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Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 as Historical Memory Phenomenon of Contemporary Russian Students

Abstract

The paper presents the results of a Russian study on the state and dynamics of the historical memory of Russian students. As a scientific result, the paper presents the main socialization results by virtue of broadcasting the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War to students of the Russian frontier region. The main positions that characterize the identified socialization results are outlined: background emotional and value experiences associated with the long-term consequences of a wartime cultural trauma, and historical narrative: student assessments / interpretations of relevant historical events that have been intensively revised in several European countries in recent decades within the framework of the "politics of memory." As a result of the study, the problematic points of upbringing the historical memory of student youth were identified; they mainly include narrative moments related to the comprehension of a number of controversial political assessments / interpretations concerning the events of the Second World War in the "information wars" conditions.

Keywords: students, historical memory, cultural trauma, values, World War II, Great Patriotic War, politics of memory, contemporary Russia

Introduction

The values and beliefs that make up the "military" layer of socio-historical memory are the most powerful and significant cultural and spiritual "guide" ensuring the continuity of the Russian eras and generations of the middle of the XX - the first quarter of the XXI centuries with multiple, comprehensive and largely catastrophic changes attributable to this time (Saraliev, Shirokalova, Kukonkov, 2015; Zygmunt, 2016). The modern global practice of "information wars" aimed at weakening and destroying the subjectivity of national and other collective unities is of particular relevance and topicality to

this theme. The memory of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War that developed in the USSR in the post-war decades was subjected to particularly massive and sophisticated attacks (Kara-Murza, 2007). The "conjunction of the symbol of the Great Victory with the narrative of the Soviet past turns out here to be a difficult problem: if there is a more or less stable consensus regarding the significance of the former, then there is a struggle between diametrically opposite positions regarding the content of the latter" (Malinova, 2015). The main "battlefield" is the consciousness of the young

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generation, especially the educated and active part of young people, students first of all.

We consider the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War as one of the most important foundations of a nationwide Russian identity (Tajfel, Turner, 1986; Krupkin, 2010; Lebedev, Krupkin, 2013), familiarization with which is a necessary component of the cultural and civic socialization of young generations. The cultural and symbolic "mechanism" of establishing identity in this regard is the experience of a national (and universal) trauma that has become a tradition of several generations (Aleksander, 2012) associated with the huge sacrifices suffered by the Soviet and Russian national community in this war for the Victory. The result and manifestation of this collective experience being subject to empirical study are the corresponding social moods (Toshchenko, Harchenko, 1996) of patriotism (Shapovalova, 2016), which make the "military" historical memory an actual value-normative basis of social life. Particularly indicative in this regard are mindsets of the student youth in the border (frontier) regions, where traditionally "a special factor in the moral and psychological climate ... is patriotism in its various interpretations" (Haliy, 2014).

Research Methods

In February 2020, a questionnaire survey of university students as part of the fourth stage of the interregional monitoring "What do we know about the Great Patriotic War" (The war was the day before yesterday..., 2015) was conducted according to the questionnaire of the Russian Society of Sociologists (ROS) by the International Centre for Sociological Research NRU "BelSU", which is the leading institution of higher education in the Belgorod Region (the capital of the Belgorod region bears the honorary title of "City of Military Glory"; the number of respondents was 2020). The sample included 75.3% of young women and 24.7% of young men. The age distribution showed 27.8% of 18-year-olds surveyed; 24.1% of 19 year olds; 15.7% of 20 year olds and 10.3% of 21 year olds; those under the age of 18 accounted for 11.1%; over 21 years old - 6.6%; another 4.5% did not indicate their age. The resulting data array was processed using the SPSS statistical analysis program. The *global goal* of the research project was to study the state and dynamics of the attitude to the Great Patriotic War and the memory of students. Within the framework of this goal, the research objectives were: a) to identify the general background of students' emotional-value attitude to this war and b) to identify a narrative - that is, students' assessments / interpretations of specific socio-historical facts related to the events of this war.

Results and Discussion

The students' emotional and value attitude to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War as a historical event is characterized by the answers to the question about their thoughts and feelings in connection with the upcoming 75th anniversary of this event. The question and answers contain two semantic intentions: objective that is the fact of preserving or eroding the historical memory of that war; and subjective that is the fact of its "attribution to the values", connection with the social ideal or, conversely, value exclusion (table 1).

Table 1.

The 75th anniversary of Victory is approaching. What thoughts and feelings do this date arouse in you?

Answers	%
The feat of the older generations, their dedication and love for the homeland will be an example for new generations.	55.2
The memory of the past war is preserved in the minds of my peers.	25.1
Over the years, the memory of the war is increasingly erased in the minds of new generations; other events and problems obscure it.	13.5
Heroism and self-sacrifice during the Great Patriotic War become alien to a significant part of the youth.	6.2
Total	100

The total correlation of assessments shows a picture of 80% / 20%: namely, the overwhelming prevailing opinion is that young people preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War, with a significant predominance of its positively-valued "charged" assessments associated with the ideal of feat of the older generations, which in their selflessness and the love of the motherland is seen by the majority as a social model for young generations. On the contrary, the opinion of the value alienation by a substantial part of youth from this memory is represented by a rather small minority (6.2% of respondents).

This question is checked and clarified by another, already personally directed, question that involves self-assessment of the respondent's personal interest in the theme of the Great Patriotic War. The answers identify almost 3/4 of the respondents for which the memory of the Great Patriotic War remains personally relevant, and only about 5% of those for whom it has not been interesting since the past years. Another 25% take an intermediate position: disagreeing with the fact that the Great Patriotic War is not interesting to them, they

nevertheless preferred the option “not very agree”. It follows that more or less interest in the events of those years is present in the overwhelming majority (95%) of respondents, which generally indicates the subjective seriousness and sincerity of the answers to the previous question. War of 1941-1945 continues to live in the consciousness and memory of university students as a socially and personally significant historical fact.

The specific semantic content of this historical fact is closely related to the contexts of clan, family history and family memory. For any today's student, the Great Patriotic War is not an abstract historical or ideological concept and it is most often filled with deeply personal meaning. In this regard, it seems at least controversial that the claims of some researchers that “This day did not become a day of remembrance, the sad memory of the dead, human suffering and material destruction” supposedly lost in the shadow of a jingoistic celebration of military victory (Gudkov, 1997; Sohrabi, 2017; Etcuban, J & Pantinople, 2018).

Based on the foregoing, it can be preliminarily ascertained that the students as a whole retain the deepest sense-forming layer of the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War being traditional for our society, associated with feelings, emotions and basic value orientations. However, this does not mean that the problem of erosion and transformation of this memory is removed: it is most likely to manifest itself at a more superficial and reflective level of their consciousness, which is associated with assessments and interpretations of specific historical events. It is these latter ones, which were guarded primarily at the level of state ideology, that have undergone intensive problematisation and erosion in the media environment and, as a result, in the Russian mass consciousness over the past 30 years. The common and “general” question characterizing such a narrative is the assessment of the contribution to the victory over fascism of various countries belonging to the anti-Hitler coalition (table 2):

Table 2.

How do you assess the contribution of various countries to the victory over fascism?

Country	Contribution to the Victory			
	Significant	Not very significant	Insignificant	No answer
USSR	92.2	1.4	0.1	6.3
USA	21.3	44.9	12.8	21.0
United Kingdom	21.0	46.8	4.7	22.6
France	15.9	43.9	15.0	24.1

As we can see, the patriotic consensus persists here completely coinciding with the real historical fact in this matter: over 90% of respondents assess the contribution of the Soviet Union to the Victory as “Significant” (the maximum indicator on a scale). The corresponding assessment of the similar contribution of other allied countries, the USA, United Kingdom and France, which is inferior to them in 4.5–6 times. The latter is estimated by respondents mainly as “Not very significant” (about 45% of respondents in each case). Noteworthy is the large number of those who found it difficult to answer: from 21 to 24% in the case of Western countries and only 6.3% in relation to the USSR. The decisive contribution of the Soviet Union to the Victory is denied only by 1.5% of respondents, and in general 7.8% of respondents raise any doubts. Based on this, we can state: a) the preservation of the students' continuity on understanding of the role played by our country in the victory over fascist Germany and its allies, and b) the preservation of

consensus with the official state position on this key issue at the level of the vast majority of students surveyed.

Further, the respondents were offered a series of questions of the same type from five positions that are significant for the Russian narrative of the Great Patriotic War and subjected in recent years to the most active “revision” during the “transformation of *memory regimes* in Europe” (Malinova, 2015, p. 18). Questions were posed in the form of a scale of agreement / disagreement with the key conceptual theses formulated in the “revised” key denying the position of the Soviet-Russian narrative. And here not so integrated tendencies of evaluations / interpretations were revealed (table 3).

Table 3.

Today there are many opinions about events related to the Second World War. Which ones do you share?

Answers	I reject this statement %	It is controversial but debatable %	I can accept this %	It is equal to me %	No answer %
Germany and the USSR are equally to blame for the war	34.1	29.7	10.6	2.1	23.5
The German attack on the USSR on June 22, 1941 was NOT unexpected	27.7	27.0	23.5	1.7	20.0
Assistance to the Nazis (Forest Brothers, Bandera, etc.) can be justified by the struggle against the Soviet system, Stalinism, for the independence of the Baltic countries, Ukraine, etc.	27.3	22.7	7.9	2.9	39.1
The liberation of the Baltic states and Eastern Europe in 1944-1945 was an occupation	23.8	21.0	6.7	3.1	45.4
The desecration of graves and the demolition of monuments to Soviet soldiers and commanders in a number of countries is decommunization (the struggle against the heritage of the USSR)	31.8	17.1	16.9	2.5	31.7

In general, the respondents' answers to all questions of this series are characterized by very low indifference to them (from 1.7% to 3.1% which is within the statistical error). At the same time, all of them revealed a significant proportion of those who found it difficult to answer: from 1/5 (20%) to almost half of the sample (45.4%). The first indicates the high relevance of the issues raised for the contingent of respondents; the second is about a high degree of uncertainty and fluctuations in a significant part of the contingent concerning assessments / interpretations of key moments in the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War.

As regards the content of the relevant assessments / interpretations, it is noteworthy that the most "tough" anti-patriotic theses are about the justification of helping the Nazis with the struggle for independence, about the occupational character of the liberation of the Baltic States and Eastern Europe as a whole, about the guilt in unleashing the wars of both Germany and the USSR scored the minimum number of people inclined to agree with them (from 6.7% to 10.6%). More often, respondents tend to agree with relatively "soft" versions of the revision of history: the "non-surprise" of the German attack on the USSR on June 22, 1941

and the "decommunization" nature of the demolition of monuments and desecration of graves of Soviet soldiers-liberators in several European countries (23.5% and 16.9%, respectively). The relative "softness" that does not allow us to unambiguously interpret the relevant statements as anti-Soviet and anti-Russian, tells them the complexity of the semantic wording contexts: the difficulty of direct and unambiguous "black and white" conclusions in the first case, and the semantic multidimensionality of the "decommunization" concept in the second. Nevertheless, the number of those who agreed to revise the history of the Great Patriotic War and in these matters amounted to a minority of respondents. From 1/4 to 1/3 of them defend the provisions of the traditional Russian version of military history and strongly disagree with attempts to revise them; from 1/6 to almost 1/3 are ready to argue and discuss.

Here, in turn, it is possible to build various hypotheses about which version of the assessment / interpretation of these events will be inclined to those who chose the answer "It is debatable, but discussed." From our point of view, the readiness to discuss controversial theses speaks more of a predisposition to a

discussion, a dialogue involving a reasoned defence of one's point of view, rather than a tendency to agree with a revision of a traditional concept. At the same time, there is a significant number of those who found it difficult to determine their position, in particular to answer the two most pressing questions about the justification for helping the Nazis with the struggle for independence (39.1%) and the occupational character inherent in the liberation by the Red Army in 1944-45 of Baltic States and Eastern Europe as a whole (45.4%).

Conclusion

In general, we should note the following when characterizing the state of the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War inherent in modern students having educated in the leading higher educational institution of the Belgorod region. The emotional-value basis of this memory is a deep complex of experience involving the loss of relatives and close ones from previous generations of the family (the family-historical component) in combination with the positive ideal of their heroism, dedication and patriotism (national component). The narrative level of this memory is represented by the prevailing successive patriotic assessments / interpretations of key events of the Great Patriotic War, with a relatively small "specific gravity" of alternative representations, with a general not indifferent background of attitude to these issues. At the same time, a significant number of those who are hesitating are those who are unable to determine their position on them. A noticeable, albeit smaller, part of the contingent surveyed remains sacred towards the events and heroes of the war, which is manifested in assessments of acts of vandalism in relation to the monuments of the latter in a number of European countries.

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