

## HISTORICAL MEMORY AS A RESOURCE OF SOCIAL CONSOLIDATION: THE CASES OF RUSSIA AND AZERBAIJAN

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### Abstract

Applying to the study of historical memory in the contemporary both Russian and Azerbaijan societies, the author explores how images of the past influence the national identity and political ideologies. The author argues that engagement of historical narratives with national history has become today a global trend so family memory, being one of the key sources of historical knowledge either in Russia or Azerbaijan significantly influences the perception of national past. Personalization of the national history through the destinies of relatives and friends gives persons more sensitive “historical optics”. So private memory is always sensitive to the official historical discourse, especially the post-memory of the heirs of eyewitnesses of dramatic events, for whom the participation of their loved ones in these events is part of their personal identity.

### Keywords

*Historical memory, tradition, identity, family memory.*

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## 1. Introduction

Images of the past play a significant role in shaping the national identity and confirming the idea of society, as they give meaning, purpose and value to both collective and individual experiences (Lowenthal, 2004). The national past is reflected in citizens' views on the future both of their state and themselves, so these ideas influence social and political attitudes of the persons, which in turn act as a factor in political decision-making and eventually determine the prospects for the society (Antonovski, 2015). The engagement of the historical narratives with national history has become a global trend in recent years: this trend is driven as by the “memory turn” (Hirsch, 2016), which refers to the growing interest in historical events among those who have personal connections to them, as by the rapid development of memory studies. Memory scholars claim the trend of a global honoring and preserving historical memories (Judt, 2004; Nora, 2005) that reflects a deeper understanding of the importance of history in shaping our present and future.

Political presentism refers to the trend of politization of the national history and integration of the elements of historical memory into political ideologies. This phenomenon has emerged as a characteristic feature of contemporary political discourse globally and the recollection of pivotal historical events and significant figures-both heroes and antiheroes-plays a vital role in shaping collective identity. Beyond the way

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national history is organized around the key events through commemorative calendars and a pantheon of national figures, the politics of memory also profoundly influences the present-day attitudes and perceptions of citizens.

Historical narratives have a significant influence on public opinion, which is why politicians across the ideological spectrum increasingly use them. By invoking shared understanding of historical lessons, they can tap into the well of collective memory, which resonates with their constituents. This reliance on historical context streamlines political discourse and makes it easier to gain public support for policy initiatives, while also serving as a powerful tool to justify them. When politicians frame their arguments through the lens of history, they transform the “argument of history” into a mechanism for legitimizing contemporary political decisions. This process often involves selectively interpreting historical events to align with current agendas, thereby aiming to foster a sense of continuity and legitimacy within the electorate. By doing so, they not only draw upon historical consensus but also create a narrative that reinforces their political authority and objectives.

Consequently, historical narratives can become battlegrounds for political ideologies, where the past is often reinterpreted to fit contemporary political needs and goals. Politicians may use the triumphs and failures of history to rally support for social policies, national unity or even military endeavors. Illustrating how the politics of memory are intricately woven into the fabric of modern governance and civic identity, historical narratives resonate with public opinion. They are popular among politicians from different ideological backgrounds, appealing to public consensus on historical events. By doing so, politicians simplify political debate and use history as a tool to justify their political initiatives, turning the “argument from history” into a way to legitimize their decisions.

## **2. Basic Historical Symbols of the National Past in Russia and in Azerbaijan**

In accordance with sociological data provided by the Institute of Sociology at the Federal Center for Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the historical memory of the Soviet era constitutes the core of contemporary Russia's historical identity (Barash, 2017). Since the mid-1990s, the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the subsequent reconstruction of the Soviet state have emerged as the most prominent events in Russian history, garnering support from 70% and 56% of respondents respectively (Sociological data, 2024).

Russians also take pride in the musicians and artists, as 46% express pride in them, as well as in the spaceflight of Yuri Gagarin with 39%. Additionally, there is a sense of pride in the achievements of both Soviet and Russian athletes, which is shared by 27% of the population. The Soviet legacy serves as the foundation for the national identity of contemporary Russia.

The second most significant emblem of historical pride among Russian citizens is the contemporary Russian army, which enjoys the support of 27%. This is closely followed by the military might of Russia and the Soviet Union, garnering 29% of the vote. Furthermore, recent events in the military sphere, incorporation of Crimea and of new territories into the Russian Federation, have also contributed to this sentiment of pride, receiving 30% and 13% of votes, respectively.

Whereas events that are chronologically distant but symbolically significant for national Russian history, such as the Russian autocracy (12%) and liberation of peasants in 1861 (7%), are in the “periphery” category of symbols of pride and the attitude towards

them is more positive than towards the key events of the –“early post-soviet” Russia. Only a few respondents are proud of the “Glasnost” and the “Perestroika” of the Gorbachev era (3%) or the transition of the state to a market economy in the period of Boris Yeltsin (4%). Just 7% of the persons are proud of the elimination of the Iron Curtain between Russia and the rest of the world (7%).

And if in the mid-1990s and 2000s, the periods of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were also unpopular (only 1-4% were proud of them), then the Russia’s rapprochement with the West during the late 1980s received much more positive ratings than it does now. In 1998 and 2007, 14% of people were proud to have turned to the West, while in 2023, only 7% were proud of this policy.

The historical narrative of the Azerbaijan is based on the idea of a unified community that has existed for thousands of years, fostering a sense of national identity, strengthening cultural unity and justifying contemporary political and territorial claims. This narrative portrays the Azerbaijanian people as an unbroken entity, evolving from early human forms known as “Azanthropes” to the modern-day Azerbaijanians who live in their historical homeland (Rumyantsev, 2016). In Azerbaijan, memory policies play a crucial role in shaping the country's image on the international stage (Karagezov, 2009). Collective memories influence not only the historical perceptions, thoughts and emotions of individuals within an ethnic group, but they also shape collective actions (Garagozov, 2006).

These patterns can lead to significant catalysts for ethnic and political conflicts, as well as geopolitical speculation (Ismailov & Garagozov, 2007). This is particularly true because competition in the South Caucasus has deep roots in the region's history, involving three regional powers: Iran, Russia and Turkey (Chiragov, 2024). Each of these countries has own historical claims and expectations for the region. Their competing interests and ambitions fuel tensions, complicating the political landscape and making cooperation challenging. The policy of memory is an integral part of the Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy, used as a tool to promote national interests (Leonteva, 2024). It can also be used to interpret historical events in a way that supports Azerbaijani interests (Bespalova, 2018). Sociological data shows that historical memory influences internal politics and identity formation in Azerbaijan. Ancient epic stories like Dada Gorgud and Keroglu serve as a repository of collective memory for Azerbaijani people.

Answering the question about the most significant events in Azerbaijan's history, persons from different ethnic groups (Azerbaijanis, Lezgins, Talysh) mentioned the same events with varying frequency: “Khojaly” and “Black January” (Karagezov, 2009). These tragic events from modern Azerbaijani history have had a profoundly traumatic impact on collective consciousness and are imprinted in national memory, serving as markers of deep, multi-generational memories of respondents.

Victory Day remains one of the most significant date in Azerbaijani history. During the Soviet era, this celebration was rooted in an idea of “shared feat among Soviet people” (Markedonov, 2020). However, today Azerbaijani leaders and historians emphasize Azerbaijan's unique contribution to Soviet victory, reflecting a growing desire for fostering a sense of national pride and identity, focusing on local achievements rather than shared Soviet identity.

And for many people in Azerbaijan, Victory Day remains a significant day of commemoration, honoring the courage and sacrifice of their relatives who survived the war. It is not only a national holiday celebrating the triumph of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany, but also a deeply personal occasion for individuals to reflect on their

family history and the legacy left by those who lived through difficult times (Bespalova, 2018). Therefore, in the complex modern identity of Azerbaijan, historical narratives and personal experiences diverge, highlighting the ongoing struggle between national pride and historical reflection.

### 3. Memory and History as the Resources of the Past Reconstruction

The sensitivity of people towards historical narratives, especially to those that relate to the Great Patriotic War, is rooted in their cultural values, identity and historical memory. For many post-Soviet countries, the memory of this war has become a cornerstone of their collective memory, linking national pride with personal and family identities. This connection transforms historical narratives into living memories, strengthening social and cultural bonds among citizens. So the provocativeness and resonance of the theme of the national past is associated with its role as a consolidating “historical core” of identity and manipulations with memory are seen not so much as an attempt to delegitimize the state by referring to the facts of the “inconvenient past”, but as the threat to the family memory.

Collective memory is not limited to the “social framework of memory”, as described by M. Halbwachs. It connects family memories with national history and gives past events significant significance. People often put more trust in personal and family memories than formal history, which can be saturated with facts. Sociological data demonstrates that memories and life stories from families and friends are among the most important sources of information about a state history. In 2024, 38% of Russians said that family memories were their main source of knowledge about national history. School and university textbooks (51%), historical films (48%) and documentaries (47%) are less popular sources than family stories. Scientific literature (19%), memoirs of historical figures (14%) and historical TV programs and talks (15%) are less popular than family memory. And academic historic sources are less popular than as historical novels and fiction (26%) as various online resources: historical websites, forums and lectures (25%) (Sociological data, 2024). Digitalization has significantly expanded the range of sources for family history research, providing numerous tools to help people reconstruct their family's past online.

Emotional images of memory are based on historical facts, “humanizing” history (Assmann, 2004) and giving individual lives significance and purpose (Lowenthal, 2004) due to their involvement into the nation's past. Family memory revitalizes official memorials (Assmann, 2016), gives the past understandable meanings, fosters interest in history (Hirsch, 2016; Halbwachs, 2005) and simultaneously condemns unsavory past events to oblivion. Personal and family memories are often trusted more readily than factual historical accounts, but it is history that provides the current context for collective memory (Halbwachs, 2005; 2007). Interest in family memory is encouraged by modern presentism, which prioritizes the present over the past. This is achieved primarily through the politicization of history, in which well-known metaphors from the past are used to describe current events. Through a combination of intentional memorization and forgetfulness (Lowenthal, 2004), we select the most significant events for inclusion in our national historical memory. Private memory is influenced by historical discourse and as a source for reconstructing the past, influences itself. After the “performative turn” in social science, which replaced dogmatic interpretations of history with reconstruction through the lives of real people, family memories have become not only a source of historical knowledge but also a foundation for personal and collective identity. These

memories allow individuals to feel connected to history and form a “genealogical project” that extends beyond their lifetime. Through shared family histories, personal biography and global history become intertwined (Barash, 2011).

Family memory is a valuable resource not only for historical knowledge, but also for personal identity. It allows people to feel connected to their past and to understand their place in history. Family history is an ongoing process that extends beyond the lifespan of any one person. Personal biographies and global events become intertwined when we look at family history.

J. Assman makes a distinction between communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory is passed down from parents to children and grandchildren, but it fades with the last generation. Cultural memory is transmitted through institutions, monuments, rituals and other cultural artifacts and is preserved through history. In the past, communicative memory gave way to cultural memory when the last witnesses passed away. Now, thanks to digital technology, history is being reconstructed and even constructed in new ways, using data and personal stories.

So, this is why many people, especially in Russia, prefer stable historical interpretations and resist changes to the way past events are understood. 48% of Russians support the idea of uniformity in understanding major historical events, but only 39% believe that assessments of historical figures and events can change over time. Clearly, the desire to maintain historical interpretations stems from a wish to preserve traditions, as well as a need to share a common understanding of family history and loyalty to personal views on the past passed down through generations (Historical Consciousness of Russians, 2022). Historical subjects, which are connected to family history and personal identity, have a significant influence on citizens' attitudes. People feel a sense of belonging to the past when family histories and personal experiences are intertwined with the history of the nation. As a result, ordinary citizens are highly sensitive to historical discussions and emotionally respond to historical claims made by politicians. Interweaving images of national and family history determinate some people to resist efforts of revision history, particularly the Great Patriotic period. In 2023, 57% of Russians believe that the interpretation of the past influences the future of the state, emphasizing the importance of protecting historical narratives from reinterpretation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus, family memory, being one of the key sources of historical knowledge either in Russia or Azerbaijan significantly influences the perception of national history. Personalization of the national past through the destinies of relatives and friends gives Russians a more sensitive “historical optics”. A good knowledge of family history increases interest in national history and at the same time links the history of the country and the history of the family: under the influence of traditions and collective ideas about the past, people regularly return to their own memories and family memory.

Private memory is always sensitive to the official historical discourse, especially the post-memory of the heirs of eyewitnesses of dramatic events, for whom the participation of their loved ones in these events is part of their personal identity. But the family memory is often very short and many persons do not know the circumstances of the lives of generations older than their grandparents. This lack of clarity gives rise to a demand for historical accuracy. In the context of wide access to digital sources of historical knowledge and especially genealogy, a considerable number of our compatriots

are trying to reconstruct their family history, especially when its oblivion is felt as a premonition of memory.

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