, this applies to the reconstruction of the Mudyug camp museum in the Arkhangelsk region, with a significant difference in the main narrative having changed from Soviet patriotic to post-Soviet national-patriotic. The available evidence does not support the hypothesis of "re-Stalinization" of official memory, which has previously been put forth to explain the state-driven incursion into Sandarmokh. The incentives of the state-backed actors to intervene were related to mnemonic security considerations, rather than reflecting any neo-Stalinist preferences. Furthermore, those actors who could be conditionally characterized as neo-Stalinists were represented by marginal actors who had no established connections with the Kremlin.

The role of the media is manifested in several ways that extend beyond mere sharing of information on memory issues and providing the platforms for mnemonic actors to present their positions. At both the regional and federal levels, media outlets

frequently act as mnemonic actors, pursuing their agendas and engaging in the processes of narrative construction. As evidenced by the Sandarmokh debate, pro-government media may serve as "trailblazers," paving the way for more active measures in state information campaigns addressing sensitive memory issues. Foreign outlets also engage in discussions on memory not only as mediators but also as partisan actors who reframe or even contest local discourses, as illustrated by the BBC's involvement in the Mudyug debate.

Furthermore, public discourse on contentious or sensitive memories of past violence in interstate relations frequently attracts the attention of nation-states that were historically involved in these tragic events. The empirical evidence indicates that national-level actors, including research institutions and projects, media corporations, and NGOs from both sides, tend to approach such memories in an instrumental manner, rather than as potential spaces for dialogue between scholars, decision-makers, civic activists, and other interested parties. For the Russian side, the expansion of federal national-patriotic frames and the security policies targeting "foreign influence" made the local mnemonic actors more conspicuous towards any agency associated with other countries. Also, the Finnish and British perception of local commemorations of violent pasts in Archangelsk and Karelia as mere Soviet propaganda holdovers or the Putin state's attempts to manipulate history did not contribute to defusing the strains. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was truly a significant factor in the escalation of these international tensions, which were nevertheless present long before.

As for memory regimes, the federal impact did not provoke significant changes in the case of Murmansk war memory. Although the conflict over the Valley of Glory revealed tensions between official and grassroots parameters of monumental war commemoration, the memory regime remained pillarized (see Article A). In two other cases, changes in memory regimes are more dramatic. As shown by the Mudyug Museum restoration in the Arkhangelsk region, federal actors preferred a more anti-Western national-patriotic narrative that praised the Reds as Russian patriots over the "pro-White" interpretation of the Civil War, which was more sympathetic towards the interventionists. In the Republic of Karelia, the local memory regime of the violent past

became rebalanced, with state actors exerting pressure on the memory of Stalin's victims while supporting "more patriotic" historical research on the Finnish occupation.

7.3. Research question 3

What are the main outcomes of the federal-regional interplay for memory politics in the three case studies presented in this thesis?

In response to Question 3, I indicate two main outcomes of the interplay in these regions: (i) *patriotic (re)branding* and (ii) *symbolic "fortification"* of local memory repertoires. *Regional patriotic (re)branding* is a set of cultural policies aimed at representing regional cultural features as parts of the national patriotic heritage (Donovan 2018, 74). In the Russian regions, patriotic rebranding is a bidirectional process involving both federal structures offering new symbolic frames for regions and regional actors claiming favorable positions for their region within these frames by utilizing their own cultural assets. Regions typically utilize elements of local memory repertoires that are related to military and spiritual deeds of valor ("*podvigi*") and can be recognized as having nationwide symbolic value (Davis 2018; Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Wójcik-Żołądek 2022). Needless to say, while forging this strategic relationship with national state patriotism, regional identities, and memory projects adopt hegemonic national frames and narratives. As seen in Arkhangelsk and Karelia, grassroots "practical patriotic" enterprises essentially revoice, sometimes grotesquely, national-patriotic narratives instead of fostering civic consciousness and strengthening local and national identities as intended. Moreover, while patriotic rebranding may be beneficial to local actors in terms of resource acquisition, it can also lead to the formation of structures of center-region codependency. Given the resource disparity between the center and the regions, it would arguably lead to a more dependent relationship with the federal center for local initiatives.

Another important implication of the federal-regional interplay is *symbolic "fortification"*. This mainly involves a discursive change in the perception of regional identities, which is linked to the strengthened notions of defense and security. As argued before, the development of all three regional identities has been influenced by the semantics of "defense of the fatherland" and "borderland of the Russian state." The

observed recent development in memory politics clearly shows that several local mnemonic actors put forward the projects elaborating these notions. In addition to conforming to federal priorities, these projects make it possible to address several issues at once, such as revitalizing local historical heritage, recontextualizing individual heritage objects within new conceptual frameworks, attracting tourists, drawing public attention to other local issues, and so on. As Miller and Pakhaliuk (2023, 12) note, "in the current conditions of the sharply complicated international situation, the border character of the regions has a significant impact on the memory politics and involves external actors in it more intensively." The border character of the three analyzed regions has become an important factor of state involvement, which has increased with the 2022 Ukraine war outbreak. By appealing to its rich war memory heritage, Murmansk has reinforced its image as a heroic "defender of the Arctic." In addition to the memory of the WWII Arctic naval convoys, the new memory projects related to the Civil War and Allied intervention reinforced the image of Arkhangelsk as a "symbolic defense territory," with its own patriotic martyrs. Karelia has become a highly securitized memory region, with the local war memories being increasingly instrumentalized by the federal actors. It remains difficult to assess the extent to which local-level symbolic fortification reinforces a "siege mentality" and everyday nationalism, as these sentiments may also arise from other confounding factors. What can be seen more definitively is the proliferation of military-historical projects fueled by increased state grant financing. Paradoxically, these are defense-related memories, such as the shared history of Arctic convoys, that continue to serve as rare points of connection between Russian and Western representatives. Even after the Ukraine war began in February 2022, British and American officials visited memorials in Arkhangelsk and Murmansk several times to honor their fallen compatriots and Soviet allies (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2023; "Posol Velikobritanii Debora Bronnert vnov' pobyvala v Arkhangel'ske" 2022).

8.   Conclusion

The three case studies have demonstrated the changes that occurred at the regional level of Russia's memory politics over the last decade, underscoring both the importance of existing local memory repertoires and the increased federal involvement in local memory issues. The federal memory policies of centralization of loyal actors' networks and expansion of state-centric narratives manifest themselves in the analyzed cases, although the scale and extent vary across the cases. The study also shows that in exerting memory policies, the state-backed actors most often rely upon or interact with local actors, heading for a confrontation with them only in special cases.

Several federal priorities in the regions that are visible through the studied material are as follows. The first is the support of projects related to military history. The second is the promotion of state-centric (state-patriotic) narratives and frameworks. The third is the encouragement of "practical patriotism," particularly through the involvement of tourists and younger generations in commemorative activities. Additionally, there are three modes of federal engagement with local memory projects. In cases where the projects do not go into contradiction with federal priorities, the state tends to *integrate* them into broader memory frameworks. A strong example of this is the Murmansk monumental commemoration of the Great Patriotic War, with a multitude of local memories being parts of a salient regional war narrative, which is inscribed into a general "league of regional war memories." The state may also support those projects that have lost their value for some reasons but under current circumstances become aligned with federal priorities (*valorization*). This is exemplified by the restoration of the Soviet-time Mudyug Museum, whose initiators gained federal funding in exchange for the alignment with the state-patriotic message. Last, the federal actors may intervene in those memory projects that expose perceived threats related to undesirable political activism or involvement of foreign actors (*securitization*). The state-backed campaign in Sandarmokh accompanied by the crackdown on the inconvenient memory activism of the International Memorial is an illustrative case of such intervention. The hypothesis that in the post-Soviet period, these memory repertoires have been subject to increased federal impact at the narrative and actor levels can therefore generally be confirmed.

The behavior of local mnemonic actors in terms of their stance towards increasing federal involvement can vary, ranging from adaptation to federal priorities to protestation against the state's actions. Among local actors in the North, there are both supporters and critics of state memory policies. However, the study reveals that strategies seeking conformity with officially promoted historical narratives are most advantageous for local memory actors, demonstrating the solid judicial, economic, and political power possessed by the Russian federal center in the domain of regional memory politics. As outcomes of the federal-regional interplay, one can observe *patriotic rebranding* (representing regional cultural features as parts of the national patriotic heritage) and *symbolic fortification* (strengthening notions of defense and security) of local memory repertoires in the Russian North. While beneficial for the federal center and local actors involved in this interplay, both outcomes strengthen the dependency of local actors on federal funding and conformity with state-promoted symbolic policies.

With that said, I return to the Murmansk monument to the Arctic Border Guards described in the introduction. By linking local wartime experiences with the national patriotic war story, specific veterans' interests with state-approved policies, the Soviet monumental canon with contemporary pragmatism, and grassroots crowdfunding with the use of administrative resources, the monument reflects the complex interplay between federal memory policies and local patriotic agendas in Russia's regions. As evidenced by the recent dramatic shift caused by the Ukraine war and the ruptured Russia-West relations, the vestiges of the Cold War-era consciousness embedded in the monument seem aptly suited to the renewed reality of a second Cold War. Indeed, the state's demand for fortified memories in the regions has significant potential for growth.

Overall, the study underscores the significance of memory politics as a conceptual framework for understanding identity construction and the production of "historical truth." It demonstrates how social actors wielding power mediate collective representations of the past by supporting those means of cultural exchange – narratives and memory infrastructure – that align with their political agendas. The study also reveals the dubious effect of non-academic invocations of history, as the politically

motivated prioritization of certain topics and episodes from the past can lead to both stimulation of public interest and proliferation of tendentious interpretations. In the case of the Russian regions, this dynamic leads to the expansion of the power elite's hegemony over historical consciousness. A valuable method for identifying and resisting hegemonic discourses on history involves scrutinizing who controls and utilizes *the means of mediation of the representations of the past*. The usability of such a method is constrained by inequalities in access to the production and dissemination of historical knowledge. These inequalities are more pronounced in contexts like Russian regions, which are part of larger center-periphery asymmetries and increasingly autocratizing polities, making them suitable research objects for case studies. Still, they are not the only ones in this respect, and further research on how representations of history are mediated can be produced in various other social contexts.

9.   References

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Appendix 1. Article A.

Spirin, Artem. (2024) "War Memories, Monumental Activism, and Regional Identity in the Arctic Borderland: Monumental Memory Politics of the Great Patriotic War and Mnemonic Actors in the Post-Soviet Murmansk Region," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 57(3), 59-80.

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War Memories, Monumental Activism, and Regional Identity in the Arctic Borderland

Monumental Memory Politics of the Great Patriotic War and Mnemonic Actors in the Post-Soviet Murmansk Region

ABSTRACT   Given the recent trend toward the instrumentalization of memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) in Russian federal memory politics, this article examines regional features of this trend by assessing the transformations that occurred in the monumental GPW commemoration in the post-Soviet Murmansk region. The case study analyzes the process of creating war memorials dedicated to the Battle for *Zapoliar'e*, a Murmansk regional narrative of the Great Patriotic War, by observing new war memorials and activities of mnemonic actors initiating these memorials. The article sheds light on the vigorous commemorative activism pushed by a set of regional mnemonic actors who, although remaining loyal to the official patriotic state narrative of the Battle, tend to emphasize other aspects, particularly heroic or tragic, depending on their agendas. While veteran organizations and sometimes regional authorities promote the state-centric and triumphalist vision of the Battle, local *poiskoviki* activists, on the contrary, appeal to its tragic side, pointing out the importance of the personal remembrance of the fallen. The article concludes that, although the centralization and unification trends in Russian memory politics noticeably affect the regional domain, they are unlikely to fully explain the regional dynamics of developing the monumental media of war memory since such dynamics are set primarily by grassroots activists.

KEYWORDS   memory politics, Murmansk region, war memorials, World War II, Russia

In post-Soviet Russia, steering the discourse on the historical past, particularly the violent past, has become an important way of legitimizing state power (Bürger 2016; Malinova 2021; Smith 2002; Weiss-Wendt 2021) and nation-building (Laruelle 2009; Malinova 2015; Torbakov 2011). This process also has regional and local dimensions. Regional and local actors of politics may deal with memories of the violent and tragic past, for example, to promote the desirable narrative of certain significant historical events, to affiliate local narratives of the past with the national ones, or consolidate local communities (Clowes 2016; Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Zhurzhenko 2021). In this way, studying regional cases of dealing with (and using) the violent past is just as important for understanding identity building and symbolic politics in Russia as examining it from the national (federal) perspective.

One example of the violent past is the Battle for *Zapoliar'e*, the military operations of the Soviet armed forces against Nazi Germany and Finnish troops from June 1941 to

October 1944. The narrative of the Battle for *Zapoliar'e* (BfZ) has a regional significance for the Murmansk region's history and self-identification. It provides a symbolic tie to the Great Patriotic War (GPW), the Soviet/Russian master narrative of World War II. The narrative of the BfZ is conveyed through numerous memorials dedicated to the war victims, making this part of the past overwhelmingly better represented in the regional mnemonic landscape than any other.

In this study, I analyze the development of post-Soviet memory politics by considering the case of the BfZ as the Murmansk region's central commemorative narrative. I trace the process of initiation and erection of the new memorials dedicated to the BfZ in the post-Soviet period (1992–p.d.) through the lens of its quantitative and qualitative aspects. I also discuss the mnemonic actors involved in creating memorials and analyze their agendas to see what narratives they disseminate.

The article's main argument is that the Murmansk regional memory politics of the GPW is by no means a process orchestrated by the Kremlin but a complex field where various actors use monumental means of war memory for various purposes. These actors can be divided into four groups: veteran organizations, public authorities, occasional activist groups, and search squads (*poiskoviki*). The empirical evidence shows that in the post-Soviet years, the number of new war monuments decreased significantly compared to the Soviet period. The observable impact of those Russian actors who promote the state-centered narrative of the war is quite noticeable but still limited. A major part of the region's war memory politics can be explained by the dynamics of bottom-up patriotic activism, local identity construction, or attracting tourists to the places of military glory. The obtained data make grassroots initiatives the main contributor to the development of monumental war commemoration in the Murmansk region.

In the first section, I briefly outline the current state of the GPW memory politics in Russia, pointing out the importance of a regional perspective on this subject. The second section sheds some light on the central role of the GPW regional narrative for the Murmansk regional memory and identity. In the third section, I present the results of a quantitative survey of war memorials installed in the region in the post-Soviet period and then discuss the set of mnemonic actors initiating these memorials. The next two sections delineate two remarkable features of war memory activism: the conflict over the Valley of Glory, which is the region's quintessential war memorial, and the distinct process of consolidating local identities by monumental means. After giving a thorough account of monumental war commemoration in the previous sections, the sixth section assesses the federal impact on this process. The conclusion highlights the main findings.

MEMORY POLITICS OF THE RUSSIAN STATE AND WAR COMMEMORATION IN THE RUSSIAN REGIONS

To discuss how social representations of the historical past are sustained and disseminated, scholars often refer to the concept of memory politics, which is commonly understood as a set of efforts by the state and other social actors to propagate and maintain the circulation of certain representations of the collective past (Bernhard and

Kubik 2014, 7; Lebow 2006, 13; Malinova 2020, 27). Although the approaches toward memory politics may vary depending on whether they focus on institutions (Lebow 2006; Miller and Efremenko 2020) or discourses (Verovšek 2016), most of them usually understand its object as an organized and institutionalized activity of mnemonic actors. Bernhardt and Kubik (2014, 9) characterize mnemonic actors as political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past. Mnemonic actors contend for dominance in symbolic space, which manifests itself, in part, in creating memorials or other structures made in honor of some person or event. Memorials, which are commonly characterized as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) (Nora 1989), are among the key material tools for the formation of collective representations of the past and, in turn, imagined identities (Anderson 2006; Bodnar 1992; Hass 1998; Norkunas 2002).

For the post-Soviet Russian state, the situation of regime transformation after 1991 necessitated the official promotion of those historical narratives that would be compliant with the tasks of legitimizing the new regime and reassembling national identity. Malinova and Miller (2021, 14) describe such narratives as elements of "usable past," or "a repertoire of historical events, figures, and symbols lodged with notions that are in one way or another significant for modern political or cultural practices." To delineate the milestones of the political processes related to selecting, enabling, and adjusting the usable past by the Russian state and non-state mnemonic actors, the researchers usually mark several periods, distinguishing between the period of Boris Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s, with the particularly critical official attitude toward the Soviet past, and the two periods under the presidency of Vladimir Putin: the 2000s, with the elaboration of a more conciliatory and "eclectic" historical master narrative; and the 2010s, with a more consolidated and proactive official memory politics that also was not immune to the use of conflicting narratives (Malinova 2018; Titov 2017; Wijermars 2018).

The period of Putin's rule is marked by growing involvement of the state and state-backed actors in constructing the usable past[1] and increased attention toward the memory of the GPW of 1941–45. Indeed, the measure of the political, societal, and cultural impact made by the topic of the GPW on Russian society is comparable to no other historical event, mainly due to the huge losses the country suffered during the war so that almost every Russian family has an ancestor who is a war hero or a victim. For the post-Soviet Russian state, the official narrative of the war became a genuine foundational myth (Koposov 2011, 163) protected at the legal and institutional levels and sanctified at the level of symbolic politics (Gjerde 2015; Malinova 2018; Miller 2009). The content of the official narrative of the GPW has changed significantly compared to the Soviet period. The Russian political elite recognizes the value of the GPW narrative and the cult of "fallen heroes" (Davis 2018, 20; Hoffmann 2021, 3), trying to frame existing commemorative practices in an official patriotic way and turn them into an element of usable past (Ponamareva 2020). Since 2012, the scale of the Kremlin's military-patriotic

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1. Wijermars (2018, 226) sees a correlation between rises in the level of public protest and peaks in state activity in the field of memory politics, explaining this by the regime's urgent search for a resource of legitimation during periods of instability.

framing of the GPW memory has expanded, involving new instruments of federal memory politics such as RVIO (*Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, the Russian Military Historical Society), and RIO (*Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, the Russian Historical Society), the two most widely known Russian memory-political GONGOs (organizations designed as NGOs but in fact controlled by the state) (Lapin 2020; Weiss-Wendt 2021).

Discussing the profiles of Russian mnemonic actors, Wijermars (2018, 3) acknowledged that "the differentiation between state and non-state actors in today's Russia is notoriously murky," referring "non-state" actors "to the grey zone beyond the state's official structures" and noting that their orientations may vary "from the 'state-loyal' to the outspokenly oppositional." Concerning some examples of "non-state" but "state-loyal" actors, Danilova (2015, 151) emphasizes a significant contribution to the development of war memorials made by "search and recovery operations" (*poiskovye otriady, poiskoviki*), whose mission is to "find the remains of unburied soldiers, identify them and rebury them with respect." It would be incorrect to characterize the *poiskoviki* movement as some manifestation of the Kremlin-led memory politics rather than a "non-state military-patriotic" mnemonic actor with its own notions of patriotism and war memory that differ considerably from the official ones (Dahlin 2017; Goncharova and Iasaveev 2020; Shokova, Glushkova, and Dereviankin 2020). Gabowitsch (2014) provides more evidence for the insufficiency of the "state versus non-state" binary for understanding memory politics and mnemonic actors. He discovered that the Soviet surge of monumental war commemoration from the mid-1960s, although officially endorsed, was first and foremost the result of actions from below. This observation is consistent with Danilova's (2015, 153) finding that the monumental activism in the regions differs from that at the national level, being much less centralized and mainly led by local communities.

My argument is that initiating, installing, and using war memorials is a complex process involving different types of actors, not just the state or state-backed institutions. The part of the literature on top-down initiatives within Russian memory politics provides a thorough account of the Russian hegemonic discourses on the historical past and plausibly explains the Kremlin's incentives, narratives, and directives but shows a limited reach of processes on the grassroots level. An effective way of understanding a complex social subject is analyzing its regional or local dimensions. As Donovan (2019, 15) points out, regional studies "provide the means necessary to make broader claims about processes and developments relevant to the national experience." In most cases, the implications of national identity-building policies become visible in regional cultural and political contexts, as do the possible restraints for the center's initiatives and the content and pathways of center-periphery exchange within identity-construction processes. At the same time, regional experiences of identity construction, which are authentic sets of attitudes and practices, can often be generalized to other regions, as in the case of post-Soviet Russian regions (Oushakine 2009, 7). This is undoubtedly relevant to studying collective memory and memory politics, which is one of the key aspects of identity building.

As the academic field of memory studies develops in Russia, regional memory politics is receiving more scholarly attention (Miller and Efremenko 2020). The memory of the GPW is usually central to regional memory politics; regional elites use war memories as powerful tools to legitimize their rule, cultivate patriotism, and acquire symbolic resources for a region's image (Davis 2018; Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Zhurzhenko 2021). A particularly interesting problem in this regard is how the agendas promoted by federal mnemonic actors become implemented at the regional level and how regional memories become "uploaded" to the federal level. Another issue is whether the federal-regional *interplay* in elaborating and delivering memory politics is an internally coherent or a conflictual process. The presented case study of Murmansk war memorials attempts to unpack these complex dynamics by analyzing the agency of regional (and some federal) mnemonic actors.

THE MURMANSK REGION: REGIONAL IDENTITY AND WAR MEMORY

The Murmansk region is a peripheral Russian administrative unit located in the European part of the country's Arctic zone. Murmansk regional identity was formed upon the powerful semantics of its geostrategic position as a "military and naval outpost" of the Russian imperial state (Podvintsev 2016, 188). The region's social and economic development is heavily dependent on federal investments, so the post-Soviet period of problematic transition from a planned to a market economy was associated with a lack of federal funding, economic depression, and depopulation; these factors also affected self-perception of regional communities (Sharova 2016; Zhurzhenko 2021, 207). The socio-economic decay of the post-Soviet years changed the political culture of the Murmansk region's population, shifting its dominant type from traditional Leftist to Russian nationalist during the "wild nineties" (Turovskii 1999, 123, 126). The memory of the GPW is crucially associated with the regional war narrative, the BfZ. The Murmansk region was the only part of the Eastern Front where the German forces failed to advance far. Soviet military historiography named the Battle's offensive part, the Petsamo-Kirkenes operation, "Stalin's tenth blow"[2] and had a high opinion of its implementation by the army command (Babin 1984, 291; Rumiantsev 1955, 93).[3]

Describing the military actions at the Murmansk theater of operations in 1941–44, the Soviet and post-Soviet historiography used several related terms such as *Bitva za Zapoliar'e* (the Battle for *Zapoliar'e*), *Oborona Zapoliar'ia* (the Defense of *Zapoliar'e*), and some others. The latter definition is ingrained in the public context particularly due to the campaign medal "*Za oboronu Sovetskogo Zapoliar'ia*" ("For the Defense of the Soviet Polar Regions") awarded to at least 350,000 people (Kolesnikov and Rozhkov 1986, 81–82). The two core symbolic elements in the medal's title are the battle's defensive nature (as of the "big" GPW) and its explicit regional dimension. The

2. In the late 1950s, due to the campaign against Stalin's cult of personality, his name was deleted from the wording.

3. On the operation see Holtsmark (2021a, 2021b).

semantics of the word *Zapoliar'e* has heroic, patriotic, military, and romantic nostalgic connotations (Podvintsev 2016, 21–22). Under the military-patriotic "brand" of *Zapoliar'e*, the regional GPW narrative is inscribed into the national patriotic master narrative of the GPW,[4] taking its place together with Smolensk, Volgograd, or Kursk in a distinctive Russian national "league of regional war memories," a set of regional narratives of the GPW used by regional and local authorities to obtain more symbolic capital and compete with the other regions for the attention from federal mnemonic actors.[5]

From this viewpoint, the memory of the BfZ observed through the lens of the aspect of the memorials dedicated to the Battle can reveal some features of the complex and multifaceted Russian memory politics, namely the peculiarities of its regional development. This study geographically scopes the Murmansk region since the BfZ operations and logistics took place almost exactly within the region's borders. Since only a minor part of the region was occupied by the German forces, the local war memorials experienced both waves of war memorialization in the Soviet period described by Gabowitsch (2014). In addition, they sensitively reflect current trends of memorialization in this border region.

In this article, I analyze data regarding Murmansk regional memorials that are (1) located in the Murmansk region and (2) dedicated to the BfZ. I considered those war memorials that meet both criteria and, as suggested by Gabowitsch's (2014, 6) "biographical approach," collected information about the most important facts of their "lives": date of occurrence, location, type (a sculpture, a memorial plaque, a gravestone, etc.), initiator/installer/sponsor, subject of commemoration (to whom a memorial is dedicated), later changes (upgrades, restorations), and so on.[6] To retrieve such information, I surveyed relevant open sources whose diverse profile includes academic articles, official reports and regulations, local reference literature, media reports, and web materials that list, describe, and report on new war memorials. I also study regional mnemonic actors dealing with the monuments, particularly their agendas and performance, by surveying their web resources and media reports about their activities. To unpack the most illustrative cases of monumental commemoration of the BfZ, I employ a qualitative analysis of relevant web sources. The data were collected remotely in 2021–22.

NEW MEMORIALS AND MNEMONIC ACTORS

In this section, I observe changes in the monumental commemoration of the BfZ by conducting a quantitative survey of the war memorials installed in the post-Soviet period.

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4. One of the recent manifestations of this was the declassification and publication of a series of documents related to the defense of *Zapoliar'e* in 1941 by the Ministry of Defence as part of commemorating the Day of the Unknown Soldier on December 3, 2020 (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2020a). The Ministry published these documents "to protect and defend historical truth, counter falsification of history and the attempts to revise the results of the Second World War" (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2020b).

5. For example, regions compete for honorary titles such as "City of Military Glory" and "City of Labor Glory."

6. Originally, this approach involved studying "all the twists and turns in a memorial's life, from creation to decay or retirement and, often enough, to its withering and death" (Gabowitsch 2014, 6). Given the massive size of the data, such a task is unlikely to be achieved; therefore, I must limit my effort to documenting only the facts mentioned.
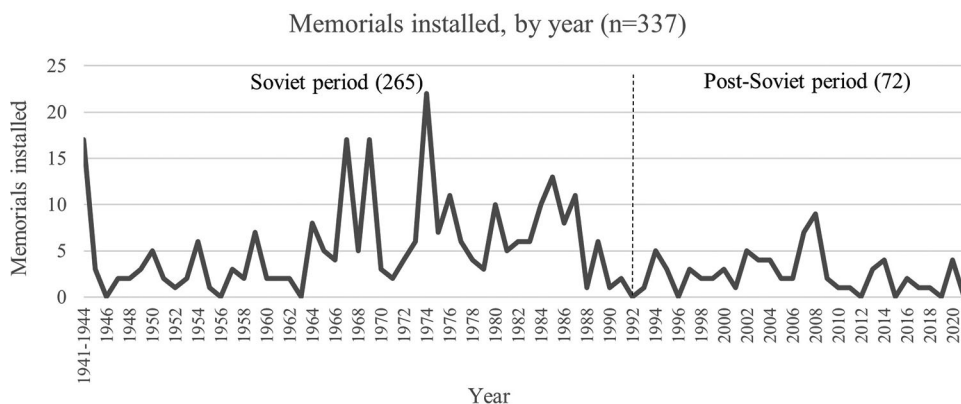
Memorials installed, by year (n=337)

FIGURE 1. Memorials dedicated to the Battle for *Zapoliar'e* installed, by year, 1941–2021. Source: Committee for Culture and Art of the Murmansk Region (2012), Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region (2020), Oresheta et al. (2009), *Pamiat' o proshlom gorod Hranit* (2014).

Next, I take a closer look at the mnemonic actors, categorize them, and describe their agendas and the ways they interact with each other. There are also a few words to say about the geographic patterns of their activity.

I managed to count 514 commemoration objects dedicated to the BfZ.[7] The date of occurrence is uncertain for 177 objects, so, unfortunately, we cannot consider them in the context of post-Soviet war commemoration. The sample for 1992–21 I use for further analysis of mnemonic actors scopes 72 memorials that appeared after 1991 (see Figure 1).

As the data show, the promotion of the official patriotic cult of victory in the GPW under Putin in 2000–21 did not cause significant quantitative changes in monumental war commemoration in the Murmansk region during the same period. On average, the number of new memorials per year in the post-Soviet period is two times less compared to the Soviet times. The reduced number of monuments in the 1990s is likely to be associated with the shortfall of money, while the subsequent decade shows some growth of monumental initiatives. However, the 2010s are marked by even fewer erected memorials than under Yeltsin, which is curious enough given the expansion of state-driven military-patriotic frames after 2012 (Weiss-Wendt 2021; Wijermars 2018). Another observation is that some peaks can be explained by anniversary years, most notably the anniversaries of the German defeat in *Zapoliar'e* (October 26, 1944). The memorials installed in the post-Soviet period include (1) sculptural monuments (33); (2) objects related to remains of the fallen in the war, namely graves, obelisks, and memorial signs (25); (3) memorial plaques (11); and (4) other objects[8] (3). To find out more details

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7. In general, all the GPW memorials in the region commemorate the BfZ. The only exception is the monument to Zoia Kosmodem'anskaia, a Soviet partisan hero who fought on the Moscow front and has no relation to *Zapoliar'e*. The monument was initiated by the Murmansk city administration and installed in Murmansk in 2018.

8. Two welcome stelas and one historical site.

about the contemporary developments of the memorials, a qualitatively focused analysis of mnemonic actors and the most representative cases of memorial developments is needed.

A type of an actor's primary social activity is selected as a relevant subject for constructing categories. On this basis, one can single out, list (in ascending order of the number of initiated commemorative objects), and describe the mnemonic agendas of the following categories: (a) veteran organizations (15), (b) public authorities (19), (c) occasional activist groups (22), and (d) search squads (*poiskoviki*) (30).

a. **Veteran organizations** usually associate veterans from certain military or civil service branches and provide them with social support of various kinds, including material, legal, or informational assistance, representing their interests in interaction with authorities, and organizing social events. In the field of war commemoration, regional veteran organizations perform not so much as typical "mnemonic warriors" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 15) but as "moral watchdogs" securing the circulation of conservative and official war narratives (Zhurzhenko 2021, 218). The *Shchit* (Shield) noncommercial fund is an illustrative example of such an organization. This GONGO was established in 2007 and was purposed to provide social support for FSB (*Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, the Federal Security Service) veterans. In the field of memory politics, the fund pursues public and patriotic activity among the young population of Murmansk, describing its mission as "to spread information about the history of security services in different periods of the Soviet and Russian history as widely as possible." Veteran organizations, while carrying out the task of forming "a positive image of men in uniform which is often unfairly slandered," explicitly frame the memory of the BfZ in an official patriotic way, placing the security services and other force structures (*siloviki*) at the center of their narrative (Shchit 2022a). *Shchit* organizes commemorative events, publishes thematic materials promoting the patriotic narrative of the war, and monitors the state of the commemorative infrastructure created in the wake of the memory of the BfZ (Shchit 2022b). There are some other veteran organizations, although they possess incomparably smaller resources than *Shchit*; such organizations can formally be noncommercial and charity funds (e.g., the *Vozrozhdenie* ("The Revival") fund, the Arctic Border Guards fund), veteran councils, and initiative groups.

b. **Public authorities** as commemorative actors encompass institutions of political power at federal and regional levels and local self-governance bodies. Such actors are the regional and local executive (administrations) and legislative (councils) bodies. Being engaged in creating the region's commemorative infrastructure, they perform both as initiators of new memorials and as providers of administrative advantages for initiators from other categories. Motivations of this group of mnemonic actors are usually determined by the powers and interests of each institution. Most often authorities initiate new war memorials "to perpetuate the memory of significant historical events," as specified by the Murmansk City Charter (Council of Deputies of the City of Murmansk 2018). Public authorities also share some common interest in increasing the tourist attractiveness of the region or locality, depending on the level of decision making. The Murmansk regional administration has been pursuing a targeted regional tourist brand construction

policy since 2013 (Podvintsev 2016, 192–194). As part of this policy, the regional government adopted the Program for the Development of the Tourist and Recreational Cluster of the Murmansk Region (Federalnyi portal malogo I srednego predprinima-tel'stva 2016), aimed at developing historical-cultural and military-patriotic tourism using the landmarks related to the memory of the BfZ in Kolskii and Pechengskii districts and the city of Murmansk (2016, 20–22, 37–38). In addition, the regional government provides funds for restoring memorials commemorating the BfZ. In 2014, it transferred 10 million rubles to local administrations for these activities (Zhurin 2013).

c. **Occasional activist groups** are professional, educational, and local collectives who initiate commemorative objects that usually have some relation to their place of employment, study, or residence. These can be school and work collectives, proactive local citizens, personnel of military units, or indigenous (Sami) activists. Although commem-oration is not central to their repertoire of social activities, these groups contribute quite generously to memory infrastructure, driven by a variety of incentives—often out of a sense of patriotism, to strengthen their local civil and professional identities or merely to enrich their daily life. Most commonly, actors from this group follow the Soviet-era agenda of commemorating the "fallen heroes" and maintaining a symbolic reference to their predecessors who fought in the war. However, it would be an oversimplification to characterize occasional activist groups as potent sources of what is commonly referred to as "vernacular memories" (Bodnar 1992) since their initiatives do not necessarily conflict with the official "sanctified" memories of the BfZ but supplement the existing memory framework with some missing links. Besides, such "citizen-based commemora-tive activism" (Danilova 2015, 212) often relies on the support of other mnemonic actors due to a lack of resources. Private companies also invest in memorial projects, often supporting local amateur mnemonic actors who lack funds.

d. **Search squads (_poiskoviki_).** This category of mnemonic actors refers to a range of volunteer organizations involved in searching, identifying, repatriating, and re-burying the remains of war victims (primarily those who died in the GPW but also in other wars that took place in the Murmansk region, for example, the Winter War of 1939–40). The _poiskoviki_ work with thousands of the unburied remains of the soldiers who fell in the BfZ, emphasizing that their work notably resulted in "debunking many myths [about the BfZ] and unraveling the immense losses of [Soviet] fighters," as one of their leaders put it (Khraniteli naslediia 2019b) and promoting a "mourning," victim-centered nar-rative of the Battle.[9] The movement has been active in the Murmansk region since 1959 spanning 22 search squads with at least 600 activists, and has contributed to the reburials of more than 22,000 fallen war victims (Khraniteli naslediia 2019b). They are also engaged in restoring old memorials, creating new ones, and promoting youth patriotic education. Since 2000, the squads associated with the regional umbrella _poiskoviki_ organization have received a small amount of funding from the regional budget that

9. Another example is the critical reception of the official commemorative practices by one of the _poiskoviki_ leaders, Konstantin Dobrovol'skii, who complained about the lack of budget funding for the activists and blamed the officials for not paying enough respect to the remains of fallen soldiers (Britskaia 2018).

barely covers operational costs. However, despite the lack of funding and other practical issues, the *poiskoviki* movement remains a well-organized and motivated movement steered by a coordinating council and driven by considerations of duty and high mission (Khraniteli naslediia 2019b), the regional *poiskoviki* are reputable mnemonic actors whose leaders (Konstantin Dobrovol'skii, Mikhail Oresheta, Lev Zhurin) are respected by local authorities and people. In September 2021, a state-funded memorial to regional *poiskoviki* was installed in the Valley of Glory (*Vechernii Murmansk* 2021).

In general, these four categories of regional mnemonic actors are characterized by generally consistent and nonconflicting agendas based on the patriotic framing of the BfZ. All actors are sympathetic toward the general idea of commemoration and its patriotic tonality. However, the actors have diverging opinions *within* the mentioned unitary memory framing that sometimes leads to tensions. For example, the regional authorities launched a thorough redevelopment of the Valley of Glory, making it more aesthetically acceptable and attractive for tourists. The initiative caused a fundamental objection from *poiskoviki* who gave war memorials a less triumphalist and more mourning and victim-centered meaning and, in this regard, harshly criticized the official initiative (Khraniteli naslediia 2019a). Nonetheless, regardless of those separate instances of conflicts, regional mnemonic actors are generally open to collaborating. Veteran organizations are the most active type of actors in terms of collaboration: the data show that in 12 cases of joint memory projects (when the actors who participated in initiating an object belong to two or three categories) veteran organizations acted as co-initiators eight times. Still, although the actors are not averse to interacting, interaction is ultimately not a common pattern in their behavior, indicating their independence rather than interdependence.

Talking about the geography of post-Soviet war memorials, it is reasonable to look at how the activity of mnemonic actors is distributed throughout the region. In general, one can observe two mnemonic areas. The urban area is marked by a set of typical urban memory infrastructure (monuments and memorial plaques) that makes up approximately two-thirds of all post-Soviet BfZ memorials. The rural area comprises the places where the BfZ hostilities took place (the Zapadnaia Litsa valley, the Mustatunturi ridge, and the Rybachii and Srednii peninsulas); for that reason, this area is formed mainly by the objects containing the remains of the fallen fighters. The data also show that officials and occasional activists initiate memorials predominantly in the urban area while *poiskoviki* focus on rural developments, apparently because they work with remains "in the fields," not in the urban zones. Interestingly, this regularity is weaker in the case of the veteran organizations, which appear to be making efforts to become visible in both mnemonic areas.

Overall, observing the four groups of regional mnemonic actors, one can say that their agency is driven by a range of incentives. Only the veteran organizations, particularly *Shchit,* which unites FSB veterans, are engaged in the targeted promotion of the official state-centered narrative. The other actors, such as public authorities, occasional activist groups, and *poiskoviki,* tend to complete other practical tasks, for example, attracting tourists and burying the fallen soldiers. Although the patriotic framing of

commemorative activity is typical for them, the understanding of the axiology and ethics of patriotism may vary, as it is in the case of veterans and *poiskoviki* who share state-centered and victim-centered notions of the BfZ, respectively. Geographically, two mnemonic areas are distinguished: the urban area, predominantly with monuments and other objects of urban memory infrastructure; and the rural area, mainly with military mass graves and graveyards. Officials and occasional activists tend to initiate memorials in the urban area, while *poiskoviki* are most often active in the rural area; veteran organizations are active in both areas.

In the following sections, I discuss the qualitative aspects of the Murmansk region's mnemonic actors dealing with the BfZ monumental commemoration. First, I analyze a salient and multifold debate over the redevelopment of the Valley of Glory, the region's central place of memory. Next, I trace the post-Soviet changes in the identified urban and rural mnemonic areas, revealing some curious cases of the mnemonic actors' behavior. Last, I consider the impact on regional monumental war commemoration made by federal-level mnemonic actors.

MNEMONIC ACTORS IN CONFLICT: THE CASE OF THE VALLEY OF GLORY REDEVELOPMENT

Besides introducing new war memorials, the Murmansk mnemonic actors work with existing ones by carrying out various conservation practices, such as reconstruction and restoration of monuments as well as identification and reburial of body remains. Since 1991, 13 monuments have been reconstructed or restored (several times in some cases); remains of the fallen soldiers have been identified and reburied within the boundaries of six memorials. In several cases, war memorials undergo more significant modifications, sometimes associated with no less significant problems. An outstanding example is the *Dolina Slavy* (the Valley of Glory), a renowned memorial complex located in the valley of the Zapadnaia Litsa River. The place became an arena of fierce fighting between German and Soviet troops in 1941–44 and was unofficially known as the Valley of Death. A centerpiece of the geography of the BfZ, the Valley of Glory has become a popular destination for commemorative and patriotic tourism. Nowadays, the memorial complex consists of two parts: the core section for official commemorative activities (e.g., the ones related to Victory Day), comprised of monuments and pieces of authentic war-era armaments and intended for official commemorative events; and the cemetery with about 7,000 buried Soviet soldiers. The memorial complex was established in 1959 and continued to develop in subsequent years: since 1985, honorable reburials of the remains of fallen soldiers found thanks to the *poiskoviki*'s efforts, have been regularly held on the Valley's territory; since 2005, some objects have been reconstructed and restored (Committee for Culture and Art of the Murmansk Region 2012, 27).

These processes had a normal course until 2018, when the regional Committee on Culture and Art[10] decided to remove the state protection status from the cemetery

10. Transformed into the Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region in 2019.

(Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region 2020) to carry out large-scale reconstruc-
tion and improvement works, including the renewal of gravestones and relocation of
remains. This reconstruction provoked many negative reactions and became the subject
of a broad media discussion. Negative voices from local *poiskoviki* and heritage activists
pointed out the decision's illegality and the wrongdoings during reconstruction, such as
numerous mistakes in the names and circumstances of soldiers' deaths (Britskaia 2019;
SeverPost 2018; Khraniteli naslediia 2019a). The conflict heated up with renewed vigor
after up to a hundred old gravestones from the Valley were accidentally found on
a dumping site.

Two groups of actors participated in the debate around the Valley of Glory: supporters
of the reconstruction represented by public authorities and opponents of the interven-
tion from local *poiskoviki* and heritage activists. The main contradictions between the
mnemonic actors concerned narrative, structural, and aesthetic issues. First, a conflict
developed between two different narratives: the official triumphalist narrative that
emphasizes the fact of Victory and gives patriotic and loyalist senses to it and the set
of various popular notions that consider war victims as the primary subject of commem-
oration. The latter notion of the BfZ is widely shared by other regional branches of the
poiskoviki movement whose activists, although firmly identifying themselves as patriots
(Dahlin 2017), disapprove of the official version of patriotism, labeling it as "*ura-
patriotizm*," or "cheering patriotism," as rendered by Laruelle (2015, 24), because of its
perfunctory nature that disregards the tragic side of the war. The Murmansk *poiskoviki*
leaders criticized the restoration and commemorative rituals in the Valley of Glory
from the same positions (Britskaia 2018; Khraniteli naslediia 2019a). Second, the
conflict revealed a contradiction between the bureaucratic desire to regularize
impromptu mnemonic signs and the grassroots desire to preserve local commemorative
practices that had been carried on since 1959. Last, the official concern for the visual
qualities of the memorials came into collision with the popular strive to save the place's
authenticity; as one protester put it, "[the memorial complex's] 'spontaneity' was also
an imprint of our postwar history" (Khraniteli naslediia 2019a). Federal media
reported several similar cases of controversial redevelopment of war memorials in other
regions (Mikhailov 2020), so the case of the Valley of Glory supplemented this recently
emerged nationwide pattern.

Interestingly, the officials and public organizations close to them explained the works
by aesthetic considerations and the need to make the Valley more attractive to tourists.
As acknowledged by one representative of the Committee on Culture and Art, "we
decided to make the burial more aesthetic so that relatives of the dead and guests from
the region and other cities and countries would come here and the burial would not look
makeshift" (Nord-News 2018). The named reasoning corresponds to the policy of the
regional authorities aimed at taking care of local war memorials and promoting military-
patriotic tourism. For example, the previously mentioned Program for the Development
of the Tourist and Recreational Cluster of the Murmansk Region (Federalnyi portal
malogo i srednego predprinimatel'stva 2016, 21, 37–38) adopted by the regional

government puts the Valley of Glory on the list of tourist resources for historical-cultural and military-patriotic tourism.

In general, the case of the Valley of Glory redevelopment featured a visible confrontation between the official and grassroots dynamics of commemorative activity. It manifested a contradiction between the official endeavor to raise the attractiveness of the memorial complex in the eyes of local people and tourists on the one hand and the *poiskoviki*'s pursuit of preserving the genuine notion of the BfZ as a place of mass self-sacrifice and keeping the memorial in its authentic form on the other. The conflict over the sensitive memory of the fallen heroes overlapped with the widespread dissatisfaction with the insufficient war memorials conservation policy maintained by the regional authorities, which indicates a vivid bottom-up engagement in the war commemoration practices.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL IDENTITIES: URBAN AND RURAL WAR MEMORIALS

The Murmansk region is a highly urbanized territory, so almost two-thirds of new memorials are located in cities and towns, most notably in the cities of Polyarny and Murmansk with 13 and 11 objects reared in the post-Soviet period. In Polyarny, which is a port city maintaining the Northern Fleet base, all new memorials are dedicated to the Northern Fleet and initiated by the military. Despite the disappearance of the control of the Communist Party in the post-Soviet years, local authors continue to design war memorials in a strict and solemn style inspired by socialist realism.[11] Of particular interest is the Sea Soul memorial complex, authored by Lev Kerbel', a famous Soviet and Russian sculptor also known abroad, and installed in 2003. Kerbel's last work, the memorial combines the same-name monument and a submarine cockpit, glorifying the Northern Fleet navy men who fought in the BfZ and exemplifying the sheer socialist realist style. This memorial was part of a joint initiative of the city administration, the local Council of Deputies, and the Northern Fleet Command, yet the idea belonged to Lev Kerbel' and Konstantin Dobrovol'skii, who is one of the leaders of local *poiskoviki*, and local workers (*Pamiat' o proshlom gorod hranit* 2014, 67–69). The case of the Sea Soul memorial complex exemplifies an entangled and complex initiation process when it is hard to conclusively identify the initiative vector and classify it as top-down or bottom-up. In general, the commemorative process in Polyarny is characterized by a homogenous, even monotonous set of repertoires shared by a robust network of local mnemonic actors. The last war memorial in the city was installed in 2010.

In contrast to Polyarny, Murmansk war memorials are dedicated to a broader range of the BfZ heroes while being more evenly distributed over the period. One of the distinctive features of Murmansk is a good representation of the memory of non-military people who contributed to the common cause of victory. Five of the eleven post-Soviet war

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11. Perhaps this is due to adherence to the canon of commemorative culture that developed during the Soviet period (Danilova 2015; Gabowitsch 2014; Konradova and Ryleva 2005).

memorials are dedicated to the city residents of non-military background, namely to the Murmansk police officers (2000), drivers (2005), war workers (2008), firefighters (2008), and citizens (2017). Murmansk local activist groups perform as the most active mnemonic actors, with seven initiated memorials for the post-Soviet period, whereas *poiskoviki* are inactive in the city. Common patterns of behavior of the Murmansk occasional activist groups are the initiation of memorials to their heroic predecessors who fought in the BfZ (e.g., city firefighters install a monument to wartime firefighters) and the use of public donations (along with taking official funds when possible) as funding strategies. The military men are diversely represented by monuments to the border guards (2013), the Northern Fleet commander, counter-admiral Aleksandr Shabalin (2018), and the Polar division warriors (2020). Two memorial objects glorify the reconnoiters (1997, 2013). A remarkable monument erected in 2020 memorializes the reindeer transport battalions, which played a significant role in the difficult task of supplying the front and rescuing the wounded. The memorial has a complicated history, as local Sami activists, who put forward this idea, campaigned for its installation for many years (at least since 2014) before they finally managed to overcome bureaucratic inflexibility, and the monument took its place in one of the city's residential areas (Britskaia 2020; SeverPost 2018).

Rural memorials are mainly located on the territories of the Pechengskii and Kolskii districts located along the GPW-era important Murmansk operative direction. As said, most of the mentioned objects contain the remains of soldiers discovered by *poiskoviki*. One of the outstanding objects is the monument to the Norwegian participants of the Resistance movement created at the expense of the Norwegian citizens and installed in the settlement of Mezhdurech'e in 1997, simultaneously with a similar monument erected by the Norwegian side in the village of Kiberg as part of a trans-border cooperation initiative (Leksikon KS 2013). Other notable objects are two crosses on the Srednii peninsula and the Mustatunturi ridge (both installed in 2006) that remain the only commemorative objects of this kind created in the post-Soviet period. In 2020, in the village of Lovozero, the capital of Kola Sami, local Sami activists erected a monument to reindeer transport battalions, which is similar to the one that appeared in Murmansk the same year.

The case of the destruction of the monument to submariners in the settlement of Liinahamari in the Pechengskii district deserves special mention. The monument erected in 1972 by Northern Fleet submariners crumbled in September 2020. Later it was established that the monument was deliberately destroyed, so after a wave of public discontent in the media, a criminal case of vandalism was initiated (Smelova 2020). Several actors, including Nornickel, expressed interest in restoring the monument (Vishnevetskaia 2020). This incident gradually involved mnemonic actors from all categories hoping for a successful re-erection in the observable future.

Observing the urban and rural mnemonic areas, we see that the mnemonic actors regard monumental commemoration as a means of consolidating their identities. Navy and military men, various civil servants, and indigenous activists strive to make a monumental reference to their predecessors who fought in the BfZ to inscribe them in the

narrative of the Battle, which possesses considerable symbolic value for the local population. Through monumental commemoration of the wartime civil and military groups, their post-Soviet descendants increase their symbolic presence in the urban cultural space, featuring the inclusive nature of community-led remembrance noted by Danilova (2015, 212). Moreover, locating new memorials in the urban areas and along popular tourist routes is related to the official endeavors to improve the region's image as a tourist destination.

FEDERAL IMPACT ON REGIONAL WAR COMMEMORATION

The federal impact on the regional memory infrastructure can be measured by assessing the involvement of federal officials, business corporations, political parties, and a specific mnemonic actor such as RVIO in the initiation process. The only case of a direct initiative by federal authorities took place in 2008 when, according to the president's decree, Polyarny gained the status of a "city of military glory" that requires the installation of a welcome stela (*Pamiat' o proshlom gorod hranit* 2014, 75–77).

Major federal business companies, such as Nornickel, Sberbank, and PhosAgro, participate in erecting new memorials, providing the initiators with financial and technical support. In this direction, Nornickel, an ambitious mnemonic actor in the Russian North, deserves special attention. In 2014, as part of the *"Vstavai, soldat"* (Arise, Soldier) federal commemorative program for the reconstruction of old memorials, the state corporation restored the monument dedicated to the seaborne fighters lost two years before (Telekompaniia TV-21 2014). Nornickel also sponsored the memorial complex *Pavshim radi zhivykh* (To the Fallen for the Sake of the Living) installed in the city of Monchegorsk in 2020 (*Vechernii Murmansk* 2020).

As for the participation of political parties in initiating memorials, the ruling United Russia party (which is much more active than the other party movements in the realm of memory politics) involvement mainly has a format of the regional-level implementation of the *"Istoricheskaia pamiat'"* ("Historical Memory")[12] party project aiming at the promotion of the restoration of historical and cultural monuments and encouraging "patriotic education of the young people" (Proekty partii Edinaia Rossiia 2022). As part of the project, regional party functionaries and *poiskoviki* activists initiated the installation of an obelisk to the fallen soldiers in the Pechenga district near the Luostari settlement.

RVIO, a prominent federal mnemonic actor, has had its Murmansk regional department headed by Governor Andrei Chibis since 2016. The Murmansk department actively participates in BfZ commemorations, military reconstruction events, and other kinds of military-patriotic activity, including monumental commemoration (RVIO 2023a, 2023b). However, the RVIO activists do not initiate or restore memorials but

12. Not to be confused with the "Istoricheskaia pamiat'" foundation, a Russian state-backed nonprofit organization (Miller 2020).

only participate in opening ceremonies and report about such events in their media, as was the case with the opening of the restored memorial plaques to war heroes in 2016 and 2017 that were both initiated by the *poiskoviki* (RVIO 2016, 2017). The monument to the Polar Division, installed in the city of Murmansk in 2020, attracted close attention from the RVIO media resources, although it was not initiated and created by the organization's activists (*Vechernii Murmansk* 2020).

In a certain way, regional veteran organizations can also be put in this category, as some of them are run by federal employees and promote official narratives (e.g., *Shchit* uniting FSB veterans). Federal officials used the *Shchit* fund as an organizational platform for international commemorative projects. Thus, from 2013 to 2019, the fund, together with Igor Chernyshenko, a member of the Federation Council from the Murmansk region, co-organized cross-border Russian-Norwegian patriotic commemorative tours to war memorials; these tours got coverage in both Russian federal and Norwegian media (Myklebost 2023).

As we can see, federal actors contribute to regional memorials and participate in associated commemoration practices. Some of the actors, such as the Nornickel corporation, the United Russia political party, and the *Shchit* veteran organization (which is not a federal actor itself but has federal-level patrons), are involved in war commemoration through different memory projects. However, the scale of their engagement remains limited. The participation of large companies in developing the memorials is sporadic, perhaps except for Nornickel showing a bit more ambition in this regard; United Russia and RVIO generally limit their efforts to participating in commemorative ceremonies. In general, the strategies of federal actors seem to imply not so much initiating as many places of memory as possible but rather adapting to the already existing conditions and parameters of war commemoration and increasing influence over part of this sphere.

CONCLUSION

The Battle for *Zapoliar'e* is extensively imprinted in the Murmansk regional commemorative culture. Despite essential ideological changes that occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Battle remains a central subject of regional historical memory, perhaps even a founding myth of regional identity. Murmansk war memorials disseminate the regional narrative of World War II, framing the national war narrative for the local population, strengthening the regional identity, and stressing the region's role in the GPW by reserving a decent place for *Zapoliar'e* in the Russian national "league of regional war memories."

The article shows that the regional configuration of mnemonic actors is diverse, including such groups of actors as veteran organizations, public authorities, occasional activist groups, and *poiskoviki* organizations, not to mention other separate actors such as private companies, military collectives, and ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, the last decade was marked by increasing influences of state-backed actors who attempted to spread various forms of control onto part of the commemorative process in the Murmansk

region, purporting to promote a triumphalist, state-centered war narrative. Against this backdrop, the contours of the conflict between official and vernacular memories emerge in several dimensions—conceptual (between celebrating and mourning war narratives), structural (between top-down and bottom-up initiatives), and aesthetic (between cultural authenticity and tourist accessibility), as we see in the case of the conflict over the redevelopment of the Valley of Glory between regional authorities on the one side and *poiskoviki* on the other. In addition, some tensions often covered by federal mass media emerge outside these dimensions due to poor or unpopular administrative decisions, malicious intent, or absence of care at the regional level.

Still, the case of Murmansk demonstrates that the federal impact remains limited, and most war memorials have been initiated by local actors driven by various incentives far removed from the pro-Kremlin agenda. The most active actors in the region are the patriotic *poiskoviki* squads who share their own version of patriotism, which often contradicts the official state-centered patriotism promoted by state-backed mnemonic actors. GONGOs (RVIO, veteran organizations), business corporations, and political parties are less active in installing new and maintaining existing memorials. An exception there is the *Shchit* FSB veteran organization, which has put serious efforts to propagate statist narratives through commemorating war heroes, also as part of cross-border cooperation with Norway. As for the agency of other groups of actors, they use war memory to strengthen local identities by inscribing them in the narrative of the Battle for *Zapoliar'e* using monumental means. The presented analysis thus challenges the Kremlin-centric understanding of Russian memory politics.

The case study also shows that the regional mnemonic actors tend to combine the war commemoration agenda with practical considerations. For instance, considerable efforts to renovate old memorials and place new ones in major cities and along popular travel routes demonstrate the official engagement in strengthening the region's tourist attractiveness. The presented analysis of the Murmansk regional commemorative infrastructure can become a starting point for new discussions on the issues of articulations and circulations of war memories in Russian regions. ■

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Appendix 2. Article B.

Spirin, Artem. A Concentration Camp for Red Patriots. The Contested Memory of the Civil War and Allied Intervention in the Russian North: the Case of Mudyug Prison Camp Museum.

Manuscript accepted for publication.

Appendix 3. Article C.

Spirin, Artem. The Contested Memories of the Violent Past in a Border Region: Memory Politics of the Stalinist Terror and Finnish Occupation in Post-Soviet Karelia.

Manuscript.

The Contested Memories of the Violent Past in a Border Region: Memory Politics of the Stalinist Terror and Finnish Occupation in Post-Soviet Karelia

Introduction

On 25 December 2023 in Sandarmokh, a renowned site commemorating the Stalinist repressions located near Medvezhyegorsk in the Republic of Karelia, authorities unveiled a new monument. The inscription on the monument read: "To the Victims of the Repressions of 1937-1939 and the Victims of the Finnish Occupation during the Great Patriotic War" (ZakS.ru 2023). This installation of a monument that referenced two events from the region's violent past might appear to be a routine part of perpetuating tragic memories. However, this particular event represented the authorities' attempt to resolve a longstanding conflict over the meaning of this place.

Initially supportive of the Sandarmokh commemorations, federal structures, and Karelian regional authorities have distanced themselves from the memory site since 2016. The same year, the generally accepted notion of Sandarmokh as a burial site for the victims of Stalinist terror was shattered by two historians who posited that Soviet prisoners of war captured by Finnish occupiers could also be buried there. Although their bold yet thinly sourced hypothesis faced criticism, it garnered support from the Russian Military-Historical Society, which soon initiated archaeological excavations within the cemetery's boundaries, yet failed to uncover any substantial evidence. The Sandarmokh case and the discredited "Finnish hypothesis" have attracted extensive media in Russia and beyond. Sandarmokh has become strongly associated with the criminal case of memory activist Yurii Dmitriev, which was characterized as politicized by many commentators and became a cause célèbre among Russian political opposition.

The Karelian regional memory of its violent past thus became a battleground where state-loyal and opposition mnemonic actors converged. In stark terms, federal-level state mnemonic actors, along with their regional affiliates, launched an offensive against the well-entrenched regional memory of Stalin's terror, maintained by the Memorial Society. In this case study, I trace how the memory conflict regarding Sandarmokh evolved and the memory of the Finnish occupation instrumentalized between 2016 and 2023. After outlining the theoretical underpinnings, I examine the

commemorative practices in Sandarmokh and their characteristics. Then, I analyze the new interpretations of Sandarmokh, particularly the hypothesis that Soviet POWs were killed and buried there by the Finns (referred to here and elsewhere as "the Finnish hypothesis") and their public reception. Lastly, I discuss the recent trend of increasing attention from Karelian academic circles and patriotic activists toward the memory of the Finnish occupation of Soviet Karelia from 1941 to 1944. I argue that the state-led intervention into Sandarmokh and the surge of research and commemorative activity surrounding the occupation topic are interconnected events, underpinned by the involvement of the federal government and the state-backed actors aiming to diminish what the Russian authorities call "foreign influence" in Karelia's memoryscape and align it more closely with nationally promoted memory frameworks. Therefore, these developments can indicate a transition to a more consolidated, state-centered, sovereign, and anti-Western memory regime, rather than Russia's alleged ideological shift towards Stalinism, as many media accounts suggest.

To inform my case study, I survey relevant academic and non-fiction texts, media reports, official documents, and audiovisual sources. To clarify certain details and augment my analysis of sources with crucial missing links, I use data I obtained through conducting semi-structured interviews with Karelian researchers and journalists who can be considered "highly knowledgeable informants who view the focal phenomena from diverse perspectives" (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007: 28) between November 2023 and November 2024.

Memory politics and memory conflicts: Russia and its neighbors

Memory politics of the violent past in Putin's Russia: through centralization to consensus

In the sphere of dealing with the violent parts of Russia's past, the recent decade has witnessed the state's intensified efforts to reconcile discrepancies between official memory policies and local memory repertoires. By developing new memory projects (Lapin 2020, Weiss-Wendt 2021) and integrating existing initiatives (Fedor 2017, Goode 2020), the Kremlin has attempted to structurally *centralize* its memory politics. Another important part of this effort involves promoting *state-centric historical narratives*, such

as the grand conceptual frameworks of the imperishable Russian "thousand-year state" (Malinova 2018) or idiosyncratic "state-civilization" (Blackburn 2021, 2022: 470-473), and ensuring their hegemonic positions at the local level. Russia's power elite strategically seeks to foster a *positive consensus* based on a shared vision of the country's historical past, rather than relying on some ideology, as ideologization would entail the undesirable politicization and mobilization of society (Gjerde 2015, Laruelle 2021: 145-146).

The most conducive environment for achieving consensus between the state and society is military history (Lapin 2020: 79), as it most often obscures issues of in-country conflicts related to inequality, economic exploitation, and domestic state violence while highlighting themes of patriotism and national(ist) unity. In contemporary Russia, the extensive historical experiences of both waging wars and imbuing them with patriotic significance enable the current political regime to use war memories as resources for memory politics and consensus-building (Laruelle 2021: 59-60). For this reason, one of the most influential official mnemonic actors is the Russian Military-Historical Society (*Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo, RVIO*), a state-backed organization dedicated to ideological education and memory activism. Over recent years, RVIO has developed a network of regional branches that support local historical and military-patriotic projects throughout the country. These enhancements, according to Lapin (2020: 93-94), have enabled the organization to undertake not only "defensive" but also "offensive" operations in the realm of memory politics.

It is evident that the Kremlin faces a more complex challenge when dealing with the memory of state terror, specifically the Stalinist repressions. The statist turn in Russia's memory politics under Putin has involved a shift towards a more nuanced official notion of Stalin's figure, recognizing him not only as a brutal dictator but a "nation-builder, Second World War winner and superpower leader" (Fitzpatrick 2017: 826). Concurrently, instances of Neo-Stalinist sympathies in popular culture increased in frequency, leading some scholars to interpret them as a state-sanctioned "re-Stalinization" of Russia, where the authoritarian state and its clients deliberately promote neo-Stalinist views among the population inclined towards authoritarian values (Khapaeva 2016, Kuzio 2016, Nelson 2019). Another viewpoint (Blackburn and

Khlevnyuk 2023, Gjerde 2015, McGlynn 2023, Sherlock 2011, 2016) suggests that neither top-down nor bottom-up re-Stalinization is likely in contemporary Russia. According to Sherlock (2016), the Kremlin tolerates some elements of (neo-)Stalinist discourse rather than actively promoting them. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Kremlin attempts to erase the existing memory of the Stalinist terror; on the contrary, it has initiated new projects related to the victims of Stalinism. Regarding popular perception, there is little evidence of widespread and open support for Stalin, while his staunch proponents and opponents are represented by minor, if not fringe, groups. Considering the predominant indifference towards Stalin and the plurality of viewpoints on his legacy, Blackburn and Khlevnyuk (2023) characterize the general mode of memory about him as agonistic, with the common notion of him being part of the statist *longue-durée* vision of the country's history. In this context, the state seeks not to silence but to reframe the repressions in a statist and patriotic manner, both at the national (Klimenko 2023) and regional levels (Sniegon 2019, Khlevnyuk 2023). Yet, although no definitive indications of re-Stalinization have been evidenced even following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022 and the increased repressiveness of the Putin regime (Molotov and Khlevniuk 2024: 85), the named changes offer little certainty that Stalin's figure will not be at least partially rehabilitated by the state for practical needs in the future.

Memory conflicts with and within Russia and combating "foreign influence"

Alongside seeking positive content for its memory policies, the Kremlin also engages in negative "active measures," such as instigating memory conflicts with its Eastern European neighbors and suppressing domestic nationalisms. *Memory conflicts* are disputes within the sphere of the interpretation of the historical past. They most frequently arise between those *mnemonic actors* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) who perceive the behavior of other actors as encroaching upon their ontological security – or, in the context of memory politics, their *mnemonical security* (Mälksoo 2015). Following the lead of its Eastern European neighbors, Russia adopted elements of a more proactive and less conciliatory memory politics which also entailed its *securitization*, or "viewing discussions on history and collective identity through the lens of national security threats". These developments were significantly influenced by

similar trends in Eastern European countries, particularly in Poland, the Baltic states, Moldova, and Ukraine. These countries moved away from a Western European "cosmopolitan" approach to memory, adopting instead an "antagonistic" approach in which Russia, perceived as reverting to Soviet-style totalitarianism, would be regarded as a "constitutive, dangerous Other" (Miller 2020: 4). In Poland and the Baltic states, this shift was associated with efforts by national elites to secure legitimate hegemonic spaces for nationalist narratives, particularly concerning WWII and the postwar period of Soviet domination, within the common European memory framework centered on Holocaust memory (Dujisin 2024, Mälksoo 2009, Miller 2020). For Russia and its Eastern European neighbors, the mutual build-up of normative and institutional infrastructure (memory laws and national mnemonic institutions) and the wars of monuments triggered a full-scale memory conflict, which has intensified drastically with Putin's warfare in Ukraine since 2022.

In addition to engaging in memory wars with Eastern European neighbors, the Russian state seeks to exert control over the development of nationalism(s), perceiving it as a centrifugal force that poses a risk to Russia's multi-national federative polity (Laruelle 2021: 147, Yusupova 2018). Nationalities (ethnicities) and confessions serve as pathways for establishing symbolic ties between members of communities of memory, particularly those commemorating Stalin's terror (Flige 2019: 88, Khlevnyuk 2018, Krikhtova 2014). Similarly to how national or religious mobilization exposes potential risks to the regime's stability, ethnic- or religion-focused memories challenge the hegemonic images of the past that are favored by the Kremlin. The regime also views nationalist narratives about the past as gateways and conduits for detrimental "foreign influence" and thus often seeks to suppress them. The authorities' efforts to combat "foreign influence" sometimes lead to memory conflicts involving various mnemonic actors at the local, national, and even international levels.

Sandarmokh in 2016-2023: incorporating patriotic memory

The very first English-language academic account of Sandarmokh as a commemorative site was provided by Merridale (2001: 2-8), who outlined the background story of this place and described in detail her experience of the inaugural commemorative ceremony in October 1997. However, the theme of Sandarmokh as an arena of memory-political

confrontation has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention. In his eloquent monograph on the falsification of history in contemporary Russia, Weiss-Wendt (2021: 225-229) presented the events that occurred in Sandarmokh between 2016 and 2020 as a clear-cut case of state machinery attempting to revise the country's history and whitewash some of its dark pages. The author pointed out that the authorities, by invoking the hypothesis that Soviet POWs might also be buried in Sandarmokh, sought to relativize the Soviet executions so that they would "no longer appear exceptional" to Russian citizens. Beyond these compelling assumptions, the author's explanation of the state's intentions, primarily informed by central non-state Russian media, generally reduces to the regime's alleged pursuit of portraying Stalin and the security services as positive characters of the complex drama of Russia's history. Similarly, Kallio (2021) interprets the state's actions in Sandarmokh as driven by ideological considerations related to constructing a glorified image of the country's past, with Stalinist repressions deemed unfitting and therefore inconvenient. He also argued that the Russian power elite's reluctance to condemn Stalin's crimes stems from their fear of being accused of human rights violations. McGlynn (2023: 45-46) examined Sandarmokh through the lens of Dmitriev's case, highlighting its dubious nature and characterizing it generally as a manifestation of "the increasing clampdown on independent – and inconvenient – forms of enquiry in Russia."

The two main reasons why these scholars did not fully explain the case are their reliance on central media as primary sources of information and a Kremlin-centered perspective on regional memory politics. Instead, I propose examining the Sandarmokh discussions and incursions as a multi-level conflict between mnemonic actors and attempting to understand why the state intervened in the memory site's narrative and landscape. While deeming the pervasive explanation of current trends in Russia's official memory policies by creeping rehabilitation of Stalinism as insufficient, I argue that the mentioned intervention is related to the state's desire to secure the border region of Karelia from "foreign influence" by eliminating the perceived threat from the International Memorial, particularly its political activism, and introducing alternative "patriotic" conceptions into the existing narratives of state terror. Therefore, I argue that

the authorities' actions are premised on considerations associated with mnemonical security rather than ideological motives related to re-Stalinization.

The Sandarmokh memory site and the Memorial Society: invoking national memories

The major contribution to researching and raising awareness of the Sandarmokh mass shootings was made by the International Memorial Society.[1] As one of Russia's most prominent opposition mnemonic actors, the Memorial Society has effectively combined historical research with practices of public history, commemoration, and political activism related to human rights advocacy (Adler 1993, Smith 2002). Between 1995 and 1997, historians and activists from the International Memorial's Saint Petersburg branch initiated research on the Solovki camp executions. The documentary material obtained from the Soviet archives, which opened in the 1990s, enabled them to reconstruct the details of the Sandarmokh executions. In August 1937, the Soviet political police chief, Nikolai Yezhov, issued Order №00447,[2] initiating a mass repressive operation known as the Great Terror of 1937-1938, and Directive №59190, which ordered the Solovki prison camp to be "unloaded" and for up to 1200 camp prisoners to be summarily convicted and executed (Flige 2019: 37-40). Following this Directive, 1111 prisoners were transported by sea from the Solovki islands to Kem', then by railroad to the Medgora settlement (today Medvezhyegorsk) and by trucks to Sandarmokh, where a firing squad executed them and buried the bodies. This relatively well-documented execution and burial of the "Solovki prisoner transport" ("*solovetskii etap"*) occurred between 27 October and 4 November 1937 (Bogumil 2018: 54-56, Flige 2019: 63-64).

A border and multiethnic region, Soviet Karelia was one of the worst-hit regions during the Great Terror of 1937-1938 (Takala 2018: 180-181). Sources estimate the total number of Soviet citizens executed in Sandarmokh to be up to 6241 (Flige 2019: 11) or even 7,5 thousand (Sand.mapofmemory.org 2024). This includes not only those from the "Solovki prisoner transport" but also Karelian residents and inmates from the nearby Belomorsko-Baltiiskii labor camp. The number and identity of the victims have been

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[1] In December 2021, the organization was liquidated by the court's decision.

[2] On the Great Terror in Soviet Karelia see Chukhin (1999), Takala (2018).

the subjects of debate. The Memorial Society insists on six or seven thousand victims from the mentioned groups (Flige 2019: 84) whereas their opponents, such as Aleksandr Stepanov (2021: 39-40), claim that the number does not exceed two thousand and that only the execution of the prisoners from the "Solovki transport" is documented. There have always been doubts about whether the location reference "near Medgora railway station" stated in a number of the execution documents should definitively be associated with Sandarmokh, or whether the executions took place elsewhere over a broader geographic area (Dmitriev 1999: 3).[3]

Throughout the Soviet period, the location of the graves remained obscure until the Memorial Society's expedition came across it in a forest stow (Russ: *urochishche*) in the Medvezhyegorsk district in July 1997, finding several remains of the executed and identifying 150 burial pits (Dmitriev 1999: 295, Flige 2019: 70-73). Although the discovery of Sandarmokh is commonly attributed to local amateur historian and memory activist Yurii Dmitriev or the Memorial Society (Epple 2020: 104, Khlevnyuk 2018: 128, Staf 2023: 477), regional media sources indicate that it was in fact made possible through the collective efforts of local journalists, authorities, and activists who had gathered key information about the place's whereabouts (Chentemirov 2017). Another important contributor to the discovery of Sandarmokh was the Federal Security Service (FSB), which provided the activists with necessary administrative and information resources (Starikov 2014). As the burial site was located, the Memorial activists requested the regional government to commemorate the victims, receiving full support. On 27 October 1997, the Sandarmokh Memorial Cemetery was inaugurated, gathering about 900 visitors, including relatives of those shot as part of the Solovetskii prisoner transport, Russian and foreign officials and politicians, priests, and local activists. The relatives marked the burial pits with wooden signs, initiating a grassroots commemorative practice of installing and renovating small personal signs and monuments on the cemetery's grounds. Over the subsequent years, hundreds of such signs were installed. Alongside these makeshift smaller monuments, Ukrainian and Polish national delegations installed memorial crosses to their executed compatriots.

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[3] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 2, 2 March 2024.

The commemoration ceremony in October 1997 concluded with a meeting between the Republic of Karelia's officials and the Memorial Society's activists, who jointly decided to initiate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Great Terror for 5 August (Flige 2019: 76-79). From then onward, commemorative ceremonies took place annually on 5 August and on 30 October, the Remembrance Day of the Victims of Political Repressions, with the local Medvezhyegorsk administration as a principal organizer.

Since individuals of 58 nationalities are buried on the cemetery's grounds (Parppei 2020: 34), confessional and especially national memories have become potent sources for both monumental commemoration and its narrative underpinnings. By 2017, twenty-five "ethno-confessional" and other group monuments had been installed (Flige 2019: 89). In the years following 1997, Karelian national and cultural organizations participated in commemorations, representing Karelian national memory.[4] The Memorial and its associates based their strategy of creating an imagined community of memory (Anderson 2006, Bogumil 2018: 44) on establishing connections between the relatives of those repressed in the 1930s and their symbolic descendants through the mediation of a national sense of commonality. For this reason, they point out the importance of categorizing the Sandarmokh victims by nationality and religious affiliation. For Flige (2019: 88), national categorization is historically relevant, as the organizers and operators of the terror often persecuted their victims along national/ethnic lines. Dmitriev considers the national aspect of remembrance to be paramount. In his words, only through gaining national consciousness can people unite and only through gaining awareness about the family, kinship, and nation's history can a national identity become effectively awakened and secured:

"I am some kind of ardent nationalist […]. The only thing that can unite peoples is their nationality. Before we all unite, we first need to know the history of our family, our kinship, our people. Stories, customs, folkways, culture. If we

[4] Author's interview with anonymous informant, journalist 1, 15 November 2023.

know it, then in no way in hell shall some rook from the high stands lead us astray" (Boldyrev 2018).

For Dmitriev, national or ethnic identity not only sets the framework for categorizing the victims but also forms a moral imperative for perpetuating their memories in monuments. By erecting a monument to their predecessors who were executed in Sandarmokh, members of a national or ethnic community fulfill the symbolic duty of remembrance and strengthen a sense of commonality among themselves (Khlevnyuk 2018: 128-129, Epple 2020: 106-107). Epple (2020: 107) points out that the first monuments launched a "competition of national prides" and as the number of national monuments increased, more compatriots and official delegations came to visit. Among these national monuments are those to Estonians, Finns, Georgians, Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians (Sand.mapofmemory.org 2023), representing border nations whose relations with Russia have been gradually deteriorating in recent years.

Another feature of the Memorial is its openly oppositional stance towards the state and its policies. This stance is to a certain extent predetermined by the discursive disposition occupied by the memory of the Stalinist terror in Russia. As Bogumil (2018: 5) observes, the creators of this memory often aim to break away from "the prevailing official narrative and recast their experience of the past as a new national narrative". The Memorial activists openly criticize the official way of remembering the Stalinist repressions, according to which "there is a tragedy with innocent victims, but there is neither crime nor perpetrators" (Flige 2019: 115). Following this line of thought, Flige (2019: 104-107) critiques certain aspects of the monumental "hardware" at Sandarmokh, particularly the central Guardian Angel monument, for its conceptual vagueness and the lack of explicit political content that should name and condemn the perpetrators. Moreover, for the Memorial, the remembrance of the victims of Soviet state terror is inseparable from reflections of its consequences in present-day Russia; speakers at annual commemorative meetings often address the inconvenient topics of political persecution and, since 2014, the conflict in Ukraine. This defiant "mnemonic warrior" position (Bernhard and Kubik 2014: 15) typically limits the space for dialogue between the state and civil society, as well as among different political forces; for instance, Fokin

and Kozlov (2023: 86) contrapose this approach with a more inclusive and conciliatory model of dealing with the violent past, as suggested by Epple (2020).

From the outset, the International Memorial regarded Sandarmokh not only as a place of memory but also as a platform for an explicit political statement. By categorizing the victims based on national and confessional lines they endowed the site with a strong national dimension. Mobilized national memories became conflated with personal, family, and local memories, thereby enhancing the moral and emotional aspects of remembrance while blurring the boundary between individual/family memories and hegemonic nationalist narratives. This conception, coupled with state support, allowed Sandarmokh to gain not only regional and national significance but also international prominence (Flige 2019: 111). However, the Memorial's clearly articulated political agenda involved using the memory of the Stalinist purges as an *explanans* for Putin's authoritarianism, while offering a nation-centric framing for private memories. As the state grew increasingly wary of opposition activity, nationalist mobilization, and "foreign influence", these parameters of commemoration became increasingly incompatible with the state's notion of social consensus.

The FSB archive documents, the "Finnish hypothesis", and the RVIO excavations: for the sake of national security

During the Continuation War of 1941-1944, Finland managed to occupy a major part of Soviet Karelia. In the occupied territories, the Finnish military administration pursued a racialized treatment policy towards the local population. Finnish-Ugric ethnic groups were considered "kindred peoples of Finland" and thus received preferential treatment, whereas others, mainly ethnic Slavs, were subjected to interment in concentration camps (Finnish: *keskitysleirit*),[5] with the ultimate aim of deporting them away from Finnish-occupied territories (Laine 1982: 105, 121, Silvennoinen 2012: 386-388). Experiencing a wartime shortage of workforce, the Finnish authorities exploited the incarcerated population as a source of cheap labor. At the height of their operation in 1942, these camps contained approximately 24 thousand prisoners of various ages and genders (or

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[5] In 1943, to avoid undesirable associations with Nazi Germany's concentration camps, the Finnish occupational administration renamed the Karelia camps as "relocation camps" (*siirtoleirit*) (Silvennoinen 2012: 389)

half of the entire non-Finnic population of the occupied territories), of whom at least 4279 died, mainly from diseases and malnutrition (Westerlund 2008: 14). The Finnish camp system also detained around 64 thousand Soviet POWs, between 19 and 22 thousand of these prisoners died in captivity (Kujala 2009: 446).[6] Several Finnish POW camps were located in the Medvezhyegorsk district, not far from Sandarmokh, where the Finnish authorities repurposed the existing Soviet penal infrastructure to detain POWs. These facts later led some historians to hypothesize that the Finns could have buried POWs in Sandarmokh, alongside Stalin's victims.

The first allegations about Finnish involvement in Sandarmokh date back to 1997, the year the burial pits were discovered (Flige 2019: 123, Yarovaia 2017). Also, there was at least one report of executions by shooting near Medvezhyegorsk (Medvezhia Gora railway station) during the Civil War, and there likely were more due to a White Army secret police station and a POW camp nearby (Pirogov 1939: 94, Monuments.karelia.ru 2024a). Nevertheless, the "Finnish hypothesis" only gained traction in media and then academic discourse in 2016, following an article by Petrozavodsk-based historian Yurii Kilin published in the Finnish tabloid "Kaleva" in July. In his article, which described the ordeals of Soviet POWs in Karelian camps in 1941-1944, Kilin claimed that the Finnish military buried Soviet prisoners in Sandarmokh, which was a place well-known to them, and highlighted the need to examine Finnish archives on this matter (Kilin 2016). Within weeks after this publication, the narrative that a large number of Soviet POWs were buried in Sandarmokh and accusations that the International Memorial had "silenced" this fact were propagated by several major federal media outlets, including Izvestiia, TASS, and Zvezda (a TV channel of the Russian Ministry of Defense) (Yarovaia 2017). As a basis for these allegations, Zvezda demonstrated documents from the central FSB archive, claiming these "recently declassified" records could refute established scholarly views on Sandarmokh and "restore historical truth" (Sokirko 2016). These documents were later included in an academic report delivered by Sergei Verigin, a war historian from Petrozavodsk and Kilin's colleague, who also joined the 2016 revisionist campaign

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involving Sandarmokh (Verigin 2016). However, a detailed investigation by Yarovaia (2017) later revealed that these documents had been declassified already in June 2015, suggesting that Kilin and Verigin likely had access to them long before this campaign began (Tumarkin 2020: 376). Verigin's main documental finding from the FSB records was that the Finnish authorities used the Soviet GULag penal infrastructure for organizing POW camps. This genuinely valuable finding led Verigin to assume that the Sandarmokh execution site might have been used similarly by the occupiers (Verigin and Mashin 2019: 14-15), although the records contain no evidence supporting this claim (Takala 2020).

Following these events that preceded the official intervention into Sandarmokh, Russia's Ministry of Justice declared the International Memorial a "foreign agent" in October 2016; two months later, the Memorial's activist Yurii Dmitriev was arrested and charged with child abuse. Many observers characterized his criminal case as politically motivated (Carroll 2020, Higgins 2020, Yarovaia 2017).

RVIO in action: entrenching the new narrative

The official engagement with Sandarmokh through using the "Finnish hypothesis" began at the federal level, involving several major media outlets and the Ministry of Defense, which is legally responsible for matters concerning WWII POWs and their commemoration. However, regional authorities initially showed reluctance to support the hypothesis and rejected Verigin's official appeal to conduct on-site archaeological expertise (Verigin and Mashin 2019: 42-43), presumably due to concerns about the politicization of Sandarmokh (Dmitriev 2020: 512). This changed when the hypothesis was further discussed at Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU) in June 2017, where it faced sharp criticism by local *poiskoviki* leader Alexandr Osiev for lacking substantial evidence of mass POW shootings in Sandarmokh (Yarovaia and Markelov 2017). Despite the negative feedback from local *poiskoviki*, the hypothesis gained support from the regional administration, which requested the RVIO regional branch in the Leningrad region to engage its own *poiskoviki* and conduct excavation works in the area. As a result, RVIO organized two sessions of excavations, in 2018 and 2019 respectively, involving the regional government, *poiskoviki* from other regions, and the military, but

encountering resolute opposition from local scholars (historians and archaeologists), politicians, memory activists, and the relatives of those executed (Chentemirov 2018, "Otkrytoe pis'mo" 2018).

While human remains with indications of execution by shooting were indeed recovered, no evidence was found to substantiate Finnish involvement or to confirm the summary executions of Soviet POWS. Nevertheless, RVIO concluded that the remains might belong to Soviet citizens who had been shot by Finnish occupiers for allegedly aiding guerilla fighters, advocating for resuming the excavations. The Karelia Minister of Culture, who was one of the initiators of the excavations, justified the resumption on the grounds that it was necessary to disclose "the information about what was going on there [in Sandarmokh] both in 1937 [during Stalin's purges] and in the wartime" (RVIO 2019a). The minister's words delineated a conceptualization of Sandarmokh that would conflate the memory of the Stalinist repressions with that of the Finnish occupation, aligning with RVIO's expectations.

Even more revealing was the Ministry's letter to the RVIO headquarters submitted in July 2019. A confidential (and therefore candid) document leaked into the media a month later offered insights into the genuine motives behind the authorities' actions in Sandarmokh. The letter expressed concern that the commemoration of the victims of political repression had become "with the support of domestic and foreign interested actors" "a paradigm of public awareness" and had been "actively used by several countries in destructive informational and propaganda campaigns in the sphere of historical consciousness." The document also highlighted the existence of "alternative points of view" on Sandarmokh, referring to Verigin and Kilin's hypothesis, and discussed its alleged politicization by Finnish authorities and media outlets. Before requesting RVIO to conduct another on-site "thorough research", it summed up the rationale part with a revealing passage:

> "The speculations regarding Sandarmokh not only detriment Russia's international image, entrench in civic opinion the unfounded sense of guilt towards the allegedly repressed foreign representatives, and allow for claims to be made against our state, but also become a consolidating factor for anti-government forces in Russia" (Strelkov and Dolgopolov 2019)

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Following the first session of RVIO's excavations, Verigin and Karelian journalist Armas Mashin published a non-fiction pamphlet that aimed to "give a cold assessment" of the problem (Verigin and Mashin 2019: 9). The publication was divided into two parts. The first was Verigin's concise account of his "Finnish hypothesis," which he developed over three years. The second part, authored by Mashin, castigates the opponents of the intervention into Sandarmokh, consistently labeling them as "pro-Western liberals." Mashin concludes his series of diatribes against them in a manner that echoes the Ministry of Culture's "anti-Western" rationale for necessitating another RVIO expedition:

> "Pro-Western Russian liberals and the West are playing the "Sandarmokh card" in information attacks on the progressive, patriotic forces of Russia. And if there are unsolved mysteries in Sandarmokh itself, the goal of the "liberal" attacks is obvious: to rewrite our country's history after their fashion, to impose their will on all its citizens, to weaken Russia by subjugating it to the dictate of the West" (Verigin and Mashin 2019: 86).

Both MoC's statements and Mashin's writings contained elements of securitizing discourse, which are typical for the speeches of Russia's top officials about the Great Patriotic War (Bækken and Enstad 2020), indicating the speakers' view of their mission as safeguards of historical memory from the distortions inspired by Western "foreign influence."

Interestingly, "The Riddles of Sandarmokh" was published by Johan Bäckman, a well-known pro-Kremlin Finnish author, journalist, and political activist. Bäckman released the pamphlet in both Finnish and Russian, thereby spreading Verigin and Mashin's message across both sides of the border. Academic (Kujala 2019, Takala 2020, Tumarkin 2020) and journalist reviewers (Markelov 2020) from both countries almost unanimously criticized the edition, pointing out its numerous fallacies in source criticism, argumentation, and referencing. Finnish historian Antti Kujala, based on his study of Soviet POWs in Finnish captivity, argued that there were no mass killings of POWs in occupied Soviet Karelia. He also refuted claims that the 2018 excavations supported the "Finnish hypothesis," emphasizing that the remains uncovered by RVIO

indicated execution methods consistent with those used by the NKVD, not the Finnish military. Kujala (2019) concluded that framing Sandarmokh as a "secret Finnish Katyn" was not a genuine academic hypothesis but rather a political tool to undermine the Memorial and downplay Stalin's mass murders. The only positive review came from Bäckman himself. In his publication, however, Bäckman (2020: 253) controversially argued that there was no evidence of Stalin's victims resting in Sandarmokh. He also participated in the RVIO excavations in 2019 and the follow-up press conference (RVIO 2019b).

The results of the RVIO excavations were mixed. The Society's *poiskoviki* exhumed the remains of 10 women and 11 men who had died from gunshot wounds more than 50 years prior, most likely in cold weather. The expedition also discovered several artifacts, including bullets, cartridges, and remains of clothes and shoes, which could have belonged to the executioners and their victims. Similarly to the 2018 excavations, Verigin announced that the findings were sufficient to confirm the "Finnish hypothesis." Karelia's Minister of Culture and RVIO's representative approved the idea to memorialize the wartime dead in Sandarmokh (RVIO 2020), which now gained scientific (albeit feeble) grounding, administrative support, and moral reasoning. However, the monumental memory of Stalin's victims buried in Sandarmokh *per se* remained intact, as no Sandarmokh monuments have been removed or re-dedicated. Despite this, this memory has become subject to re-contextualization and a withdrawal of official support. Besides, the provocations by national-patriotic activists on the Remembrance Day 5 August have intensified, targeting foreign diplomats and activists who display national symbols.[7]

The analysis of how the "Finnish hypothesis" was produced and introduced between 2015 and 2023 suggests that it was part of a federal effort to purge Sandarmokh of "foreign influence" and incorporate it into the state-sponsored frames of the violent past. The practice of selective and manipulative use of archival material by state agencies is well known (Dujisin 2024, Miller 2013: 118). Given the murky circumstances of how the documents were selected for publication by the FSB archival

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[7] Author's interview with anonymous informant, journalist 1, 15 November 2023.

office and introduced into the scholarly discourse, the active involvement of state-affiliated federal media from the very beginning, and the regional government's initial reluctance to support the "Finnish hypothesis", one can point to the involvement of the federal security structures. In addition to direct involvement, the federal center involved its clients. In the discourse of the authorities and the state's clients, one can observe clear elements of the securitizing discourse. At the same time, it is unlikely that the officials were driven by the motives of re-Stalinization, given that the intrusion did not imply any undermining action regarding the established memory of Stalin's victims. The authors of the "Finnish hypothesis" consistently underscore the inviolability of the fact of the mass shootings by the Soviet NKVD (Verigin and Mashin 2019: 39). In 2019, following RVIO's second excavations, the regional administration allocated 2,3 million rubles for restoring Sandarmokh's central monument, which was completed a year later (Rk.karelia.ru 2020). Since 2016, the regional authorities have not impeded the annual commemorations but have instead only ignored them. Other non-state actors have also distanced themselves from the annual commemorations, with Russian Orthodox Church representatives, for instance, ceasing to attend them since 2019.[8]

Other (neo-Stalinist) voices: Aleksandr Stepanov's "Lies and truth about the Sandarmokh stows"

Not only state-backed actors such as RVIO or historians such as Verigin challenged the International Memorial's stance on Sandarmokh; the discussion also involved independent bottom-up speakers. The established narrative of Sandarmokh was thoroughly criticized by Aleksandr Stepanov in his book *Lozh' I pravda ob urochishchakh Sandarmokh* ("Lies and truth about the Sandarmokh stows") published in 2021 (Stepanov 2021). A journalist and former Communist opposition deputy of Karelia's legislative assembly, Stepanov has actively participated in discussions about Sandarmokh in print and online media, ultimately elaborating his (neo-)Stalinist perspective on the history and memory of the Sandarmokh executions, which is incompatible with that of the Memorial. First, he rejects the Memorial's method of counting the victims, which is based on including all those executed in the Medgora

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[8] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 3, 5 November 2024.

area. Instead, by citing RVIO *poiskoviki*, he argues that the real number is between 1 to 2 thousand (Stepanov 2021: 40, 156). Second, he denounces the Memorial's representation of the executed as innocent victims by pointing to several cherry-picked cases of individuals, mostly Ukrainian nationalists and White Army militants, who had a hand in mass violence outbreaks and war crimes during the Civil War. His other argument against the victim image is the reference to a specific post-revolutionary violent *Zeitgeist* that renders irrelevant attempts to evaluate Soviet mass terror using a contemporary moral framework. Third, Stepanov points out the politicized nature of the Memorial's Sandarmokh myth, accusing the activists of appropriating the site of memory and adapting it to their ideological needs by imposing a nationalist and anti-Communist narrative, allegedly to divert people's attention from the disastrous aftermath of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s (Stepanov 2021: 148-152).

Indeed, some of Stepanov's points on Sandarmokh, particularly his condemnation of the "liberals", uncritical stance towards the implausible "Finnish hypothesis", and endorsement of the RVIO excavations, are largely aligned with those espoused by the state-backed actors. Tellingly, during the Remembrance Day event in 2022, pro-Kremlin activists from the *"Volontery Pobedy"* ("The Volunteers of Victory") movement distributed copies of Stepanov's book to visitors, including foreign diplomats.[9] Nevertheless, Stepanov has a long-standing reputation as a *tribunis plebis*-like opposition politician and there is no evidence that he is associated with the state or its clients.[10] Rather, his neo-Stalinist stance reflects a pervasive frustration with the post-Soviet neoliberal reforms and a concomitant antagonism toward any genuine or superficial ideological rationale for them; this frustration frequently serves as an important input in Russia's memory politics (Blackburn and Khlevnyuk 2023).

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[9] Author's interview with anonymous informant, journalist 1, 15 November 2023.

[10] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 2, 2 March 2024; author's interview with anonymous informant, journalist 1, 26 March 2024.

Bulwarking regional memories: the case of the memory of the Finnish occupation of Karelia

Post-Soviet Karelian memory of the occupation: towards a memory conflict

During the Soviet period, the narrative of the Finnish occupation of 1941-1944 was strictly disciplined and situated within state-sanctioned frameworks. This was due to the state's efforts to cultivate amicable relations with Finland and downplay the memory of past hostilities. The public awareness of the occupation began to increase in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The oldest and most influential actor in the sphere of memory of the occupation is the Karelian Union of Former Young Prisoners of Fascist Concentration Camps (hereafter KU, or the Union). Established amid a burst of Perestroika social activism in 1989, the Union provides legal and social support to former child prisoners whose welfare was severely affected by the post-Soviet socio-economic crisis, also representing their interests in Russia and abroad.[11] In particular, the activists demanded that the Russian federal and regional authorities increase welfare benefits and appealed to the Finnish government to pay compensation to former camp prisoners, as the German government did (the Finnish president eventually declined the appeal). Furthermore, the Union serves as a community of memory, with its members erecting memorials and organizing annual commemorative ceremonies on 11 April, the International Day of Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps (Golubev 2015, Karel'skii soiuz BMU 2024). The KU combines the characteristics of a community of loss and a community of memory. Nevertheless, despite previously being a proactive social actor, the Union is gradually losing its influence due to scarce funding, a lack of official interest, and simply that more members are dying over time. Tellingly, a collective memoir of child prisoners published in 2023 was titled *My esche zhivy!* ("We are still alive!") (Niuppieva 2023).

The narrative transmitted by former child prisoners accentuates the tragic and violent aspects of the Finnish occupation, as experienced within the context of daily life in the concentration camps, such as loss, deprivation, harsh labor, and unfreedom. By

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[11] In Finland, awareness of the experiences of former child prisoners grew through the efforts of writer Marja-Leena Mikkola, who collected 17 stories of their stories in her book "Menetetty lapsuus" ("The lost childhood") (Mikkola 2004).

incorporating past suffering into the present, the Union members established solidarity ties in a manner consisted with the observations made by Oushakine (2009) and leveraged their traumatic wartime experiences to gain symbolic resources and secure their role as "moral watchdogs" of the memory of the Finnish occupation (Golubev 2015).[12] However, these bitter incarceration experiences are essential, yet not the sole elements of Karelia's wartime memory. According to the Finnish ethnic discrimination policy, Russian and other East Slavic populations were subjected to detention, surveillance, and limited supply, whereas the "kindred" ethnic groups, including Karels, Finns, and Vepsians enjoyed substantially better living conditions. This other aspect of the occupation related to the experiences of the Finnish-Ugric population was developed by PetrSU historians. As part of the research project *Ustnaia Istoriia v Karelii* (The Oral History in Karelia), between 2006 and 2008 they gathered a substantial corpus of testimonies of wartime and occupation experiences, with many of those starkly contrasting with the stories told by former child prisoners (Golubev and Osipov 2007). In general, the memory of the Finnish occupation in the post-Soviet period was pillared by these two neighboring narratives, which together formed a complex and balanced overall picture of Karelia's non-frontline wartime past.

The Finnish side responded with notable immediacy to the grassroots initiatives commemorating the victims of the occupation. In 2006, Finnish lawyer Kari Silvennoinen called the former owners of the property located on the territories that were subsequently ceded to the Soviet Union to demand restitution from Russia (Potashov 2006). Silvennoinen was affiliated with the fringe nationalist and revanchist movement ProKarelia, which sought to return the territories lost by Finland after WWII. Another "trouble spot" used by Finnish actors to pressure Russia was the Soviet guerilla raids into Finnish territory, which resulted in frequent civilian casualties (Potashov 2011). In response to these invocations of the difficult past, the Russian side highlighted similar violent acts committed by the Finns (Repnikov 2012). Against the background of a simmering memory conflict, prominent Finnish historians denied that the military command engaged in ethnic cleansing in Soviet Karelia. They insisted that the

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[12] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 1, 16 November 2023.

concentration camps should be characterized no other way but as "migration camps," echoing the pre-1980s historiography (Juonala 2019). The post-Soviet debates on the common violent past served as important spaces for maintaining dialogue but failed to achieve mutual reconciliation. This failure was, in part, due to the Finnish actors' distrust of Russian initiatives commemorating the occupation and the continued prevalence of Cold War-era national war narratives.[13]

The monument, the film, and the replica of a concentration camp: the new features of the grassroots memory of the Finnish occupation

Over the past decade, notable changes have occurred in Russian Karelia's memory of the occupation, with new mnemonic projects and actors engaging with this memory in the fields of (monumental) memoryscape, cinema production, and tourism. The region's memoryscape was updated with a new memorial to the victims of Finnish concentration camps, unveiled in Petrozavodsk in June 2017. The memorial features an eclectic composition that incorporates various symbols typical of both Soviet and post-Soviet commemorative canon. It includes a massive stone bas-relief depicting human figures reaching upwards, crowned with a sculpture of a grieving Mother of God standing on a crown of thorns, and several stone blocks engraved with approximately 3,5 thousand names of victims of the concentration camps. Initiated and sponsored by a real estate developer whose ancestor died in incarceration in 1942, this memorial was placed in the Petrozavodsk graveyard Peski, which also served as a burial site for those who died in the camps, in June 2017 (Monuments.karelia.ru 2024b). Despite support from regional authorities, the monument should not be interpreted as a manifestation of a recent national-patriotic turn in official memory politics. Monumental commemoration of the victims of the Finnish camps has a long history, with memorials installed in 1969, 2005, and 2011, well before the expansion of patriotic frames and state-backed intervention in Sandarmokh. Rather, this case exemplifies the state-approved but community-driven monumental war commemoration process that has been ongoing since at least the 1960s (Gabowitsch 2014).

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[13] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 1, 16 November 2023.

Another contribution to the regional memory culture was the locally produced 2018 film "Vesuri". This historical memoir-based drama about child prisoners reflected the tragic narrative of the Finnish occupation shared and transmitted by the KU members. "Vesuri" featured a local cast and production team but also received 65% of funding from the federal Ministry of Culture. However, this level of federal support is common for minor cinema projects in Russia and does not necessarily indicate that the product was commissioned by the Kremlin. Despite its appeal to a deeply entrenched, emotionally charged memory of the occupation and child imprisonment, the film failed to achieve success. As a low-budget film with scarce distribution, it was criticized for its cliched story and lackluster acting[14] and performed disastrously at the box office (Konstantinova 2020, Lenta.ru 2020).

The story of the film "Vesuri" had an unexpected twist when part of the film's scenery was reconstructed in the Kondopoga district to depict a Finnish concentration camp and handed over to a local NGO after production concluded. This NGO received a substantial amount of funds (RUB 2,9 million, approx. 70% of all costs) from the presidential fund to "create a historical reconstruction site of the everyday life in the Finnish camps in 1941-1944." The applicant announced that the project aimed to engage schoolchildren from Karelia and the Leningrad region, educating them "about the occupation of the Russian lands by the Finns during the Great Patriotic War", thereby fostering compassion for their compatriots and promoting "social solidarity" and "the sense of unity regarding the country's values" among the younger generation (Prezidentskiegranty.rf 2019). The replica of the Finnish camp was opened in December 2020 and was intended, according to the initiators, to demonstrate the living conditions in the camp.[15] Nicknamed by several regional and central media outlets as a "mock concentration camp for children", the project provoked mixed reactions among the

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[14] Author's interview with anonymous informant, researcher 1, 16 November 2023.

[15] The camp evokes the 2017 storming of the Reichstag replica by the Yunarmiya, a military-patriotic youth organization, in Patriot Park, Moscow region (Weiss-Wendt 2021: 130-131). However, despite their apparent similarity, these projects differ significantly upon closer inspection. The reenactment of the Reichstag siege was a one-time event organized by the Ministry of Defence and involved patriotic youth. In contrast, the Karelian replica camp-museum was privately organized and primarily targeted at non-politicized school students.

locals, including former child prisoners (Gnetnev 2019, Markelov and Coalson 2020).[16] However, the lifetime of this scandalous camp installation was short: following a series of educational and patriotic visits organized for schoolchildren in the spring of 2021, the camp became abandoned due to the lack of interest from both the responsible party and tourists (Kiabeleva 2024).

Overall, the described mnemonic initiatives showcase an upsurge of public interest in the theme of Finnish atrocities during the 1941-1944 occupation. This upsurge is likely due to the expansion of the patriotic framing of history that began with Putin's third presidential term. However, the analysis reveals the private character of the projects, whereby the state's role varies from minimal, as in the case of the memorial to the camps' victims, to providing partial sponsorship, as with the latter projects. The memorial to the victims of the Finnish concentration camps continues the long-standing Soviet and post-Soviet tradition of monumental war commemoration rather than represents a pivotal change in Karelia's memory culture. Nor does it contribute to the memory conflict between Russia and Finland: it does not directly accuse Finland of unleashing terror against the civilian population (for example, the monumental inscription has no references to Finland as an occupier). As for the film "Vesuri" and the grotesque camp installation, both projects utilized state funds, and the message they disseminated was more explicit in denoting the antagonists. Still, this does not indicate that these initiatives are top-down and state-commissioned. In developing their fund-seeking strategies, the mnemonic entrepreneurs tried to adapt to the new parameters of commemoration by promoting regional topics that would fit the statist (national-patriotic) turn in Russia's memory politics. This can explain the invocation of the tragic theme by the film producers and the use of patriotic, statist, and solidaristic rhetoric by the initiator of the camp project when pitching to state institutions. These projects ultimately failed, demonstrating the initiators' inability to efficaciously perpetuate tragic memories through their production.

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[16] Author's interview with anonymous informant, journalist 1, 26 March 2024.

Academic efforts, political implications: new research projects on the Finnish occupation

Despite the persistent gap between history and memory, these matters are interconnected, as the discourse on the historical past is at least partially informed by academic historical research. Political actors use existing historical concepts and viewpoints as well as endorse or support academic initiatives that align with their interests. Historians produce expert opinions, which often serve as valuable resources that enable the power elite to influence public attitudes. Correspondingly, state-supported historical research can develop arguments that are employed to inform cooperative or, more often, conflict strategies in interstate relations, particularly between Russia and its Western neighbors.

An important example of current state-supported initiatives of this kind is the "No Statute of Limitations" federal project, which has been active since 2019. Named after a Russian characteristic formula semantically associated with crimes against humanity, the project aims to "preserve the historical memory of crimes committed by Nazis and their collaborators during the Great Patriotic War" (Bezsrokadavnosti.rf 2024). It coordinates the efforts of archival historians, *poiskoviki*, and educational workers, also disseminating the results of their work by publishing them in printed and digital media. Apart from documental and archaeological search, the project is particularly engaged with public history practices, organizing various public events addressing the themes of the Great Patriotic War and Nazi crimes. Educational workers participating in the project "Without the Statute of Limitations" also developed a same-name educational module for universities, with seminars on archival work, Nazi ideology and practice, and aspects of international law related to crimes against humanity.

The project has undeniable scholarly value, having published 25 volumes of collected documents and declassified more than 7 thousand documents from 80 archival institutions. Yet, beyond its academic purposes, the project carries significant judicial and political implications, aiming to present documental evidence of the genocide policy carried out by Nazi Germany and its allies against the Soviet people. Archival findings documenting Nazi atrocities often serve as a benchmark for judicial institutions to

investigate and qualify them as acts of genocide according to Russian criminal law (Miller *et al.* 2023: 18-19), with corresponding political consequences.

The federal project also features a pronounced regional focus and close cooperation with regional archival institutions and historians. For instance, in the Republic of Karelia, a volume of collected documents on crimes committed by the Finns during the 1941-1944 occupation was published in 2020. The introduction to this volume was authored by Sergei Verigin, who characterized the Finnish crimes against the Russian population of Karelia as a "manifestation of deliberate genocide against the civilian population" (Bezsrokadavnosti.rf 2024: 51). In April of the same year, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation opened a criminal case on the genocide of the population of Karelia during the Great Patriotic War (Gazeta.ru 2020). In a TV interview in December 2023, Verigin emphasized that there are grounds for accusing Finland of the genocide of Soviet citizens in Karelia, claiming that Finnish concentration camps were "more terrible" than Nazi ones and mentioning that a court trial on the genocide case was planned for 2024 (SampoTV 2023).

No less important for the Karelian case is the research project "The Detention Facilities for the Population of Karelia, 1941-1944" (2022-2023), which aims at publishing archival material, including declassified files, and producing research materials. Funded by the regional budget, the project is aimed at "visualizing and preserving the historical memory about the detention facilities for Karelia's noncombatant civilian population in the context of the ideological confrontation with foreign public opinion, as well as developing digital historical and cultural tourism in the Republic of Karelia" (Kareliaconcentrationcamps.ru 2024). Within the project, several articles and a collective monograph were produced.

It is unsurprising that academic research on the violent pasts while producing knowledge may also provide resources to mnemonic actors for their further use in discursive clashes over history. In this respect, the cases of two research projects on crimes committed by Nazi Germany and its allies are illustrative. The federal center reinforces the symbolic power relations with the Karelian region by financing and supporting the research initiative that propagates the official interpretation of the Great Patriotic War. In turn, by participating in the state-initiated project, the regional

authorities express their loyalty and simultaneously promote regional memories at the federal level. The efforts to legally recognize the genocide are aimed at fortifying the regional war memory whereby the symbolic resource of victimhood is used in the memory confrontation with the Western states, here with Finland.

Conclusion

For the Russian federal authorities and their subordinates, it has become essential to maintain control over regional memories by overcoming contradictions between the Kremlin's master narrative and local narratives on the historical past. In instances where mnemonic activity is linked to political activism and particularly to "foreign influence", the state can intervene using its clientele. By analyzing the conflict over Sandarmokh, this study has demonstrated that the Russian regime perceives politicized national victim memories as a threat to its promoted *status quo*. The 2014 Ukraine crisis and the Putin regime's increasing authoritarianism made it impossible for the federal authorities and International Memorial activists to coexist peacefully. Three factors triggered the state to initiate its intervention into Sandarmokh: (1) the nation-centered format of commemoration involving nationalities both from and beyond Russia; (2) the political use of the memory of state terror as *explanans* for the present; (3) the involvement of foreign representatives. In response to these perceived threats, the state deliberately endorsed the historically controversial yet politically expedient hypothesis about the Soviet POWs also buried in Sandarmokh. Subsequent archaeological excavations conducted by the state-backed RVIO, which were intended to confirm the hypothesis, ultimately failed to meet the expectations of their initiators and were instead met with protests. Certain elements of the official discourse indicate that the Sandarmokh case was perceived by the authorities as a prominent issue of mnemonical security, which was both the result of direct state pressure and the hegemonic impact related to changes in war memory policies. To address this security issue, the state implemented a strategy of limited incursion, utilizing convenient narratives (the patriotic war narrative) and loyal actors (RVIO, local historians) to integrate the memory of the "own" state's terror with that of the Finnish occupation. As for the alleged impact of re-Stalinization, the study has shown that solitary local neo-Stalinist actors indeed propagate alternative

visions of the Sandarmokh history and memory, but there is no evidence of them being patronized by the state.

Regarding the narrative of Finnish occupation and civilian concentration camps, there is scant evidence of it being coordinated from the Kremlin. The relevant research and commemorative projects reveal that the involved actors were driven by opportunistic motives, seeking to secure resources from the state rather than demonstrating proactive ideologically premised agency. In contrast, the legal acknowledgment of wartime crimes as acts of genocide is clearly a state-orchestrated process with significant political implications. The post-Soviet memory conflict between Finland and Russia has been evident since the early 2000s, though it was confined to region-scale clashes over several shared legacies of the violent past, unlike the way more acute Poland-Russia or Russia-Ukraine memory wars. However, this simmering conflict has recently escalated, involving federal power structures and new historical research projects from the Russian side. Given the rapidly deteriorating relations between Russia and Finland, it seems plausible to suggest that Karelia, with its tragic war history, is poised to become a fully-fledged "memory war frontline zone."

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Appendix. Table of interviews

Interviewee	*Date of interview*
Journalist 1	15 November 2023
	26 March 2024
Journalist 2	24 November 2023
Researcher 1	16 November 2023
Researcher 2	2 March 2024
Researcher 3	5 November 2024