

## Politics of Memory and Nationalism

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### Abstract

Scholars of nationalism knew about the role of memory and forgetting in nation building long before the contemporary boom of memory studies. Still, they can learn a lot from this relatively new research field. This article offers an overview of the literature on the politics of memory, focusing on different patterns of dealing with a dark past of genocides, civil wars, and political repressions, on the one hand, and on the observations derived from the recent so-called “memory wars” in Europe, on the other. Both issues elucidate a persistent role of nationalism in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** politics of memory; nationalism; the dark past; memory wars; mnemonic security

### Introduction

Long before the consolidation of memory studies as an interdisciplinary research field, scholars of nationalism became its pathfinders. At least since Ernest Renan’s seminal lecture (1990), they recognized the decisive role of memory and forgetting in nation building. The widespread “invention of traditions” at the end of the 19th through the beginning of the 20th century (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) is sometimes considered as the first wave of the “memory boom” (Toth 2015, 553). According to the analysis of Duncan Bell (2003, 67–68), all major explanations of the origins of nationalism shared the idea of the centrality of historical representations, even if they did not necessarily make a clear distinction between professional history, shared memory, and popular myths. The most valuable contributions of scholars of nationalism to memory studies include revealing the role of historians in forging nations (Hroch 1985; Suny and Kennedy 1999; Coakley 2012), exploring the patterns of national mythology and typologies of national myths (Schöpflin 1997; Smith 1999; Coakley 2007, 2012; Mock 2012), and pointing to some mechanisms of symbolic struggle that result in the domination of particular interpretations of the past (Smith 1999; Bell 2003; Coakley 2012). In turn, the recent boom of studies on social memory brings new knowledge that elucidates the role of nationalism in the modern world. However, this interdisciplinary field is too diverse to discuss its findings and problems in a single article.

In this review, I focus on politics of memory, as a specific subfield of memory studies developed mostly by political scientists, historians, sociologists, and scholars of international relations. Taking into account the journal’s geographical emphasis, I concentrate on the European context, leaving largely aside the literature on another regions. *Politics of memory* comprises public activity of various social institutions and actors aimed at the promotion of specific interpretations of a collective past and establishment of an appropriate sociocultural infrastructure of remembrance, school curricula, and, sometimes, special legislation. Memory is indispensable for any identity

(Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 54; Olick 1999, 337; Müller 2004; Bell 2006, 2). Yet, the major part of the literature is focused on shared representations of the past that are constitutive for national identities, which makes it especially interesting for scholars of nationalism. The fact that, for a century and a half, professional historiography largely concentrated on exploration of the past of nation states, or nations seeking to get their states (Berger 2004; Coakley 2012), facilitated looking at *the usable past*, that is, the most commemorated and sometimes also most debated historical episodes through nationalist lenses.

Nation states are considered as important but not the only actors in the politics of memory. The range of mnemonic actors, or “political forces that are interested in specific interpretation of the past” (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 4), includes various institutions, groups and even individuals who have relevant social capital and communicative resources. Typically, studies of the politics of memory are concentrated on the activity of memory entrepreneurs belonging to various social sectors: politics, academia, victims’ associations, “national memory institutes” (Neumayer 2015), as well as state officials. Mnemonic actors invoke myths and symbols of the national past to shape and delimit their societies’ identities, legitimize their power, mobilize electoral support, and exchange power resources (Smith 2002; Mink and Neumayer 2013), which means that quite often memory appears as an instrument for other political goals. Elites are the most important groups forging collective memories. A study of elite-level discourses is essential for exploring politics of memory. However, the “memories presented for support” should “resonate with those held by the population” (Langenbacher 2008, 54), which induces a dialectical connection between the elites’ efforts to manipulate the past and the configuration of myths and beliefs shared by the society. The allocation of resources between the mnemonic actors is unequal, reflecting power relations (Forest and Johnson 2011; Mink and Neumayer 2013; Bernhard and Kubik 2014). So, the key question for a scholar of the politics of memory is “who had the power to manipulate symbols in public space, and to what political ends?” (Johnston 2018).

Collective memory is culturally mediated (Assmann 2008). It rests upon the infrastructure of texts, pictures, films, memorials, toponyms, museums, public holidays, symbols, and rituals (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 14; Etkind 2004; Langenbacher 2010, 29; Gustafsson 2014). The development of this infrastructure is a crux of politics of memory (Smith 2002; Forest and Johnson 2011).

Politics of memory is quite often a field of conflict, which is hardly a surprise, taking into account that modern societies are composed of groups whose identities are constructed on the basis of different historical myths (Bell 2003). However, diverging historical narratives do not necessarily imply conflict and contestation; they also can overlap to produce political unity and strength (Kalashnikov 2017). Yet, the theme of conflict visibly prevails in the literature, as scholars of the politics of memory consider domination of some memories and downplaying of others as a dynamic result of never-ending symbolic struggle.

This article provides an overview of the discussions and findings about two issues that are especially instructive for scholars of modern nationalism. Based on the relevant literature, it examines how states cope with their *dark past* and explores the roles of nationalism and transnationalism in contemporary memory wars. Taking into account that most of the literature on the politics of memory is case studies, to reveal common tendencies one needs to focus on cross-case comparisons and temporal dynamics.

### **How States Cope with Their Dark Past**

In nationalist discourses, representations of historical past are typically focused on reinforcing a positive self-image of the nation (Coakley 2012, 94). Scholars of nationalism generally support the famous observation of Renan about “a heroic past” and particularly “suffering in common” as “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea” (1990, 19). This does not mean that nationalist discourses are exclusively concentrated on a glorious past. As Steven Mock (2012) demonstrated in his book, symbols of defeat could be nonetheless effective instruments of national mobilization.

According to Aleida Assmann, “national memory can absorb the episodes of both historical elevation and humiliation, provided that they get a heroic interpretation” (2014, 67–68).

However, the long twentieth century left tragic memories of wars, revolutions, civic conflicts, genocides, ethnicides, and political repressions, which affected large groups of population. Much of this historical legacy does not fit into the model of the heroic past that is so essential for constructing national identities. In particular, many contemporary nation states have to cope with what Jennifer Dixon named a *dark past*—“a large-scale or systematic human rights atrocity that occurred in the past and for which the state bears some responsibility, either directly or as a successor to the regime that perpetrated the crimes” (2018, 15). Of course, there are various types of dark pasts, and accommodating a memory of civil war or of political repressions caused by the collapsed authoritarian regime to a national narrative is not exactly the same as acknowledging responsibility for genocide that a nation once committed, or condemning past violence toward an aboriginal population. Dilemmas involved in acknowledging a dark past greatly depend on available patterns of identification of the us, as a contemporary nation, with so-called victims and villains in the past. Yet, there are two common tendencies in dealing with the past that corrupts the positive self-image of a nation. First, ruling elites typically prefer “foot-dragging” in confrontation with such elements of the past (Heisler 2008a, 16). So, when it appears possible, a dark past tends to be silenced, or downplayed, or even rejected. As a result, its public discussions often begin with uncovering of blank spots in collective memory. Second, looking at how in the recent decades “coming to terms with the past” became an ubiquitous problem (Art 2006, 3), one can conclude that confronting a dark past can be postponed, but not forever. Among the mechanisms that bring it to the public agenda are regime changes (Sherlock 2007), resolution of ethnic conflicts (King 2010), international pressures (Schneider 2008; Dixon 2018), generational dynamics (Rousso 1991, Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Wüstenberg and Art 2008), the activity of victims’ associations (Boyd 2008), and also transformations of norms, as a result of which “actions that were considered appropriate, even desirable, at an earlier time[. . .] are now viewed as inappropriate or wrong” (Heisler 2008b, 202).

There is a growing literature about public and private experiences of dealing with the dark-past memories. It considerably concentrates around the concepts of *transitional justice* describing manifold practices of revealing misdeeds committed by the collapsed authoritarian regimes and rehabilitating their victims (Ash 2004; Rusu 2017; Cole 2018; Epplée 2020), and of *collective*, or *cultural trauma*, which focuses on social and political consequences of the harrowing events, that “generate serious and often catastrophic challenges to communal self-understandings” (Bell 2006, 5; see also Alexander et al. 2004; Edkins 2003; Resende and Budryte 2013; Tismaneanu and Jacob 2015; Kissane 2020). Both concepts are sometimes criticized for combining under the same label rather different social practices (Bell 2006; Olick 2007, 122–123; Toth 2015, 556). In this review, I focus on the literature exploring how nation states cope with their dark pasts to reveal the major patterns.

Western Germany is often considered a good example of a critical work with a dark past. However, *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (working through the past) was a difficult process, marked by the resistance of large portions of society and possibility of backlash (Wüstenberg and Art 2008, 74). Why in Germany could the pattern of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* become dominant, while many other countries could not follow their example? Of course, the primary factor was the crushing defeat in 1945, and the pressure of the Allies who unambiguously put the blame for war on Germany, making de-Nazification a part of their occupation policy. Though, three Nazi successor states, namely, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and the Republic of Austria, demonstrated different approaches tackling their respective dark pasts. In FRG, the critical reflection of the Nazi crimes became visible only in the 1960s. Chancellor Willy Brandt’s kneeling in front of the memorial to the uprising at the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970 marked the becoming of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* as the official state policy. Remarkably, both the GDR and Austria avoided the stigma of identifying their national identities with the Nazi past because of their foundation myths, capitalizing on the communist resistance to fascism in the former case and that of the so-called Hitler’s first victim in the latter case.

Clearly, the positions of these states in the postwar political setting facilitated their different approaches to interpreting the recent past (Wüstenberg and Art 2008). However, they do not explain transformations that took place in Western Germany between the 1960s and 1980s. David Art (2006, 30, 1) focused on the diverging patterns of coping with the Nazi past in the FRG and Austria to test his theory of public debates as the mechanism of transforming the dominant framing of specific historical events. According to his argument, “sets of exchanges among elite political actors reported in the media” can affect the ways the larger body of public perceives lessons of the past. This process unfolds by shaping the domain of so-called politically correct concepts and ideas, introducing to political discourse tabooed issues and changing the language of the discussion by coining new code words for old ideas. In the last decades of the twentieth century, discussions about the Nazi past shaped different environments for right-wing populist parties in the FRG and the Republic of Austria, as well as different approaches to coping with a dark past. In Western Germany, regular public debates and expanding civic activity shaped the culture of critically “working through the past” that after the reunification was, in a sense, transferred to Eastern Germany (Wüstenberg and Art 2008, 77–78; Ash 2008). Though of course the process was not that straightforward, as the reunification provoked new waves of discussions of a common framework of public memory (Sierp 2014). As for Austria’s acceptance of the blame for the Nazi crimes, it resulted from the pressure of the European international community in the early 2000s and was a reaction to the rise of the transnational European memory of the Holocaust (Wüstenberg and Art 2008, 79–80).

If Germany was a paradigmatic case of working through a painful past, then Spain, until recently, exemplified the policy of forgetting. At the start of a transition to democracy after Franco’s death in 1975, the right and left parties concluded the informal Pact of Oblivion (*Facto del Olvido*) that prescribed collective amnesia about the political excesses of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist era. The policy of forgetting was consolidated by a broad amnesty law enacted in 1977. Being supported by most of society (Encarnación 2008, 442–447), it remained a cornerstone of the state’s stance on memory issues until the mid-2000s.

The case of Spain is much discussed by political scientists as it undoubtedly refutes the widespread opinion about confronting the past misdeeds as a precondition for effective democratization (Encarnación 2008; Shevel 2011). Its implications for national identity construction appear more complicated. On the one hand, it looks like the democratic success allowed for consolidating the Spaniards on the basis of “constitutional patriotism” (Aguilar and Humlebæk 2002, 140–141). This suggests that, contrary to the dominant theories of nation building, under specific conditions “a degree of social unity can be achieved despite a divided memory of the past” (Shevel 2011, 146). On the other hand, the policy of forgetting, which made historical appeals a minefield, clearly impeded a construction of the national political memory as the basis of common identity in post-Franco Spain (Solís 2003). Besides, constructing a collective national mythology of the new Spain was complicated by a lack of an anti-democratic other as soon as it was impossible to ascribe this role to the Francoists explicitly (Cardus i Ros 2000, 25–27). Paloma Aguilar and Carstein Humlebæk demonstrated that the democratic period was marked by “several ‘lost opportunities’ for establishing or commemorating shared civic national symbols such as national holidays,” while the entrenched symbolic practices had “more continuities with the Francoist period than with the Second Republic or with any other previous period” (2002, 155, 152). This asymmetry explains forcing the issue of the painful past into the political arena in the 2000s (Encarnación 2008).

The Law of Historical Memory adopted in 2007, by the initiative of the Socialist administration of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, signified a clear change in the state’s policy, as it attested the Franco regime as a dictatorship, acknowledged its victims, and prescribed the retirement of its symbols from public places. At the same time, it recognized the citizen’s right to personal and family memory, thus refusing the intrusion of any narrative as dominant (Encarnación 2008). In spite of a hail of criticism from both the left and the right (Encarnación 2008; Boyd 2008; Ryan 2016), some scholars consider the 2007 law as an example of a democratization of memory that is worth taking into account as a possible solution for other nations coping with a divided historical legacy (Shevel

2011). The literature explains the abandoning of the policy of forgetting after 30 years of its successful practicing by the pressure from the civic associations struggling for the rights of the Franco regime's victims (Boyd 2008), generational change, and the consolidation of democracy that diminished a fear of the resumption of civic conflict (Encarnación 2008).

Of course, there are many states whose attitude toward their dark past neither clearly falls to the paradigm of official forgetting nor to a one of persistent working through. Russia is one of the most instructive cases of conflict between tackling the painful past and constructing a positive historical basis for national identity. Working through the totalitarian legacy with a particular focus on the Stalinist political repressions and ethnic deportations was brought to the public agenda during Perestroika and played an important role in dismantling the ideological pillars of the Soviet regime (Sherlock 2007; Kopusov 2011). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian political elites became concerned with (re)building the post-Soviet Russian nation. President Boris Yeltsin's official narrative of "the new democratic Russia" based on a rejection of "the totalitarian past" appeared to be a shaky basis for the national identity (Smith 2002; Gill 2013). Soon after Vladimir Putin's coming to office in 2000, "the thousand years long Russia" narrative, focused on positive aspects of the past, was substituted in place of Yeltsin's narrative (Malinova 2018a, 2018b). Such a shift in the official discourse, added by the fact that some groups in the Russian society are still sympathetic to Stalin, though for different reasons (Ferretti 2003; Kalinin 2011; Sullivan 2013; Khlevnyuk 2019), made the state's attitude ambiguous toward the mnemonic entrepreneurs who seek a broader public commemoration of the victims of Stalinism. In spite of some recent steps toward acknowledgement of a dark past (Sherlock 2016; Malinova 2018b), the state is much more focused on commemorating national glory with a particular emphasis on the victory in the Great Patriotic War (Khapaeva 2016; Edele 2017; Kopusov 2018; Luxmoore 2019). However, the issue of tackling a dark past is still persistent in the public agenda, which reveals itself in enduring discussions on the issue of Stalinism (Bogumił, Moran, and Harrowell 2015; Sherlock 2016; Epplée 2020). Focusing the state's memory policy on the frame of national glory evidently helps to consolidate the majority of the Russian society around the positive national symbols. However, it does not prevent mnemonic conflicts making the attitudes toward a dark past one of the important ideological cleavages.

While recognizing domestic political processes as a decisive factor in shaping divergent patterns of dealing with dark pasts, the recent literature pays remarkable attention to the international factors (e.g., Resende and Budryte 2013; Sierp 2014; Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015; Dixon 2018). On the one hand, the dark pages of the past often have a direct or indirect connection to state relations, and the pressure emanating from the so-called victim states is a typical way of bringing the historical wrongs to the fore of a political agenda. In comparing the patterns of dealing with the Armenian genocide in Turkey and the Nanjing massacre in Japan, Dixon (2018) makes a compelling argument about the combinations of international and domestic factors that make an acknowledgement of a dark past likely. On the other hand, the emphasis on human rights and strengthening of norms of legal accountability and truth-seeking in the post-WWII period changed expectations about states' behavior. What Jeffrey Olick named "the politics of regret" (2007, 14) in the end of the twentieth century became elevated to the new principle of political legitimation. By Olick's opinion, shifting the focus of politics of memory from heroic golden ages to past misdeeds signals a decline rather than triumph of nation-states and nationalist sentiments (134). However, his critics fairly point out that this claim needs examining on empirical grounds (Toth 2015, 558). It looks like the recent international memory conflicts in Europe, which will be addressed in the next section, disprove rather than confirm Olick's suggestion.

### **Transnational Memory, Nationalism, and European Memory Wars**

In the recent period, the dynamics of national mythscapes during and after the Cold War, on the one hand, and efforts of the European Union to rely on the past for constructing a common

European identity, on the other, brought the clashes between competing memories to international arenas. The European politics of memory is often described in terms of the interactions between three or four memory regimes (Onken 2007; Mink and Neumayer 2013), mnemonic communities (Mälksoo 2009), broad narratives (Kattago 2009), commemorative traditions (Snyder 2015), or distinct memory discourses (Siddi 2017). Typically, scholars distinguish between Western European, Eastern European, and Soviet/Russian memory discourses, while Germany is considered as a special case. Though, these distinctions cannot embrace the actual complexity of the memory landscapes on both national and regional levels. These memory discourses, focused largely on WWII and its aftermath, took shape in the context of ideological and political cleavages that cemented during the Cold War. Tony Judt described the myths that dominated in different parts of Europe as combinations of “two sorts of memory”: “that of things done to ‘us’ by Germans in the war, and the rather different recollection of things (however similar) done by ‘us’ to ‘others’ after the war” (1992, 89; see Snyder 2015). In a sense, a selective amnesia involved in this mythmaking was functional, as “drawing a line under the past” (Judt 1992, 97) made possible the postwar developments including European integration. In the West, a partial revenge of history became visible in the 1960s (Rousso 1991), while in the East the unfreezing of memory, that is, its liberating “from constraints imposed by the need for state legitimation and friend–enemy thinking associated with the Cold War” (Müller 2004, 6), was brought about by the collapse of the communist regimes. It made the national mythscapes rather variegated.

The European integration contributed to this mnemonical complexity by promoting a transnational and cosmopolitan memory centered on the Holocaust. Memories of WWII were one of its cornerstones, as European integration was designed to overcome the states’ nationalist impulses that ultimately led to the war (Littoz-Monnet 2012, 1186–1188). The theme of Holocaust was not at its core from the very beginning, but after being institutionalized in the cultural infrastructure in the 1990s, it became the founding myth for European societies. Holocaust remembrance symbolizes their common responsibility for the past wrongs as well as “the rejection of racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia” (Probst 2003, 53). Aleida Assmann characterized the European memory of the Holocaust as “cosmopolitan” as soon as it became “a global memory event” after it had “left the national containers and become deterritorialized with the help of mass media” (2010, 106). This both facilitated its functioning as a moral norm for human action and blurred its connections with local contexts.

Since the mid-2000s, the Eastern European elites’ striving for international legitimization of their version of memory and an official acknowledgement of the crimes of Stalinism as morally equivalent to those committed under Hitler stirred up a series of international conflicts (Mälksoo 2009, 2014; Neumayer 2015, 2017; Subotic 2018). The Eastern European memory discourses, focused on the loss of national statehoods and sufferings from the Soviet occupation, clearly contradicted Russia’s official historical narrative praising the Red Army as the liberator of Europe (Kattago 2009) and incited Russia’s involvement in the escalating memory wars (Torbakov 2011; Edele 2017; Miller 2020). At the same time, pushing the interpretation of Nazism and Stalinism as equally evil induced a “persistent memory asymmetry” inside the EU, as it challenged the uniqueness of the Holocaust (Mink and Neumayer 2013, 14; cf. Littoz-Monnet 2012). In turn, an integration of the Holocaust to the post-Communist–East European historical narratives caused remarkable tensions “because of its perceived elevation of Jewish victimhood above victimhood of other regional majority ethnic groups” (Subotic 2018, 300; cf. Himka 2008). The Ukrainian elites’ struggle for acknowledgement of the Holodomor, the man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 that killed millions of Ukrainians, as genocide carried out by the Soviet government (Kasianov 2014; Himka 2014; Schmid 2016) can be considered as a manifestation of the same tendency outside the EU. The memory conflicts between Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and other European countries got a new impetus after the annexation of Crimea by Russia and unleashing of war in Donbass in 2014 (Siddi 2017; Dreyer 2018). In the last 10–15 years, the conflicts over frames of remembering the tragic events of the twentieth century became an enduring element of European international relations.

There are several theoretical frameworks available for analysis of these conflicts, all of which elucidate the role of nationalism in the contemporary world. Beyond the naturalistic explanation about unfreezing the memory cemented by the Cold War cleavages, there are some theories focused on elites' strategies. Maria Mälksoo (2009, 655–656) explained the assertive memory politics of the Baltic countries and Poland in the mid-2000s as a resistance to their liminal status in Europe and striving for ideological decolonization, which became possible after their adoption to NATO and the EU was completed. George Mink proposed the frame of partisan memory games, which focuses on different historicizing strategies that national elites use to pursue their interests in national and transnational fields (Mink 2008). The volume edited by George Mink and Laura Neumayer (2013) provides case studies illustrating various historicizing strategies used by mnemonic actors in Central and Eastern Europe.

Some scholars connect memory wars with the proliferation of victimizing strategies of national identity construction, aided by the rise of the transnational and cosmopolitan memory concentrated on collective guilt. Victimization combines commemoration of the past sufferings of a victim-nation with striving for their recognition by other nations and sometimes for compensation from a perpetrator-state (Mink and Neumayer 2013; Schmid 2016). Some scholars describe this strategy as victimhood nationalism, which is based on exploiting the epistemological binary of collective guilt and innocence as markers of identity. As a result, “victimhood becomes hereditary in the national historical imagination” (Lim 2010, 139). It inspires a kind of a competition among victims, or “a race to get painful pasts legally recognized and perpetrators punished” (Mink and Neumayer 2013, 13).

The International Relations literature contributes to understanding memory wars by adopting the theoretical framework of ontological security, which reflects the post-Cold War tendency to extend security studies beyond the traditional issues of physical security. The concept points to the need in “the security of Being premised on certainty and continuity of the Self,” which is claimed as essential for individuals and societies (Rumelili 2018, 281), as well as states (Steele 2008). Memory is central for ontological security, as far as “political memory is what constitutes state identities” (Subotic 2018, 298). This theoretical framework reveals a connection between seeking ontological security and securitizing national memory, that is, representing its misunderstanding and misrepresenting by other(s) as an existential danger for a national identity, and striving for its protection in domestic and international arenas. The literature on ontological and mnemonical security uncovers the nationalist logic of states' behavior based on reification of the dominant version of memory and homogenizing national identities (Mälksoo 2015). It also reveals the inadequacy of such logic by demonstrating that mnemonical securitization actually amplifies “negative spirals of ontological insecurity” (Mälksoo 2015, 225; cf. Rumelili 2018).

This approach provides important insights for understanding the mechanisms of international memory wars. However, being focused on states as actors, it tends to neglect the actual complexity of national memories by connecting ontological security with the dominant versions of the national past. Besides, taking security maintenance as a valuable goal, it in a way legitimizes the nationalist rationale of seeking ontological security. Though, most literature is critical toward the actual political practices. Some scholars argue for desecuritization of memory and developing “agonistic mnemonic pluralism” (Mälksoo 2015, 232), or the “pillarized” memory regimes, in which competing visions of the past “peacefully coexist” (Rumelili 2018, 291; cf. Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 13). However, it is not clear whether this pattern can prevail over the antagonistic mode of remembering (Bull and Hansen 2016; Miller 2020) that reveals itself in memory wars. The results of the research project *Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe*, supported by the Horizon 2020 program, which aimed to test an agonistic mode of remembering in different settings, confirm some potential for effective promotion of agonistic representations and understandings of contested pasts by heritage institutions. However, they also demonstrate that even in the new museums representing the European memory this mode of remembering is not salient (Bull and Hansen 2020).

## Conclusion

As this overview demonstrates, the post–Cold War politics of memory deals with multiple challenges, which result from the impossibility of fitting the tragic history of the 20th century to the model of glory and heroic sacrifice famously described by Renan. The literature reveals different patterns of coping with the painful memories of civil wars, political repressions, genocides, and other kinds of dark pasts. On the one hand, it documents the pattern of this critical working through, which increasingly becomes a norm shaping public expectations. It involves an idea of common guilt, which augments Renan’s repertoire of the uniting past, by a new element. The German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and the European politics of commemoration of the Holocaust are the most salient examples of this pattern, on national and transnational levels. On the other hand, the literature describes a plenty of cases of temporarily forgetting a dark past, and of a hard struggle for its acknowledgement, driven by various combinations of domestic and foreign factors. The focus on interactions between mnemonic actors, which is typical for much of this scholarship, draws these divergent patterns as resulting from agency that takes part in changing contexts rather than from some so-called natural laws. Resisting the temptation to represent these patterns as a binary opposition between the bad nationalist and good cosmopolitan and transnational approaches, one should see the politics of memory as a field of competition between different understandings of the national good and wrong.

This is particularly evident in the recent memory wars in Europe. The growing literature about proliferating memory conflicts reveals how victimhood nationalism, which is definitely not a new phenomenon (Mock 2012), appears a popular historicizing strategy in the context that combines transformations of international power regime with the rise of the politics of regret as a new principle of political legitimation (Olick 2007).

Taking into account a visible proliferation of memory conflicts in different parts of the world, it is easy to predict a further rise of scholars’ interest to this research field. Alon Confino once remarked that “the problem with memory defined in terms of politics and political use is that it becomes an illustrative reflection of political development and often is relativized to ideology” (1997, 1393). I think that to avoid reducing memory to political development and ideology we need to pay more attention to connections between them. On the one hand, politics of memory is fused into a web of phenomena that are traditional concerns of political sciences—struggle for power and its legitimation, regimes of power at international, national and local levels, geopolitics, political cultures, ideological transformations, actors’ coalitions, institution building, and more. These connections appear banal, but taking them seriously is essential for moving studies of politics of memory beyond a chaotic collection of cases. On the other hand, politics of memory deals not only with a symbolic politics conducted by elites but also with individual and group remembering. For this reason, it should not be reduced to ideology or propaganda. To understand the current memory conflicts, we need to focus on how the narratives of the past are articulated at public arenas—taught at schools, represented in museums, performed in political rituals—correlate with embodied memories of families and other small groups. We also need to study the mechanisms of domination that lay behind public remembering and forgetting that are so important for constructing and maintaining national identities.

**Financial Support.** The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, Grant no. 17-18-01589, at the Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences.

**Disclosure.** Author has nothing to disclose.

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