

Russians' historical memory of the great patriotic war of 1941-1945 in sociological research

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Abstract. This study dwells on the historical memory of Russians about the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. Based on the analysis of various sociological studies on revealing the attitude to the Great Patriotic War, as well as the authors' research, we concluded that the historical memory about the war of 1941-1945 of the significant majority of Russians (in particular student youth) shows the continuity in their understanding of the leading role of our country in the victory over the enemy and its allies. The obtained data do not diverge from the official position of the Russian state on this key issue. It is important to note the fact that Russian families almost have no veterans who participated in that war. However, they keep carefully transmitting the information about the war events from generation to generation, which is an important component of the cultural tradition and national identity of Russia.

Keywords: memory, historical memory, Russia, Great Patriotic War, cultural tradition, national identity.

Introduction

At present, the memory issue has acquired not only an epistemological dimension (it related to the role of history in the society's life and with the methodological foundations of science) but also a political undertone. Historians, sociologists, politicians and mediasphere representatives enter are engaged in the study of memory. This phenomenon is becoming a serious sociopolitical problem that has both theoretical and practical aspects. On the one hand, the memorial phenomenon is a certain political resource in a situation of severe sociopolitical divides and changes. In conditions of economic crisis and in the absence of a clear program for future development, the state often seeks to turn memory into the main element of national consolidation. On the other hand, memory is a concept of the social sciences, and it is a polysemous concept that operates in various scientific spheres and, precisely because of its multivalence, is the subject of a variety of controversies.

Strong interest to the memory issue in its connection with history begins in the 1970s when there emerged a particular situation in both theoretical and sociopolitical fields, which not only became a subject of scientific and philosophical discussions but also gave rise to a specific direction in politics known as politics of memory (Trufanova, Emelyanova & Yakovleva, 2022). Historical memory is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon in terms of content and its further sociological study. Many Russian historians (Repina, 2020; Repina, 2011; Safronova, 2018; Ryazantsev, Podlesnaya & Kozlov, 2014), sociologists (Toshchenko, 2020; Shirokalova, 2020; Malinkin, 2020), philosophers (Shtop-Rutkowska, 2015; Ryaguzova, 2019) and psychologists (Emelyanova, 2002) have been

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working on the issues of historical, social, cultural, local, cyber, and other kinds of memory. In recent years several new publications devoted to the analysis of historical memory, in particular memory policy (Miller & Efremenko, 2020), as well as a textbook for a course in historical memory (Safronova, 2020) and a multi-authored monograph have been published (Trufanova, Emelyanova & Yakovleva, 2022).

Currently, there are different approaches to the definition of this concept. Sociologist J.T. Toshchenko writes that historical memory “an expression of the process of organizing, preserving and reproducing the experience of people, country, state for its possible use in the people activities or for returning its influence on the public consciousness sphere” (Toshchenko, 2000). German researcher J. Rusen defines historical memory “...on the one hand, as a mental ability of subjects to preserve memories of their experience which is the necessary basis for the development of historical consciousness... On the other hand, as the result of certain sense-making operations for the ordering of memories, carried out in the course of the formation of historical consciousness through understanding of experience...” (Ryuzen, 2001). Russian philosopher L.P. Repina considers historical memory in general “as a totality of prescientific, scientific, pseudoscientific and extrascientific knowledge and mass perceptions of society about the common past” (Repina, 2004). In the opinion of V. E. Boikov, “historical memory constitutes one of the bases of person’s awareness of the self in the family lineage and in the history of their people, understanding of our collective self in the national and cultural community of the country as well as in the framework of the universal civilization” (Boikov, 2002). V.V. Kulish characterizes historical memory “as a systematic, collectively expressed element of public and individual consciousness with its inherent mechanism of recording, storage and reproduction of culture. This element provides the actualization of traditional forms of life of social subjects and sets the direction of innovation in all spheres of life of an individual and society” (Kulish, 2011).

The reason for the current diversity of approaches to defining this phenomenon is both its own lack of clarity as an object of sociological research and the difficulty of empirical verification. From the point of view of realization of the tasks set in the present study it seems necessary to define historical memory as one of the most important sociocultural phenomena regulating the behavior of individuals and collectives, social groups and estates, ethnic groups and society as a whole, and also as a result of attitude to a set of social processes of the past. As one of the most important backbone elements of social consciousness, historical memory is a sublimated expression of the attitude of individuals and society as a whole to certain episodes and events of the past, clearly or latently reflecting the interests of various social groups and stratum. Its content is a set of knowledge and perceptions, values and symbols, ideas and beliefs, beliefs and customs, traditions, norms and rules of behavior, which form the core of ethnic and cultural self-identification of individuals and thus have a significant impact on the regulation of their behavior and determine the present and future of individual social groups and communities, as well as ethnic groups and society as a whole. The ideas about the past stored in the memory act as values which provide a regulating influence on the behavior of people, their worldview, and contribute to the formation of national and cultural identity.

Historical memory is shaped by various events. Some of them are important for certain categories of people, while others are important for all citizens of the country and even for the population of the whole planet. Such a global and tragic phenomenon in human history was the Second World War, the most important part of which was the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. Its historiography is huge; the war is devoted to thousands of studies, revealing both large-scale and individual episodes of military events. As real life shows, the attitude towards the war is the most important bond of Russian society, and Victory Day has become the most revered state holiday. Naturally, President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin repeatedly stresses the place and role of the feat of the Soviet people in our society. For instance, in his August 2011 speech to young people in Novorossiysk, V.V. Putin stated that historical memory is “...perfect cement which unites people of different ethnicities and different religions into a Russian nation, one and undivided, creates and strengthens a united and undivided great Russia”. Addressing the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on January 15, 2020 the

President also stressed the importance of May 9, Victory Day, as the greatest and the holiest holiday for the Russians. He emphasized that “our memory is not only a tribute to the historical past, it serves our future, it consolidates our unity”.

Let us note that the notions of historical memory look unambiguous at first glance. Thus, historical memory is about historical events and their characters, but the practice of various studies shows that collective memories are actually crystallized on events and personalities, which have a high value. Meaningful memories usually deal with heroic or, on the contrary, morally traumatic events of history and its positively or negatively colored episodes. Thus, the subject of historical memory may be considered not all historical events and characters but those that are highly relevant to contemporary society.

The Great Patriotic War in sociological research

The Great Patriotic War holds a special place in the historical memory of Russian society. For example, research by the Public Opinion Foundation from 2003 to 2011 shows that the Victory Day is a significant day for the vast majority of the Russian population (Romanovsky, 2011). The most recent survey by the Public Opinion Foundation in April 2022 (N-1500) shows the following results: more than half of Russians (62%) are convinced that they know the history of the Great Patriotic War “more likely well than badly”, while about a third (29%) think that they know it “more likely badly than well”. At the same time, 53% of respondents believe that Russians as a whole know the history of that war “more likely badly than well”, while 28% of them think they know it “more likely well than badly”. The history of the Great Patriotic War is covered in Russia “more likely truthfully than not” and this is the opinion of 77% of respondents. 12% think otherwise. Moreover, 33% believe that the mass media write and talk about the Great Patriotic War too little, 8% say too much, and 53% believe they say enough. More than a half of respondents (55%) think that May 9 is a national holiday. 36% named Victory Day a public holiday, 4% – a family holiday, and 2% – an ordinary day off (Novyye izvestiya, 2022).

As a result of sociological surveys of students conducted in 2010-2015 under the supervision of A.V. Rachipa (N-988) the following results were obtained regarding the events of the Great Patriotic War. In one of the tasks, among the nine most significant events of the 20th century, offered to assess the students, the period of the war stands out with a significant margin and in a positive way (2010 – 58%, 2015 – 59%) (Rachipa & Burkov, 2016).

Another study by M.V. Tkachev devoted to the formation of the image of the Great Patriotic War in the student environment (N-516) showed that interest in the history of the Great Patriotic War is high, but for the overwhelming part of student youth is typical "passive" form of information about this period. The topicality and necessity of reference to history is determined by the reasons for the preservation of the unified historical memory of Russian society and the education of patriotic attitudes and sentiments in the youth environment. Thus, it was found that only every fifth respondent (23%) is characterized by “active” form of interest in the history of the Great Patriotic War; it is reading scientific and journalistic literature, watching TV programs on this topic. Every tenth respondent answered that the history of the Great Patriotic War is rather not interesting, the knowledge received at school and university is enough (10%), it is not interested for 3% of respondents on the whole array (Tkachev, 2012).

The high interest of Russians in the subject of the Great Patriotic War is also noted by Russian Public Opinion Research Center, which in 2018 published the data of its survey. About a third of our fellow citizens (35%) today can recall the stories of close members of the war, another 55% of respondents know that relatives fought, but are not aware of the details or only heard that they were killed or missing in the Great Patriotic War. In the last few years, the attention of Russians to the subject of the Great Patriotic War has noticeably increased: thus, 45% of respondents reported meeting with veterans (their number was 35% in 2014), 61% (against 30% in 2014) about visiting places of military glory and museums dedicated to the war, and 51% (against 28%) about burials of fallen

warriors. The vast majority of citizens watched films about the war (88%), while the demand for thematic literature is several times lower: during the year, 23% of respondents read relevant books, and this proportion have decreased since 2014 (from 30%). The exact date of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War (June 22, 1941) can be named by 69% of adult Russians, but there is more than a significant difference in the answers of the young, mature and older generation: while only 40% give the correct answer in the group of 18-24-year-olds, their number among 45-59-year-olds is 83% (VTsIOM, 2018).

Interesting for us is the study of the team from the National Research University “Belgorod State University” dedicated to the analysis of selected results of the study of student youth in the framework of the fourth stage of the inter-regional monitoring of the Russian Society of Sociologists “What we know about the Great Patriotic War” (2005-2020) (N-2020). The study revealed that the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War remains relevant at the level of the vast majority (80%); for the majority of students (55% of respondents) this memory has a value-positive character, associated with the ideal of the feat of the older generations and with the social model of their selflessness and love for the Motherland. The emotional and value basis of memory is a deep complex of experiences of loss of relatives and loved ones from previous generations of the family (family and historical component) combined with the positive ideal of their exploits, selflessness and patriotism (national component) (Lebedev et al., 2020).

Another very important and revealing point in this study is a special question on the attitude of respondents to the anti-cultural practice of demolishing monuments to Soviet Soldiers-liberators, which has become widespread in a number of European countries in the last decade. A relative majority, 41.2% of respondents, believe that these countries have the right to do so on their territories and that Russia therefore has insufficient grounds to interfere in their internal affairs. However, a comparable number of respondents, 31.4%, believe that active pressure in the form of reduced cooperation with such countries is legitimate. Approximately one in ten respondents was indifferent to the question, and 5.9% gave their answers (Lebedev et al., 2020)..

The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 is the event of Russian history that is significant for both schoolchildren and students, although with regard to students there is a knot of contradictions outlined in their requirement to formulate the question about the Great Patriotic War. The study of M. A. Podlesnaya, G. V. Solovyova and I. V. Ilyina, which was conducted in 2018 among schoolchildren and students of a number of Russian schools and universities (N-2505), is devoted to this contradiction. The events of the Great Patriotic War were named as the most important event in the history of Russia by 41% of students, all other named events did not score even 10%, which certainly indicates the importance of this event among schoolchildren. The significance of the World War II for students of universities according to the survey is very low (30%) in comparison with the first manned flight into space (47.3%). The authors believe that such distribution of answers is caused by the fact that in recent years the Great Patriotic War has been discussed quite a lot in connection with the Immortal Regiment movement, which makes this event commonplace in Russian society (Podlesnaya, Solovyova & Ilyina, 2021).

On the whole, based on the above results of various surveys, we can note that the historical consciousness of Russians has absorbed the value orientations of the collective memory of previous generations, where the memory of the war of 1941-1945 is an important component of cultural tradition and national identity. According to J.T. Toshchenko “victory in this war for the Russian man is the event from which the state and the nation draw strength and inspiration for present and future generations. There is a mythologization of the event, consolidation of its status as an event of national scale and a special national pride. The main achievement of the Russians in the Great Patriotic War is the against-all-odds victory, the victory in the conditions of death and life to the point of exhaustion; in this may be the main national trait of the Russian people is endurance and patience” (Toshchenko, 2020).

Study Methods and Procedure

In 2021, as part of the theme indicated by the authors, a monitoring sociological study was conducted to identify gaps in collective memory among the population of Russia. The object of the study were the residents of five federal districts of the Russian Federation. The subject of the study is the impact of historical events on the collective memory of the population of Russia. A separate aspect of this research was the discovery of respondents' attitudes toward the Great Patriotic War as one of the most important events in the life of our country. The sociological method used was a survey. The survey was conducted in the form of a handout electronic questionnaire. The electronic survey was conducted on Survey-Studio platform, which allowed to authenticate the respondent by IP-address (the respondent could not fill in the questionnaire twice according to the electronic link sent to him). The sample size was 1,070 respondents, representing five federal districts of the Russian Federation:

- Southern Federal District (49.6%);
- Central Federal District (19.4%);
- Far Eastern Federal District (14.0%);
- Northwestern Federal District (6.7%);
- Siberian Federal District (6.3%).

The gender distribution was as follows: 31.0% male respondents; 69.0% female respondents. By age: 18-24 years - 64.1%; 25-34 years - 11.9%; 35-44 years - 11.1%; 45-59 years - 9.0%; over 60 years - 3.9%. Sampling: non-probability by random sampling, the main selection features were region of residence, age, and gender of respondents.

Instrumentarium and research matrix developed by the authors of the study. The data were processed and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 statistical package. After controlling the quality of the questionnaires, the processing of the study data was performed. In closed questions, a numeric code was assigned to each answer choice. In open and semi-closed questions, the respondents' statements were grouped according to the content principle, followed by assignment of numerical codes. A set of questionnaire questions formed a structured model of the subject of the analysis of empirical data. Statistical analysis included an analysis of linear (univariate) distributions of the respondents' answers to the questionnaire, and comprehension of the parameters of contingency tables.

Results

When asked: "Do you celebrate historical dates important for Russia in your family?" 43% of respondents indicated that they celebrate such dates in the family. The remaining 57% of respondents indicated that they do not celebrate important historical dates for Russia in their families. From the calculation of the number of respondents who celebrate important for Russia, historical dates in the family were sorted and grouped 22 most frequently mentioned historical dates. The most popular historical dates according to the respondents which are celebrated in the family circle were:

1. May 9 (Victory Day) (39.9%),
2. June 12 (Day of Russia) (10.1%)
3. November 4 (Unity Day) (4.0%)
4. February 23 (Defenders of the Fatherland Day) (4.0%)
5. 1 May (Labor Day) (3.7%)

It can be assumed that high popularity of Victory Day holiday is caused by several factors like availability of relatives who participated in the war in the respondent's family, careful passing of events about the Great Patriotic War by relatives to the next generations, as well as active support of this holiday by the state (in particular the outspread of the Immortal Regiment campaign).

The most important and crucial event in Russian history for the country, according to the majority of respondents (select no more than three events from the list) are: 1) Victory in the Great Patriotic War (76.2%), 2) Collapse of the USSR (57.9%), 3) Emancipation Reform of 1861 in Russia

(56.2%), 4) Great October Socialist Revolution (43.3%), 5) Yuri Gagarin's Space Flight (29.3%). Detailed data are shown in Fig. 1.

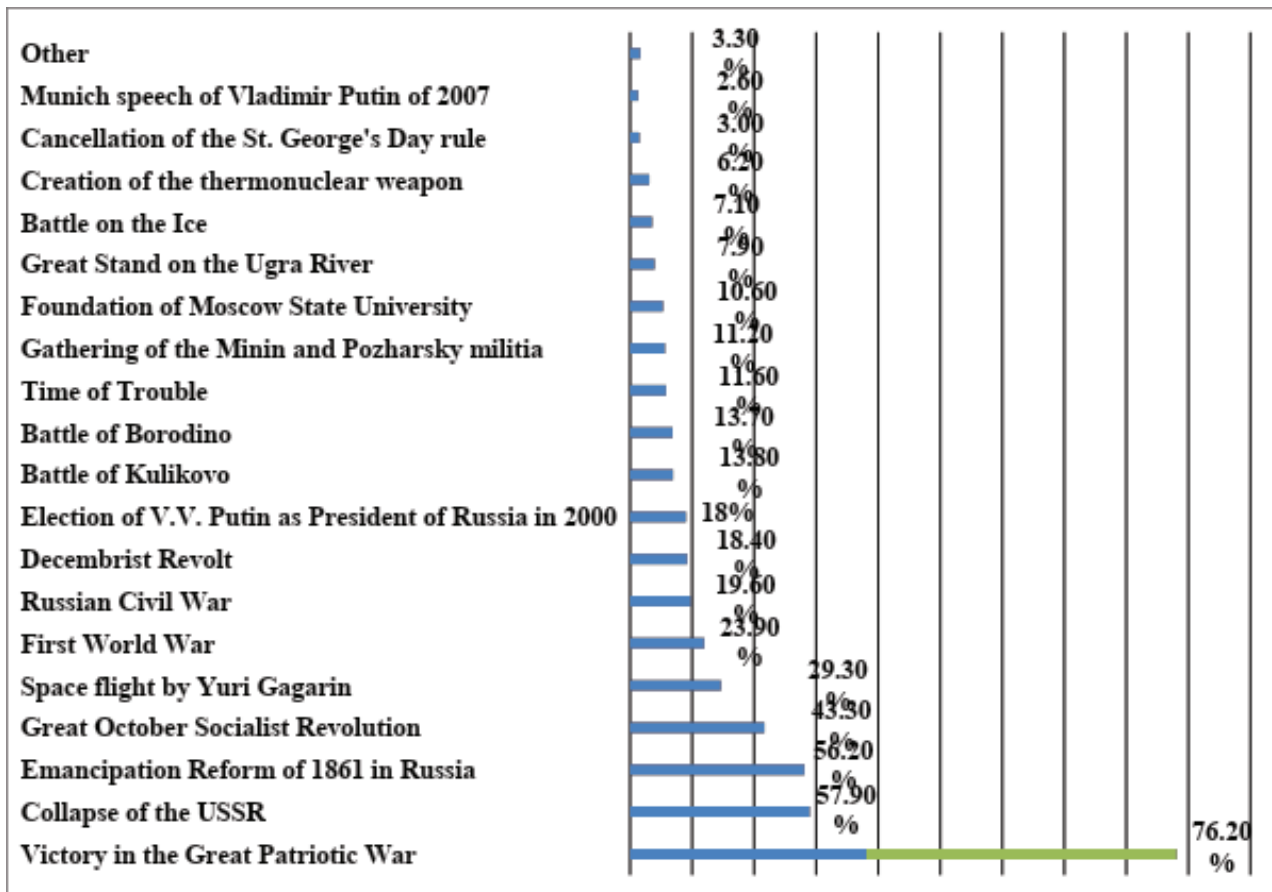


Fig. 1. The most important and crucial events of Russian history for the country (%).

The majority of respondents neutrally assess the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the secret protocol to it on August 23, 1939 (33.5%). Of the respondents, 21.2% give a positive assessment of this signing. 17.6% of respondents assess this signing negatively. It is worth noting that approximately 28% of the survey participants found it difficult to answer this question. This fact indicates a low level of awareness of this event. According to professional military historians (Grishchenko, 2013; Nevolina, 2009; Chubaryan, 2008), this pact gave the Soviet Union respite to prepare for war and allowed to strengthen its military industry and increase the size of the Red Army. And in the initial period of the Great Patriotic War the German troops were forced to attack from way more remote borders. Thanks to this the USSR was able to evacuate numerous industrial enterprises to the east in time, and additionally mobilize many divisions which held back the Wehrmacht armies at Moscow and Leningrad.

However, the majority of survey participants (64.4%) point to the responsibility of the Soviet leadership for the defeats of the Red Army in the first months of the Great Patriotic War. Slightly more than 15% of respondents believe that the Soviet leadership should not be responsible for the defeats of the Red Army in the first months of the Great Patriotic War. 20.5% of respondents found it difficult to answer this question. The male respondents (23.2%) have a more negative attitude toward signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol, and also put the blame on the Soviet leadership for the defeats of the Red Army during the first months of the Great Patriotic War to a greater extent (67.1%) than the female respondents.

For the purposes of this study, the authors identified respondents' attitudes toward the Great Patriotic War only as one of several aspects within the study of the phenomenon of collective memory in Russia.

Conclusion

To understand the significance of the historical event that was the Great Patriotic War today, a modern scholarly discourse describing the nature of its memory as a cultural trauma is needed. According to cultural and sociological theory by J. Alexander, traumatic experiences, channeled in the appropriate value and ideological direction, have the power to transform the destructive effect of tragic events that once occurred into morally high states and reference points. They expand human circle of compassion, empathy and mutual understanding, generating and affirming non-utilitarian foundations of social identification and solidarity. Anchored in the foundation of everyday life through symbols and rituals of commemoration that allow us to empathize and share the pain of trauma survivors, historical memory acquires the properties of an essential spiritual resource that provides opportunities to solve current problems and to correct disorders of collective consciousness in a long-term social perspective.

In this regard, the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War as part of it, which was an exceptionally traumatic event in every respect for the peoples of the former USSR and especially Russia, refracted through the prism of Soviet and later Russian traditions of historical memory, is seen as one of the foundations of contemporary Russian national identity, really solidarizing Russian society in the 21st century. This kind of memory contentively fills the values of Russian patriotism, forming stable social attitudes of moral and civic orientation through the institutions of socialization. It is natural in this connection that it has become the primary object of information wars directed against Russia in the geopolitical game that we can currently observe.

Based on the analysis of various sociological studies of attitudes toward the Great Patriotic War, as well as the author's own research, we conclude that the historical memory of the war of 1941-1945 for a significant majority of Russians (in particular student youth) shows continuity in their understanding of the leading role of our country in the victory over the enemy and his allies. On this key issue they do not disagree with the official Russian state position. It is important to note the fact that there are practically no veterans of the war who participated in those years in Russian families, but there is still a careful transmission of information about the events of the war from generation to generation, which is an important component of the cultural tradition and national identity of Russia.

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