

**Mediated Memories of the USSR:  
Reconstruction and Critical Re-evaluation of the Soviet Past  
through Internet Images**

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by

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## **Abstract**

Browsing Russian websites, one encounters dozens of images that attribute to the former USSR. Manifold representations of Soviet leaders, depictions of hammer and sickle, collections of Soviet cars, watches, postcards, as well as computer games, blogs and anime stylised as Soviet – this is far from a full list of images presenting the Soviet epoch on the Web. Yet, there are even more similar instances that may at first sight look absurd to the viewer, such as, for example, “Stalin vs. Hitler” comic strip or the online mini-series “Epoch: Made in USSR.” While the diversity of digital Soviet images is striking, their presence on the Web is not accidental: they generate and support public memory of the Communist era in the new media sphere.

This thesis studies digital Soviet imagery as a form of remembrance, reconstruction and re-evaluation of the Soviet past. In other words, it explores different ways of how one recalls, understands and reinterprets that fascinating and controversial period of Russian history through web-based representations. The project also answers broader questions of why, in the twenty-first century, Soviet memory entered the digital field and, subsequently, how new communication technologies have turned into a suitable means for circulating notions related to the Communist epoch.

As users bring more and more Soviet images online, the number and variety of digital commemorative practices related to the Soviet period increases. In this thesis, I test the limits of such ‘memoriescape’, while investigating different patterns of remembrance of the Communist legacy on the Internet. For this purpose, I examine four hitherto unexplored vehicles of digital Soviet memory: online visual archives of the Soviet past created and contributed to by common users, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag set up by the Memorial Society, Soviet propaganda posters appropriated as Internet memes, and the series of images *Stalin is like* created for a campaign to promote knowledge of Stalinist terror. Using these

examples, I inquire into how images construct different visions of the Soviet past, ranging from its idealistic portrayal to ironic and even traumatic representation.

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### **Note on Transliteration**

Russian names and titles have been transliterated in accordance with the Modified Library of Congress system, except for well-known names (e.g. Trotsky, Yeltsin, Nevsky, Yaroslav the Wise, Pozharsky, Gennady Zyuganov, Felix Dzerzhinsky, Lubyanka Square, Yury Luzhkov, Isaak Dunayevsky, “Yabloko,” Grigory Yavlinsky, Mayakovskiy, Solzhenitsyn, Yezhov, ‘stiob’, etc.) in which case the common English spelling has been used.

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## **Introduction**

### **I. Soviet Images on the Web**

Browsing Russian websites, one encounters dozens of images related to the former USSR. Manifold representations of Soviet leaders, depictions of the hammer and sickle, collections of Soviet cars, watches, postcards, as well as computer games, blogs and anime stylised as Soviet – this is far from a full list of images presenting the Soviet epoch on the Web. Yet, there are even more similar instances that may, from the first sight, look absurd to the viewer, such as, for example, a “Stalin vs. Hitler” comic strip or the online mini-series “Epoch: Made in USSR.”<sup>1</sup> Although it has been more than twenty-five years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its vestiges are alive, and they persist not only in Russian material culture, but also in digital space. Furthermore, Russians attempt to ‘revive’ the old Soviet symbols while producing their online copies. The virtual environment offers new ways for the collection and preservation of these artefacts and also makes them widely available for the public.

Soviet images on the Web are diverse, as they include different yet related phenomena. On the one hand, these can be, for instance, digitised photographs of the Communist era and depictions of Soviet goods, copies of propaganda posters and reproductions of Socialist Realist art, scanned documents and books from the time. Such items prevail on websites devoted to the former USSR. It looks as if Russian users deliberately bring pieces of Soviet culture online in order to share, collect and preserve them for future generations. On the other hand, the Web also contains numerous visual ‘hybrids’ and that is, images that have been

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<sup>1</sup> See “Stalin vs. Hitler” comic strip at <https://www.comicsnews.org/comics/stalin-protiv-gitlera/page1> and “Epoch: Made in USSR” online mini-series at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBgELJ0v\\_9Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBgELJ0v_9Q) or at <http://vk.com/made.inussr> retrieved 19.07.2016.

created purely digitally. While being produced with new media tools, these pictures have no material sources or analogue referents. They are thus true digital creations. In this regard, in my thesis I approach digital Soviet images broadly. Not only graphic representations fall under this category, but also videos, computer games, digital maps and entire websites concerned with the Soviet topic.

The diversity of Soviet images on the Web is truly striking, as they pervade Russian-speaking digital platforms and services. Yet, even more striking is the fact that these pictures construct different visions of the Communist past, which range from excessive idealisation to fierce critique of ‘all things Soviet.’ In this way, some depictions portray the USSR as a once existing Utopia: they glorify the collapsed superpower while creating its idealistic image.<sup>2</sup> Other digital representations, on the contrary, are critical, as they condemn the Soviet regime for brutalities endemic to it.<sup>3</sup> However contradictory these images are, they illustrate different attitudes towards the Soviet period, where nostalgia or condemnation are only a few of such views. The Web now opens a multitude of perspectives on the former Soviet empire, which, in theory, should contribute to memorialisation of that controversial time, but is that really so? Do *all* mediated representations help remembering history or do they, conversely, confuse the viewer while creating ambiguity around that past?

In fact, some Soviet-related images on the Web are far from truthful portrayals of historical reality. They can be vague, odd and even absurd due to transformations in virtual space. Instead of memory, these depictions present a distorted version of the past with multiple ‘deviations.’ There are many examples of such pictures on the Russian Internet, however the most prevalent are digital memes devoted to the Soviet topic, which currently gain momentum online. This category of images is outstanding. It ‘plays’ with Soviet history while mocking it and making events and characters look pronouncedly grotesque. Thus, for

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of nostalgic vision of the USSR see chapter 3 “Online Visual Archives of the Soviet Past”.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Soviet trauma representations see chapter 4 “Virtual Museum of Gulag”.

instance, both the collapse of the USSR and the figure of Lenin can be ridiculed through Internet memes, which offer a parody of the Soviet past, rather than its literal representation. Yet, one should not discard such images as they are important indicators of contemporary public mood. Studying them one can learn peoples' attitude towards the past. It is precisely these amateur grass root depictions that "allow individuals to express their views on the past and challenge/ support existing historical narratives."<sup>4</sup> As Mykola Makhortykh notes, Internet memes, alongside other digital representations, "tell us mainly not about the past, but how people feel about that past."<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, Soviet images on the Web are 'vernacular' products. They are produced by common users, who put forward their personal and thus, often, biased perspectives on the former USSR. Not surprisingly, the Communist past is never neutral when pictured online but is always emotionally coloured.<sup>6</sup> Accompanied by texts or comments, digital representations enable people to express their feelings about Soviet life. Nostalgia, scepticism or rejection are only a small part of the emotional spectrum that Russians experience towards former Communism, which is evident in virtual spaces where anyone can produce a historical interpretation. According to Luke Tredinnick, on the Web "the role of the historian in creating the historical narrative out of the detritus of documentary culture is supplemented by the role of individuals in making their own sense of the past."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the very "idea of history... changes," for it becomes a process of active remembering, in which any user can take part.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> M. Makhortykh, "Everything for the Lulz: Historical Memes and World War II Memory on Lurkomaor'e". *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 13, 2015, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> E. Rutten and V. Zvereva, "Introduction: Old Conflicts, New Media: post-Socialist Digital Memories" in *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in post-Socialist States*, ed. by E. Rutten, J. Fedor and V. Zvereva, London and NY: Routledge, 2013, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> L. Tredinnick, *Digital Information Culture: the Individual and Society in the Digital Age*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2008, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Digital images emerge in response to controversies of Soviet history. Disputable events or characters, for instance, Lenin, the October Revolution, Stalin and WWII, are ‘overrepresented’ online, as they prompt the public to produce pictures. Simply put, the more contested an issue, the more images it generates in the digital sphere. This is not accidental given that on the Web users employ images as basic units of communication in order to share opinions, react to important issues and comment on different matters. Although in these cases images often come together with words, the role of the former is paramount.

## **II. Research Objective**

This project started from a personal curiosity about the new and relatively unexplored field of digital Soviet imagery. As an art historian, I was fascinated with the visual heritage of the Communist epoch and therefore I explored how aesthetics of that controversial period were manifested online. To my surprise, I discovered a multitude of Soviet depictions on the Web, the number and variety of which were striking. These images pervaded digital space. The contexts in which Soviet imagery was appropriated varied too, so that an identical picture (an official portrait of Lenin, for example) could appear in a personal blog, on a game server, meme generator and social networking site at the same time. The Internet encompassed all kinds of Soviet representations, which differed in terms of their use and modification. The enormous amount of such images made me think about their meaning and function. I asked myself if there was any particular reason to have them online. What drives Russian users to bring these old graphic signs of the Communist era into new media environment? Putting it simply, why do they need Soviet past on the Web?

Considering this rather complex issue, I suggest that the existence of Soviet imagery on the Web is not accidental. These images serve a purpose: they contribute to the production of what some scholars increasingly call ‘media memory.’ There are other related terms for this phenomenon. For instance, Joanne Garde-Hansen calls it ‘digital memory,’ Andrew Hoskins

invents a broad definition of ‘new memory,’ while Anna Reading talks of a more specific ‘globital memory field.’<sup>9</sup> However diverse and unusual these notions are, they highlight one important fact: the emergence of new memorialisation practices due to new media. Although ‘media memory’ is my preferred term, it should not be taken too literally, as it represents the evolutionary stage of contemporary memory in general, rather than an entirely new phenomenon. It indicates the dependence of current remembrance practices on digital technologies that now transform our relationship with the past. There is a complex process of ‘mediatisation’ and ‘digitalisation’ taking place in our information age so that both personal and collective forms of recall tend to become digital.<sup>10</sup> Overall, media memory can be defined as an intrinsic feature of modern communication technologies; it is about “collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of the media, and about the media.”<sup>11</sup> Yet this is a versatile multi-layered notion that has not yet been fully explored, and my agenda is to make a substantive contribution to prying apart its meaning and utility for comprehending contemporary practices of memorialisation.

With respect to the Soviet epoch, media memory can be more beneficial and, paradoxically, more destructive than all previously known types of memory. On the one hand, an obvious advantage of such memory is that it makes the Communist period accessible, visible and available to the public.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for example, the Web collects all Soviet artefacts (that is, their digital images) in a huge media storage, which allows retrieval at any time and

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<sup>9</sup> J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins and A. Reading (ed.). *Save as... Digital Memories*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Hoskins, A. “The Mediatisation of Memory”. *Save as... Digital Memories*. ed. J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins and A. Reading. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 29; Reading, A. “Memory and Digital Media: Six Dynamics of the Globital Memory Field”. *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 241.

<sup>10</sup> F. Krotz, “Media Connectivity: Concepts, Conditions and Consequences”. *Connectivity, Networks and Flows: Conceptualizing Contemporary Communications*. ed. A. Hepp, F. Krotz, S. Moores and C. Winter. NJ, 2008, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg (ed.), *On Media Memory*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Hoskins, op. cit., p. 30.

from any geographical location. Precisely this capacity enables users to construct new online archives of the Soviet past and new virtual museums that represent different aspects of Communist history (see, for instance, chapter 3 “Online Visual Archives of the Soviet Past” and chapter 4 “Virtual Museum of Gulag”). On the other hand, however, media memory subjects Soviet recollections to substantial change. They are no longer ‘stable’ in the digital environment. As all Internet content is fluid and volatile, so become images of items that relate to the former USSR: anyone can copy, reuse, imitate, recombine or even distort and transform them on the Web. Resulting from this, the Soviet past turns into ‘workable material’ exposed to different manipulations (see, for instance, chapter 5 “Creative Transformations of Soviet Memory”).

Soviet images support media memory, as they reconstruct different versions of the Soviet past online. I assume that it is through images that public recollections of the former USSR take shape in the virtual environment and that these images help us revise and reconsider the most disputable questions of Communist history. Although digital commemoration can also be text-based (thus implying, for instance, online discussions in blogs or social networking services), my thesis prioritises *visual images* as key vehicles of media memory for their intrinsic mnemonic power. As Barbie Zelizer notes, under some special “circumstances... images, rather than words, emerge as preferred way to establish and maintain shared knowledge from earlier times.”<sup>13</sup> She argues that images, “the various forms – portraits, pictures, photographs, films – ... constitute a cogent means of tackling the past and making it work for the present.”<sup>14</sup> Following Zelizer, I privilege the role of the visual in memory, while also acknowledging the role of the verbal at the same time, since, as Zelizer

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<sup>13</sup> B. Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory”. *Framing Public Memory*. ed. K. Phillips. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2004, p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

points out, in many cases “images about the past appear alongside other [media]”, including, in the first place, text.<sup>15</sup>

In my project, I suggest that representations on the Web are powerful agents of media memory that not only bear traces of previous times, but also identify people’s attitude and position towards past experiences. They facilitate public understanding of the past, instantly connecting it with the present. Their key quality is that they are created ‘here’ and ‘now’ for the purpose of reassessing historical issues. Internet images, rather than written texts or any other type of data, can set an immediate parallel between ‘now’ and ‘then’, and therefore provide an instant link between the two times for their critical comparison. Metaphorically speaking, images are portals that open a passage into history and that always leave a chance to ‘look back’ and ‘return’ to the present.

Overall, the purpose of this thesis is to study Soviet imagery on the Web as a form of remembrance, reconstruction and re-evaluation of the Soviet past. In other words, its basic aim is to explore different ways of how one recalls, understands and reinterprets that fascinating and controversial period of Russian history through web-based representations. The project also aims to answer broader questions of why, in the 21st century, Soviet memory entered the digital field and, subsequently, how new communication technologies (the Internet, in this case) has turned into a suitable means for circulating notions related to the Soviet epoch. Since memorialisation today is more and more reliant on electronic media, the Internet provides an alternate space for remembering the USSR, but “how [exactly] is the Soviet experience commemorated in digital spheres?”<sup>16</sup> And what is the difference between online and offline commemorative strategies used with respect to that period? What are the consequences of memory moving into the digital space? How does it change, how is it

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> E. Rutten, “Why Digital Memory Studies Should Not Overlook Eastern Europe’s Memory Wars”. *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. U. Blacker, A. Etkind and J. Fedor, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 220.

affected by the medium? Such questions not only frame this thesis, but also prefigure it and hence addressing them is my primary task.

### **III. Research questions and hypotheses**

1. This project examines different ways of how one remembers the legacy of the former Soviet Union in the age of cell phones and tablets, social networking services and blogs, electronic commerce and user-generated content. I assume that digital technologies (and the Internet, in the first place) maintain a new kind of memory, which is radically different from traditional material-based memorialisation. As was indicated above, it is a new ‘media memory’ and it subjects knowledge of previous epochs to substantial change. But is this, actually, a positive or negative influence? Do all mediated representation that we encounter online shape adequate perception of past events and processes? Or, does, on the contrary, the overabundance of digital images expose our recollections to yet more vagueness, obscurity and amnesia? I will address this tricky question in the first chapter of this thesis, where I argue that media memory has an ambivalent effect: it is about both remembering and forgetting of our past.

2. Due to its fluid nature, media memory can generate dozens of narratives, representations and perspectives on the same historical event or phenomenon. The Web produces a new dynamic ‘memoriescape’ with a whole range of unpredictably evolving routes and pathways.<sup>17</sup> This study will test the limits of such ‘memoriescape’, while investigating different patterns of remembrance of the USSR in the virtual sphere. I will identify lines of approach to the Soviet past online, such as, for instance, idealisation, condemnation or even irony. Why do some digital images cause a nostalgia for everything Soviet? And how do other images furnish the Soviet trauma, thus exposing the horrific experience of Stalinist camps?

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<sup>17</sup> Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, op. cit., p. 29.

Which images are ‘serious’ in their portrayal of historical reality? And which are absurd?

Why do the latter mock the fundamental concepts of Soviet life?

3. As mentioned above, the Russian Web is packed with various Soviet images, ranging from digitised documentary photographs of Communist times to comic strips about Stalin. There are myriads of such images, however, due to their number and heterogeneity they appear confusing to the onlooker. As they migrate from one website to another, they infest online communities, while also undergoing transformations in the process. Like all media content, these images are scattered. They present a mosaic of different, often contradictory fragments of the former USSR, rather than its uniform picture.<sup>18</sup> As Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva observe, “fragmentation turns into the main mode of presentation for facts, thoughts and emotions” in the post-socialist digital space, where “all materials are subjected to the procedural character of online life.”<sup>19</sup> In view of this, this thesis not only provides an overview of digitised Soviet images, but it systematises them according to their function. While constructing a comprehensive classification is, of course, impossible, it is nonetheless within the scope of the current project to outline some of the most common functions that Soviet images serve on the Web. In my thesis, I examine a variety of their uses. They can be assembled in digital archives, they can be exhibited in virtual museums, and they can also be appropriated as digital memes, ‘demotivators,’ and Internet posters.

4. The Soviet past as such is a disputable topic in contemporary Russian discourse. Although the Soviet period underwent multiple reassessments over the last twenty-five years, it still causes disagreement among different parties, social groups and the public at large. There are still more questions than answers in the seventy-four-year history of the USSR, which generates ever new revisions. How did the Bolsheviks come to power? Was Stalin’s brutality justified? Was the collapse of the USSR unavoidable? Or was it brought on

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<sup>18</sup> Rutten and Zvereva, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev? How did the new independent Russia cope with the aftermath of the Communist regime? These are but a few questions that still get asked, and there are many more. No consensus about Soviet political, economic or cultural legacy has been reached thus far in Russian society, and so the vision of that period remains ambiguous. Consequently, at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russians inevitably look back at their collective past, as they try to overcome the uneasy historical experience of the previous century.

In their pursuit of answers, Russian users address the Internet as the most democratic and all-encompassing medium. The situation is even more complex, given that many of them never lived under Communism, being born after its collapse. In this virtual space, they look for additional meanings and interpretations of anything that ever belonged to the USSR, or anything that was part of its culture; they thus become “digital archaeologists of history...who turn to digital media to unearth what they consider ‘the bare historical facts’.”<sup>20</sup> Different online practices are used in this search, among which the most popular are blogs and social networking services, gaming- and content-sharing websites, as well as specific portals devoted to the Soviet Union. Due to its open ‘universal’ nature, the Web turns into a perfect arena for popular re-examination of the Soviet past, where anyone can discuss it, construct its image and express a personal attitude.

5. The work is deliberately focused on the graphic aspect, suggesting that memory operates with images, even when the latter are supported by other media, such as text. This study rests upon the belief in the absolute power of images, in their ability to store our memories and thereby to act as essential mediators between the present and the past. For media memory, the visual factor is even more crucial, since the online environment is predominantly visual. The Web is overloaded with pictures, photographs, video, animations, graphic elements and parts of the user-interface. Although the Internet encompasses all types

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<sup>20</sup> Rutten, op. cit., p. 223.

of data, images play the key part, as users constantly generate, share and multiply visual content.

Overall, image-based study of memory appears as urgent as ever. This can be explained by the simple fact that the culture of our age is more visually, rather than text-oriented. Today, the production, consumption and distribution of images occurs on a large scale, so that our entire life is largely affected by visual phenomena. As Julia Thomas observes in this regard, “we live in a visualized world, a world in which we are bombarded everyday and everywhere with images that appear transglobal, capable of crossing geographical and racial divides, or, as one famous advertisement implied, of ‘uniting’ hand in virtual hand, people of different age, sex and ethnicity.”<sup>21</sup> The scholar maintains that “such a global community is manifest in Internet technology, which offers world-wide the new experience and pleasures of cyberspace, an arena where images do not reflect but constitute reality.”<sup>22</sup> A media theorist and semiotician Gunther Kress expresses a similar view, as he privileges images as basic units of today’s communication. Thus, according to Kress, “communicational change is altering the relations of the means by which we represent our meanings, bringing image into the centre of communication more insistently than it has been for several hundreds years, and thereby challenging the dominance of writing.”<sup>23</sup> He adds that “the former constellation of *medium of book* and *mode of writing* is giving way, to the new constellation of *medium of screen* and *mode of image*.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet, it was Thomas Mitchell, who first noted the shift of the current age towards ‘image-centricity’ and who, thus, stated that our modern culture is preoccupied with images rather than with texts. In support of this argument, the scholar introduced the concept of the ‘pictorial turn,’ which supposedly took place in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> The pictorial or the visual

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<sup>21</sup> J. Thomas, *Reading Images*. Hounds mills, Basingstoke: NY: Palgrave, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> G. Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell., *Picture Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 9.

turn signified a conceptual change in all disciplines of the humanities, including philosophy, art history, anthropology and the newly emergent domain of visual culture. It denoted a shift in the academic discourse. In Mitchell's view, contemporary culture is no longer 'linguacentric', as it is not about words or texts any more, but it is about images, through which we perceive, share and reproduce knowledge about the world.<sup>26</sup> As he admits, it was during the postmodern age that "the fantasy of a pictorial turn, of a culture totally dominated by images became a real technical possibility on a global scale."<sup>27</sup>

Taking into account the role of the visual in our digital epoch, I put forward an image-based study of memory. I regard those Soviet representations that one encounters on the Web as primary vehicles of public recall. They are reconstructed pieces of the Soviet past drifting in the borderless, constantly expanding hypermedia universe. I call them 'mediated memories of the USSR' because of their 'remediated' nature and ability to communicate certain ideas about the Soviet epoch. The phrase 'mediated memory' should be taken as a metaphor, signifying that collective memories about the Soviet Era are mediated by images and through media.

#### **IV. Theoretical Framework**

The current study involves three subject fields, which are the concept of media memory, the domain of the Soviet past and Internet images. All three are relatively new areas of scholarly inquiry that come from interconnected yet distinctly different branches of humanist knowledge. To tackle them, it is important to employ a multidimensional theoretical framework resting on cultural, historical, media and aesthetic fields of study. Thus, this project includes findings drawn from the following disciplines and research dimensions.

- Cultural and Collective Memory Studies

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<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

From the perspective of ‘traditional’ memory scholarship, the concept of media memory still appears a fresh theoretical development, requiring more qualitative and quantitative research.<sup>28</sup> I place this concept at the core of my analysis, demonstrating how it elaborates the main argument of this thesis, thus extending this nascent field of scholarship.

New media memory certainly did not emerge in a vacuum but originated and inherited some of its features from other types of memory. Although it presents a recent phenomenon prompted by an exponential growth of modern technologies, it has its roots in all previously known forms of remembrance. Thus, within the framework of current study it is logical to examine media memory in conjunction with the closest and most relevant domains of *collective* and *cultural* memory.

Although both collective and cultural memory belong to the same theoretical field, as they have many interconnections, there is a constitutive methodological difference, which turns them into two different memorialisation modes. Those scholars, who cultivate the theory of *collective* memory in their works, emphasize the role of society in retaining knowledge about the past; they thus see memory as a social product. According to Maurice Halbwachs (who in his seminal work *La Mémoire Collective* first introduced the notion of collective memory) the construction, articulation and keeping of memory becomes possible within a group of people, not individually, as “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories” and it is in society where people “recall, recognize and localize their memories.”<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, adepts of *cultural* memory focus on cultural aspects of remembrance, while stating that memory is, first and foremost, a cultural construct that manifests itself in different representational forms. As Andreas Huyssen assumes, “all representation – whether in

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<sup>28</sup> By ‘traditional’ I mean the already established concepts of personal, collective and cultural memory.

<sup>29</sup> M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 38.

language, narrative, image, or recorded sound – is based on memory.”<sup>30</sup> In his works, Huyssen studies those cultural and aesthetic representations that facilitate public recollection. Memory uses a spectrum of different media through which it projects itself in contemporary culture, where such media vary from monuments and artworks to films and literature.

In this project, I address the fields of collective and cultural memory with the purpose of borrowing crucial methodological concepts for the development of my own theory on media memory. I cite pioneering scholars, who in their works define and establish memory studies as a new academic discipline. Of particular significance are the already mentioned publications of Maurice Halbwachs and Andreas Huyssen, the research on ‘arts’ (media) of memory implemented by Aleida Assmann, Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de memoire* (sites or realms of memory), as well as Astrid Erll’s and Ann Rigney’s ‘dynamic’ approach to memory and Zelizer’s investigation of Holocaust photography as a vehicle of traumatic recall.<sup>31</sup> Although there are many other memory-related theories that also contribute to this project, works of the above scholars are formative to my analysis of digital memorialisation. Not only did they help construct a theoretical framework for this thesis, but they also inspired me to study different forms, practices, and notions of memory in today’s Global Age. By synthesising this work I craft a theoretical approach that enables a fine-grained analysis of emergent modes of memorialisation that are yet to be adequately conceptualised and analysed in their practice.

- Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies

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<sup>30</sup> A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. NY. Taylor and Francis, 2012, p 2.

<sup>31</sup> Halbwachs, op. cit.; Huyssen, op. cit.; Assmann. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge, 2011; Nora. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”. *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989; Erll and Rigney (ed.) *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009; Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Dealing with the complex subject of the Soviet past and its topicality in modern Russia, this thesis refers to Soviet and post-Soviet studies as one of the central scholarly fields. Although this is an immense and constantly growing research field that examines all sides of the USSR, including its history, politics and economy, in my study I employ mainly those theories that ponder cultural aspects of the Communist period. Of special importance for me are interdisciplinary publications of Richard Stites, Frederick Corney, Evgeny Dobrenko and Alexei Yurchak, who investigate intersections of authoritarian ideology and public culture, as the two were inseparable.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Stites describes the ritualistic character of early Bolshevik culture, which was crucial for establishing Soviet rule.<sup>33</sup> Thus, according to Stites, straight after events of 1917, Lenin and his party invented traditions and rites as a new quasi-religion that helped retain their power. Similarly, Corney explores the narrative of the October Revolution as a new foundation myth of the Soviet regime, through which it legitimised itself in the eyes of the population.<sup>34</sup> Dobrenko looks at Stalinism, as he inquires how cinema of that time worked for indoctrination of the masses and imposed the new Soviet identity.<sup>35</sup> Yurchak focuses on the period of late Socialism, while proving that many of its cultural trends, such as, for example, underground clubs, rock music and jokes, unexpectedly preconditioned the demise of the USSR.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> R. Stites, “Bolshevik Ritual Building in the 1920s” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*. ed. by S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch and R. Stites. Indiana University Press, 1991; Stites, “The Origin of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution” in *Symbols of Power: The Esthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. C. Arvidsson and L. E. Blomquist. Stockholm, 1987; Corney, F. *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*. NY: Cornell University Press, 2004; Dobrenko, E. *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008; Yurchak, A. *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More: the Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Stites, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Corney, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Dobrenko, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Yurchak, op. cit.

No less significant for this thesis are insights of scholars researching the aftermath of the Communist regime, and, more precisely, its symbolic legacy, which is still of great value for modern Russians. The Soviet system collapsed, but it left a long trail after itself in the form of symbols, culture and particular mentality: none of them could have been given up or substituted easily. Thus, for instance, following the August Putsch in 1991, many citizens found themselves in a state of flux, as they did not know where their country was heading. Whilst the old Soviet order was widely denounced, “a new form of narrative was needed, one which both explained the state of existing society and gave sense of its direction.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, as Graeme Gill observes, during this period of transition, “no single coherent symbolic programme has emerged to replace that of the Soviet period.”<sup>38</sup> The scholar elaborates on these complications in his *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia* while discussing “why it has been so difficult to generate a new set of symbols [that] could constitute a coherent narrative for the new Russia.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Kathleen Smith describes hardships of the Yeltsin years, although choosing a slightly different angle. She examines the politics of memory implemented by the new Russian government as it came to power.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside Gill’s and Smith’s works, a few other studies should also be noted. Particularly, Robert Service’s *Russia: Experiment with a People*, where the scholar explores how Russian identity transformed with the change of political order; Robert Davies’ *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*, which investigates uses of the Soviet past under Yeltsin’s rule; the ground breaking article on phenomenon of post-Soviet nostalgia of Serguei Oushakine and the seminal study on memory of the Stalinist terror in modern Russia by Alexander Etkind.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> G. Gill, *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, *Foreword*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> K. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics of Memory during the Yeltsin Era*. NY: Cornell University Press, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> R. Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003; Davis, R. *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1997; Oushakine, S. “We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the past in Russia”. *The Russian Review* 66 (3),

These and a few other works are crucial for my project, as they help researching the subject of the Soviet past from different interrelated perspectives. In this thesis, I use the theoretical findings of the above scholars both for the construction of my own theory and analysis of the cases studies, thus extending contemporary post-Soviet studies of the politics of the visual within memory-work.

- New Media Theories

The choice of this subject area as part of the theoretical framework is not surprising, given the complex nature of the medium, which the current project has to deal with. The Internet, with its maze-like structure sets its own rules for everything that is placed in the virtual realm. The sophisticated visual language of the Web deserves particular attention, which can be achieved, precisely, with the help of new media: a recent scholarly direction that emerged following the boom of digital technologies in 2000s. Despite its relative newness, this area has already grown to the scale of a scientific paradigm with all the necessary tools for exploring digital phenomena. Theoretical developments in this field are indispensable for understanding new media aesthetics and the Internet as such.

As for particular theories, this work addresses both ‘classic’ texts and more recent new media scholarship. The former include the well-known monograph of Lev Manovich (*The Language of New Media*, 2001) and of David Bolter and Richard Grusin (*Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 2000) that today are regarded as landmarks of new media research. The principal merit of Manovich’s study is considering digital media as cultural objects, rather than pure machines. Thus, in *The Language of New Media*, he examines electronic means from two seemingly opposite perspectives: one cultural and the other technological, thus arguing that in reality they do not oppose, but interact with each other. This approach results in the emergence of a relevant scientific discourse with a system of

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2007, pp. 451-482; Etkind, A. *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

terms that is applicable to almost any kind of media format (such as virtual art, video games, Internet images) and digital device (including computers, the Internet, tablets and cell phones).<sup>42</sup>

*Remediation: Understanding New Media* is another canonical piece that probes the limits of new digital culture. In this work, the authors coin the special term ‘remediation’ to describe one inevitable feature of digital technologies: their ability to ‘refashion’ or re-appropriate older media in a single virtual mode. Remediation is thus an act of recycling and improving, where “each new medium is justified because it fills a lack or repairs a fault in its predecessor, because it fulfils the unkept promise of an older medium.”<sup>43</sup> Drawing on diverse examples of modern films, computer graphics, PC games, software applications, web sites and virtual art, Bolter and Grusin demonstrate how the actual ‘logic of remediation’ works in each case.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, *Remediation* does not explain everything about the digital sphere, yet its basic argument on ‘refashioning and repurposing of media’ is applicable to the visual environment of the World Wide Web.

More recent media theories involve a wide range of approaches that consider, for instance, ‘net cultures,’ the aesthetics of the Web, so-called ‘net criticism’ and the ‘mediatisation’ of life.<sup>45</sup> Each of these academic inquiries is remarkable in its own way. Josephine Bosma and Vito Campanelli study the aesthetic impact of new media that currently changes public perception of reality.<sup>46</sup> In their respective works, both scholars envision the Internet as an aesthetically valuable medium, which enables creative expression, generates

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<sup>42</sup> L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. the MIT Press: Cambridge, 2001.

<sup>43</sup> J. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding the New Media*. Cambridge: the MIT Press, 2000, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> J. Bosma, *Netitudes: Let's Talk Net Art*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2011; Campanelli, V., *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society*. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers, 2010; Lovink, G., *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011; Deuze, M. “Media Life”. *Media Culture Society* 33 (1), 2011, pp. 137-148; Poster, M. *The Second Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Bosma, op. cit., Campanelli, op. cit.

new artistic forms and, in certain ways, moulds contemporary culture. Another media scholar Geert Lovink calls for an interdisciplinary analysis of the Internet, what he defines as ‘net criticism.’<sup>47</sup> This project brings about a few concerns about the Global Net, such as its socio-cultural, economic and aesthetic influence. Finally, Mark Poster and Mark Deuze describe the increasingly ‘mediatised’ condition of our time, as they introduce their concepts of a ‘second media age’ and ‘media life’ respectively.<sup>48</sup>

- Visual Culture Studies

It is no exaggeration to state that the area of visual culture studies is immense and heterogeneous, as it comprises a variety of disciplines and subjects, such as art history, film studies, photography, mass media, fashion, gender discourses, modern and postmodern philosophy and others. Everything that falls under the category of the visual is principal: any object, image (for example, pictorial, verbal or mental) and even text can be the focus of this subject field. As Marquard Smith assumes, “‘visual culture’ is becoming ubiquitous, omnipresent, that it can and is being used to signify works or artefacts or spaces from any historical period, geographical location, thematic concern or combination of methodological practices.”<sup>49</sup> While dealing with histories, archaeologies and genealogies of images, visual culture employs different methods coming from other branches of humanist knowledge, including, for instance, iconology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and queer theory. Obviously, examining all of them is not the purpose of this study, rather it employs those methods that are applicable to analysis of Internet images.

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<sup>47</sup> Lovink, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Poster, op. cit., Deuze, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> M. Smith, *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers*. LA, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE, 2008, p. 3.

## V. Originality of Research

This project lies at the intersection of two scholarly dimensions: post-Soviet studies and digital memory studies. Both areas are relatively new, however, if the former has already been established as a full-scale research paradigm, the latter came into existence only a few years ago and hence is only just taking shape. In my project, I aim to bring together these subject fields, while inquiring into how digital memorialisation ‘functions’ in the post-Soviet context. In other words, I will explore different patterns of remembering the Soviet past on the Russian Internet.

The subject of post-Soviet digital memory has recently attracted attention of scholars coming from diverse disciplines and branches of humanitarian knowledge. In *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States* edited by Ellen Rutten, Julie Fedor and Vera Zvereva, the contributing authors acknowledged the need to research the “idiosyncratic forms that online memory can acquire in post-socialist space.”<sup>50</sup> As Rutten and Zvereva observe, this is “the first book-length publication to analyse not only how, in post-socialist space, new media serve as a site of political and national identity building; but also how in this geopolitical domain, online identity construction is irreversibly affected by thinking about the past.”<sup>51</sup> I aim to contribute to this novel research direction, while focusing on a very specific instance of this phenomenon: I consider only image-based manifestations of online memory of the Soviet past.

Although *Memory, Conflict and New Media* has a separate chapter devoted to visual transformations of post-socialist digital memory, I suggest that this peculiar and only recently outlined scholarly field deserves further investigation.<sup>52</sup> While users bring more and more

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<sup>50</sup> Rutten and Zvereva, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Pasholok, M. “Between Runet and Ukrnet: Mapping the Crimean Web War”, Howanitz, G. “Repeating History? The computer games as historiographic device”, Preda, C. “The Digital (Artistic) Memory of Nicolae Ceaușescu”, Lassila, J. “Witnessing War, Globalizing Victory: Representations of the Second World War on the Website *Russia Today*”, De Bruyn, D. “From ‘The Second Katyn’ to ‘A Day Without Smolensk’: Facebook

Soviet images online, the number and variety of digital commemorative practices increase, generating new, fascinating cases of visual reference to the USSR. Yet few of them have been addressed by contemporary scholarship. In my thesis, I attempt to break new ground by studying several representative trends of image-based online memorialization of the Soviet past. In particular, I examine hitherto unexplored online visual archives of the Soviet era, the Virtual Museum of Gulag, Soviet propaganda posters manipulated and appropriated as Internet memes and the educational project *Stalin is like*, in which the image of the Soviet dictator is used in conjunction with logos of the world's most recognizable Internet companies. I explore the ways in which online images affect the work of memorialising the Soviet past, which leads me to ponder to what extent such images aid memory of the period. None of the material I investigate has been examined by scholars to date.

This project also aims to make a contribution to the methodology of memory studies. Central to the thesis is the term of ‘media memory,’ which presents a significant theoretical challenge, as it is a recently introduced tool and as such, still much a working concept. Yet credit should be given to those pioneering scholars who already started searching for new analytical tools applicable to the problem of digital memorialisation. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading first asked the tricky question of “what ‘digital memories’” were and where they were located.<sup>53</sup> In a collective volume *Save As... Digital Memories*, this group of scholars studies the impact that new media technologies has on our recollections. How do the ongoing processes of ‘digitisation’ and ‘mediatisation’ transform existing memory discourses? Which new forms and practices of recall emerge as a result? Is there still a clear boundary between private and public memories? Or do these two subcategories merge under the influence of the new technological sphere? Whilst the answers

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Responses to the Smolensk Tragedy and its Aftermath” in *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in post-Socialist States*, ed. by E. Rutten, J. Fedor and V. Zvereva, London and NY: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, op. cit., p. 4.

for these questions may not be univocal, one fact, according to the researchers, is obvious: “the digital suggests that we may need to rethink how we conceive of memory; that we are changing what we consider to be the past; that the act of recall, of recollection and remembering is changing in itself.”<sup>54</sup>

Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg are another team of authors, who examine closely the problem of mediation of memory in the contemporary digital epoch.<sup>55</sup> While stressing the paramount role of the media in transmitting public knowledge about the past, these scholars place “‘Media’ and ‘Mediation’ – both with capital Ms – to the forefront of the scholarly inquiry of collecting recollecting.”<sup>56</sup> This is how they outline a new multidimensional field of ‘Media Memory,’ which stands at the crossroads of new media research and collective memory studies. As the authors state, the purpose of the volume *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* is “to position the term ‘Media Memory’ as a salient theoretical and analytical concept while presenting its multilayered and complex nature.”<sup>57</sup> It is precisely from this book that I borrow the term ‘media memory’ which I aim to explore from my own perspective, thus expanding the general vision of this topic.

The third ground-breaking study which was already mentioned above and which deals with the novel subject of online memorialisation is *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web-wars in post-Socialist States*, edited by Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva.<sup>58</sup> Like the two above-named volumes, this publication ponders how “with its speed, accessibility, and accommodation of anonymity, the Internet [as today’s most advanced digital technology] is radically transforming the way memories travel between generations and communities.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg,, *On Media Memory*.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2.

<sup>58</sup> Rutten and Zvereva, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

Thus, this inquiry examines the making of public recall in the virtual sphere – in blogs, social networking services, wiki-articles, online games and other digital spaces. However, and as was also mentioned above, the principle distinction of this collection of essays is its focus on ‘non-Western’ material, which originates from ‘post-socialist’ online space. The latter presents, according to Rutten and Zvereva, “the vastly under-theorized segment of the worldwide web that is constituted by Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.”<sup>60</sup> As the authors maintain, “this territory features its own digital landscape – one that partly blends and partly differs from other online cultures” and therefore it requires a new methodological approach.<sup>61</sup> *Memory, Conflict and New Media* is thus unique, as no analogue studies tackle the same subject area.

This thesis contributes to and expands upon the above described innovative research fields. In terms of theory, it probes the newly emergent and yet not fully developed concept of ‘media memory’ according to several criteria: its relation to other types of memory, its ‘newness’ and authenticity, its ability to render the notions and events from collective past, its dependence on digital media (the Internet), and its functioning in the local, context, such as the Russian segment of the Internet. In terms of practice, the project also offers a fresh insight, as it introduces previously undocumented case studies from the digital sphere. Thus, all empirical material included in this work has not yet been subject to scholarly examination. Particularly, I consider images and websites that have never appeared in the academic discourse before, but that, nevertheless, merit scholarly attention because of their relevance to the media memory field.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## **VI. Thesis Overview and Structure**

The thesis is organised along five chapters that tackle the subject of ‘mediated memories of the USSR.’ While moving from general assumptions to more concrete examples, each of these chapters approaches the problem of the Soviet past and its manifold digital representations. It is my attempt to find an answer to the seemingly simple question (which, in reality, is not simple) of why the debris of former Communist culture still matters for Russians, who now actively go online. For this purpose, the thesis tends to find a balance between theory and practice, so that it contains two theoretical and three empirically oriented parts.

The two opening chapters investigate the overarching concepts of ‘media memory’ and ‘Soviet memory’ from theoretical and historical perspectives respectively. Chapter 1 “Media Memory,” offers a new analytical framework for description of modern forms of remembrance. Why does the contemporary digital age pose a need for a reconceptualization of memory-related issues? What happens to collective recall in the new media sphere? Do our recollections become more ‘dynamic’ with new digital technologies? Finally, do we remember or do we forget our past on the Web? Chapter 1 covers these and related issues, as it answers the overriding question of ‘what new media memory is.’

Chapter 2 “Soviet Memory” focuses on the development of public memory in Russia over the period from the establishment of Soviet rule and up until the present. Both a theoretical and historical inquiry studies the ways in which attitudes towards history shifted before and after the collapse of the USSR in line with the change of official discourse. As the chapter reviews different Soviet and post-Soviet memorialisation practices, it describes the uneasy relationship between Russian society and its Communist past. In this regard, Russia still has not ‘digested’ the Soviet experiment and so the controversies related with that period persist.

Chapter 3 includes the first case study, which I call “Online Visual Archives of the Soviet Past.” This group of websites now rapidly spreads on the Russian Internet, as they become more and more popular among users, who assemble traces of former Soviet culture online. Almost everything can be ‘archived’ on the Web in the form of digital images: Soviet consumer goods and furniture items, toys and postcards, money and military equipment and other artefacts. Although these online archives are mostly amateur non-for-profit projects, they are remarkable for their nostalgic portrayal of the USSR. These websites present the former Soviet life as a once existing Utopia with a ‘happy Soviet childhood,’ friendly atmosphere, security and equality among all its citizens.

Chapter 4 presents analysis of another website devoted to the USSR: the Virtual Museum of Gulag set up by Memorial Society in order to deal with the memory of Soviet political repressions. In many respects, this digital outlet is unique. Not only does it open new ways for reconceptualizing Stalinist terror, but it also helps in coping with that lasting trauma which, according to Alexander Etkind, haunts Russian society as an unquiet ghost.<sup>62</sup> I consider the Virtual Museum of the Gulag as a new memorial museum that holds a set of powerful imagery. It is through the images that this digital venue narrates the Soviet traumatic past and preserves evidence of those atrocities in the virtual sphere.

Chapter 5 “Creative Transformations of Soviet Memory” does not examine entire websites but rather studies separate images that travel around the Web and that change their function depending on the context of appropriation. I call this process ‘creative transformation of memory,’ for it is unclear whether such images support vision of the Soviet past or, conversely, destabilise it. In fact, due to the digital editing, some of these images can be vague, controversial and even bizarre, leaving one wondering as to what sort of message they are meant to convey. Two particular examples are poignant, in this regard: Soviet propaganda posters appropriated as digital memes and the recent *Stalin is like* poster series. Although both

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<sup>62</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, p. 18.

cases refer to Soviet history, their meaning is somewhat tangled. The purpose of the chapter is to define the actual impact that these images have on the post-Soviet recall. Can one trust these modified, ‘hybrid’ illustrations?

# **Chapter One| Public Recall in the Age of Digital Communication:**

## **Media Memory**

### **1. 1. Memory and Postmodern Society**

The fact that all practices and forms of public recall are reliant on social, cultural, political and technological conditions of time seems obvious. Memory, as a vital function of society, is dependent on multiple factors, which include internal and external policies of states, major historical events, economic developments and the availability of new means of communication. The ways a past is remembered, constructed, and re-narrated shift in line with ongoing transformations in each social group and culture. Putting it simply, memory changes with the society, be it the society of Ancient Greece, the Middle Ages or Modern Europe. As Alison Landsberg notes, public recall is always “historically and culturally specific [...] meaning different things to people and cultures at different times.”<sup>1</sup> It is the society that is able to choose ‘what’ and ‘how’ to remember, and hence to develop the instruments, agents and structures most suitable for representation of its own past. It is the society that creates specific ‘frameworks’ for the articulation of memory.<sup>2</sup>

Our era exposes memory to new and drastic changes, which affect all modes of collective, individual and cultural remembrance. The present is remarkable for its information-oriented character and the availability of various digital media, tools and networks that communicate our memory. Our time provides new digital ‘frameworks’ for reconstruction of the past, whereby the past not only acquires additional meanings, but it might be radically confused or even totally misinterpreted. When ‘placed’ in the digital

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<sup>1</sup> A. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 38.

sphere, our past is no longer ‘secured’ as it may be in the physical space of museums, archives or architectural monuments. Instead, the virtual reality available through new media changes our perception of history, as the digital sphere grants boundless opportunities for re-interpretation of previous experiences. Thus, upon characterising the power of digital technologies in the current age, Mark Poster states, “mediation has become so intense that the things mediated can no longer even pretend to be unaffected …media often changes the things that it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities.”<sup>3</sup> This, in his account, results in ‘multiple’ realities, or the fact that reality can ‘take many forms’ in the new media domain.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of memory in digital environments. This requires an examination of the general characteristics of the digital age and the challenges these pose for both individual and public remembrance. These changes are taken up within scholarship on the nature of postmodern society. Thus, contemporary media scholars, cultural and social theorists share a common opinion with regard to the present. They assume that the twenty-first century is giving rise to an entirely new social order, accompanied by the rapid evolution of new electronic means. The turn of the century marked a transition to the current ‘information age’ with a subsequent rearrangement of all the existing societal norms and structures. New media played a significant part in this.

Yet, it would be misleading to consider digital technologies as the only reason for the global transformation. In fact, technologies as such do not determine the culture, but they are the result and indication of major ideological shifts of each particular time. For instance, while expounding on the birth of the ‘network society,’ Manuel Castells distinguishes a complexity of trends taking place in the recent decades. These are: the world financial crisis, which reached its climax in August 2008; restructuring of business and labour markets;

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<sup>3</sup> M. Poster, *The Second Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

transformation of social interaction; re-evaluation of gender relationships; the search for new identities; and shifts in the perception of time and space.<sup>5</sup> The scale of such change should never be underestimated, as it works on multiple levels, which, in turn, lead to a transformation of all aspects of life, including politics, financial sector, communication, local cultures, and even human understanding of the self.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the basic definition of the ‘information society’, it becomes clear that this phenomenon lies in several dimensions, each related to different types of human activity and organisation. Thus, *ideologically* the information society rests on concepts of “science, rationality and reflexivity”; in terms of *social* structure, it implies “a labour market with a majority of functions largely or completely based on tasks of information processing requiring knowledge and higher education”; its *economy* is “increasingly characterised by information production” and, finally, its *cultural* segment is “dominated by media and information products with their signs, symbols and meanings.”<sup>7</sup> The latter aspect means that our age is at the same time the ‘media age’ or the ‘second media age,’ as some scholars define it, while stressing the fact that new media transform our life.<sup>8</sup>

Upon describing new media, it is important to avoid any technologically determined approaches that often diminish the meaning of the culture we live in. If earlier, emergent electronic means were characterised as ‘machines’ or ‘appliances,’ today such descriptions seem outdated. In recent decades, the media grew from mere technological devices into pervasive structures, systems and ‘media ecologies,’ which provide a borderless ‘ground’ for human activities. Media are no longer the external forces affecting our experiences and knowledge, neither are they simple applications meant to improve the performance of daily tasks, but they infiltrate our life to such an extent that they become inseparable from us – “our

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<sup>5</sup> M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley: Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> J. Dijk, *The Network Society*. London: SAGE, 2012, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Poster, op. cit.

life is lived *in*, rather than *with* media – we are living *media life*.<sup>9</sup> This also explains the reasons why today one keeps on inventing new metaphors to describe the diversity of contemporary media phenomena. For instance, such terms as ‘mediascape,’ ‘media life’ and ‘mediapolis’ are frequently used with regard to conditions dictated by postmodernity.<sup>10</sup>

What we observe in the beginning of the new millennium is not a smooth transition, but a technological revolution similar to the one that happened at the turn of the twentieth century, when new means of mass communication were introduced to the public (for instance, film, radio, telephone, print media). Today, however, such revolution is caused by the fast spread of digital media and information technologies that become more embedded into our lives. There are several grounds to call the ongoing communicative turn a ‘revolution,’ the most important among them being the pervasiveness of its scale and, thus, infiltration into all spheres of human activity.<sup>11</sup> The primary question that I pose in this regard is what happens to memory within the current situation. If all aspects of the information society undergo dramatic change, then does it alter our attitude towards the past?

Contemporary culture is a decisive time for all forms of recall. The new media boom provoked a subsequent memory boom and the digital technologies revolution necessitated the search for new terms for reconsideration of the past. Media, as the primary agents of memory, have a substantial effect on the ways societies read, reproduce and reinterpret their histories; they also help to forget or erase recollections that are deemed unwanted. Memory co-evolves with the media, which is essential, considering that the latter play a pivotal role in rendering of the past. As for today, this ‘co-evolution’ has an amplified pace and scope: “contemporary memory is thoroughly interpenetrated by technological unconscious,” whereupon one can

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<sup>9</sup> M. Deuze, “Media Life”. *Media Culture Society* 33(1), 2011, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> R. Silverstone, *Media and Morality: on the Rise of Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Castells, op. cit., p. 29.

witness a new “mediatized age of memory.”<sup>12</sup>

Similar to constantly changing technologies, the nature of memory in the twenty-first century is dynamic and fluid. This can be explained in a number of ways. First, it becomes ‘cosmopolitan’; it transgresses the borders of local and national and fuses with global context.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that memory becomes globalised (or universal), but only indicates the capacity of one nation to ‘appropriate’ and intervene with the historical past of another state. Secondly, another dynamics of memory lies in the ways of its communication. Contemporary memory is distributed through networks, mobile tools and web-based platforms. It always stays ‘connected’ and, thus, is subject to change. Finally, our memory becomes discursive. If earlier, it was possible to speak about memory in terms of strict differentiations between private and public, individual and collective, authentic and fictional, today all of these notions lose their original meaning. Such binaries are no longer important (or at least are not as important as they were before) for contemporary forms of remembrance. In the new media age the borders between these categories are blurred, so that it becomes difficult to draw an exact line between ‘genuine history’ and the reproduced past (sometimes even manufactured, carrying in itself a large portion of fiction).

Recent changes in our relation with the past have been noticed by many contemporary historians, cultural and media scholars. Considering the status of memory in our time, they all highlight the impact of digital media in how we treat and reproduce the past events and phenomena. Some theorists regard it as an inevitable yet positive process associated with the overall ‘mediatisation’ of life. Others express sceptical views fearing for history and for the ‘weakening of temporal boundaries’ that generally secure a distinction between the present

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<sup>12</sup> A. Hoskins, “Digital Network Memory”. *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. ed. A. Erll and A. Rigney. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> A. Huyssen, “Remembering in a Global Age. Review Essay”. *Germanic Review* 78 (1), 2003, p. 87.

and the past.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Andreas Huyssen suggests, that the spread of modern media might pose a real threat to our vision of history as understood in a traditional way. According to his assumption, an abundance of recent technologies for reproducing the past leads to a ‘hypertrophy’ of memory, to a state where we suffer from the excess of imagined and fabricated remembrances, which in turn, can result in a fundamental crisis of historical knowledge. Although Huyssen does not advocate for a history/ memory opposition, it is obvious from his argumentation that he treats them as two rival terms. For instance, he describes history as a stable foundation of society, as a framework, which any nation could refer to in order to define its position in the present and envision itself in the future. Conversely, in his view, memory is ephemeral, subjective and liquid. The overflow of memory causes uncertainty in the society and a blurred prospect for a future development. The crucial difference between history and memory, however, lies in the way the two affect our perception of time. Whereas history “guarantees the relative stability of the past in its pastness,” memory, on the contrary, merges the past with the present, thus making the former pervade into our reality.<sup>15</sup>

The prevalence of memory shows that public interest in the past has significantly increased during the period from the end of the twentieth century until today. Precisely, postmodern society is not simply interested, but “obsessed with its past.”<sup>16</sup> This tendency is manifested in a number of ways: states review their official history, while struggling for the most appropriate version of the past; new museums are being established; there is a rising demand for disclosure of previously hidden historical data; commemorative practices now have amplified scope and intensity; governments more frequently apologize for historical

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<sup>14</sup> A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. NY: Taylor and Francis, 2012, p. 5.

injustice; a specific area of scholarship on memory and collective traumas is booming, as well as there is also a growth of memoir and autobiographical literature, ongoing construction of new memorials etc. At the turn of the new millennium, all civilizations simultaneously started to look back, as if trying to find in the past the solutions for their current problems.

In this, postmodernism radically differs from the modern epoch centring on a belief in the future. A general fascination with the future was intrinsic to the ideology of that time. It encouraged many modern societies to struggle for utopian ideas: those of a new social order, of a new man and of a new world. The most poignant example, in this regard, was the October Revolution 1917 and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet rule, which lulled people with a promise of a ‘bright new future.’ Thus, according to Richard Stites, “the Bolshevik regime was a nation builder, one of the first governments in history to attempt the creation of a new society with new values involving all the population in an elaborate break with the past.”<sup>17</sup> The scholar maintains that it was a new utopianism, the role of which was “to summon up archaic memories and ancient dreams, construct new projects, and put on display an ‘exhibit’ about social and spiritual innovation.”<sup>18</sup>

Modernism never turned back, instead it aspired to always look forward. The term ‘modern’ marked “the recognition of a rupture with the past” and, in the beginning of the twentieth century, it was commonly used with the neighbouring notions of ‘new’ and ‘progress.’<sup>19</sup> However, belief in a bright new future and inevitable progress dramatically collapsed in postmodern time.<sup>20</sup> This failure of modern ideology resulted in an overall disillusionment among Western civilizations, causing uncertainty about possible ways of further evolution. Instead of privileging the future, societies started to fear it. This was also an

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<sup>17</sup> R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> J. Le Goff, *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Huyssen, op. cit., p. 6.

ontological crisis, which made people re-evaluate their position in the ‘past/ present/ future’ continuity and thereby shift their attention to the past. One particular case of such collective retrospection was an upsurge of interest in the Holocaust trauma in the final quarter of the twentieth century, when memory of Nazi atrocities ‘captured the public imagination.’<sup>21</sup> Thus, from the late 1970s through 1990s, as Zelizer observes, “memorialization took shape as a concerted undertaking, the Holocaust newly established as both an academic subject and in more popular cultural representation.”<sup>22</sup> During that time, the Western world found itself in the process of active remembering and re-conceptualisation of one of the most tragic events in the history of the humanity.

We have entered an age where past becomes one of our primary concerns, while obsession with memory takes on tremendous scale. This concern with public recall is a response to our anxiety about the future – current uncertainty, partially conditioned by ongoing processes of globalisation. Thus, according to Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, today “people fear a worldwide homogenization of cultures, which will inexorably entail the loss of their own;” [...] “they fear that because all human attachments are particular, globalization will standardize and destroy everything in our collective life that is worth having.”<sup>23</sup> As a possible solution to overcome this fear, societies look back at their roots, at their histories, in this way, attempting to find a common ground. In this regard, “collective memories persist as a bulwark against encroaching globalization,” for “they serve as a foundation for stabilizing group and national memories that are linked to a particular place and time.”<sup>24</sup> As Levy and Sznaider conclude, “after all... the concept of collective memory...[is] an integral component

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<sup>21</sup> B. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> D. Levy and N. Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

of the fixed national and ethnic sense of identity that people have of themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

Overall, today, memory moves into a new level of its development: the processes of public remembering and forgetting are now more dynamic, the capacity and scale of the media expand and new innovative memory discourses start to emerge. Whilst some scholars determine this evolutionary stage of recall as ‘new memory,’ I suggest the alternative term ‘media memory,’ which, in my opinion, reflects the crucial importance of new media for all current forms and practices of memorialisation.<sup>26</sup> In what follows, I will discuss those major effects that the digital age puts on our view of collective past. Does the new media environment transform our relationship with history? How do the digital media help us remembering past events, processes and phenomena?

Yet, rather than a mere acknowledgment, characterisation of media memory is a more complicated task. Thus, one may wonder about the key qualities of those collective recollections that one encounters on the Internet, CDs, computer games, TV-programmes and other information sources. Apparently, the basic ‘characteristics’ of media memory correspond with those of digital means of communication, as the latter are the principal agents of this memory. Simply put, new media project their features on our memory and therefore it can be described with the same terms. Like current technologies, media memory is “pervasive, accessible, disposable, distributed and promiscuous.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, upon taking a closer look, one observes that under the impact of the digital environment images of a collective past become more fluid, visually explicit, variable and subject to transformation. Generally, media memory presents the following. It blurs the borders between habitual categories of authentic and inauthentic, genuine and manufactured, organic and artificial, official history and non-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> A. Hoskins, “New Memory: Mediating History”. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21 (4), 2001.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hoskins, “Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn”. *Parallax* 17 (4), 2001, p. 19.

official memory, which doubts the very borders between the present and the past. Below, I will give a brief account of these and some other effects, while acknowledging that such discussion requires more space than is offered within the confines of the current thesis.

## 1.2. On Media Memory

### 1.2.1. *The Problem of Definition*

My study rests upon the assumption that our digital age generates and supports a new form of memory. This memory is neither entirely collective, nor personal, for it has one radical distinction from all known types of recall: its ‘essential habitat’ is the digital environment of new media. In recent theoretical publications such memory appears under different names, ranging from ‘digital’ and ‘new’ to ‘mediatised’ and ‘networked.’ In this project I will refer to it with the general term of ‘media memory.’

Because of its newness, media memory has not yet been established as an acknowledged concept in the modern paradigm of memory studies. Although some recent articles incorporate and extensively cite this concept, they do not give a clear explanation of what the notion of media memory might signify. Looking through them, I wondered if it was possible to find a single description, which would elucidate the nature, principles of development and the key qualities of this complex phenomenon. My search did not yield positive results: all works touched upon isolated, random aspects of media memory, focusing either on its relation with digital technologies, dissemination through networks, ‘mediated’ or ‘fluid’ character. I hope to resolve this problem in my study through an interdisciplinary discussion on media memory in order to apply this concept to the empirical material of my research.

As part of contemporary memory discourse, media memory appears as an abstract and rather vague entity, the meaning of which is hard to grasp. Indeed, understanding its nature

could be problematic, considering the fact that memory per se is a subtle construct. The further one inquires into the core of media memory, the more ephemeral this notion appears, merging with neighbouring concepts of ‘social,’ ‘collective’ and ‘cultural’ memory and finally slipping from one’s view. To outline a coherent definition of media memory is not a simple task and in fact, it is not necessary: a single definition as such is not particularly useful while dealing with this kind of notion. This study does not attempt to set strict limits with regard to the concept, but it seeks to provide a multidimensional perspective on media memory, so that a complex understanding of this phenomenon can be achieved. The very emergence of the term ‘media memory’ indicates that in the twenty-first century we have found new means to construct images of the past, we created new “technologies and practices of memory” allowing reproduction of previous times and enhancement of past experiences.<sup>28</sup> In line with this, media memory can be understood as twofold. 1) A specific form of memory available by virtue of digital media, 2) the current state of public memory in general. Thus, it is both a “media-affected formation”, and “reformation of shared or social memory in the contemporary age.”<sup>29</sup>

Media memory results from an increasingly ‘mediatised’ condition of current time, where the development of historical knowledge no longer comes from a sole narrative of a textbook, but emerges from a multiplicity of electronic media, regardless of whether the latter deliver a portion of historical truth or whether they, as it is in some cases, represent plenitudes of ‘fictional pasts.’ With the burst of popular communication technologies it became common to draw visions of history from interactive CDs, Internet videos, online photo galleries, heritage websites and other digital venues that go far outside traditional historical sources.

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<sup>28</sup> M. Sturken, “Memory, Consumerism and Media: Reflections on the Emergence of the Field”. *Memory Studies* 1, 2008, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> A. Hoskins, “The Mediatisation of Memory”. *Save as... Digital Memories*. ed. J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins and A. Reading. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 28.

Today one encounters images of the past in new hybrid media and electronic platforms, which are anything but neutral carriers of historical data. Each new media creates its own impact on public perception of the past, affecting ways in which historical knowledge is passed from one generation to another.

Digital media are powerful agents of memory that help us “to make and remake patterns of understanding which explain the origins and nature of the world that we live in.”<sup>30</sup> However, due to a set of intrinsic qualities they are, in the meantime, the most sophisticated mnemonic carriers. On the one hand, digital structures of new media turn them into a perfect means to communicate public recall: the most obvious benefits of it are the capacity to render the notions of past through multiple formats, to shape and reshape historical visions and to present various interpretations of the same memory-matter in one form (in a form of a web site, for example). Thus, for instance, in *the Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*, Tessa Morris-Suzuki describes the Internet as the most practical medium of historical memory since, according to the author, it provides a space for sharing public opinions concerned with any historical issue.<sup>31</sup> In this connection, she cites “Exploratorium,” a virtual museum based on documentary photographs of the Nagasaki atomic bombing, which, in her view, is a distinctive example of how collective remembrances of tragic events can be communicated through the Web. The structure of this website allows users to comment on images and exchange their ideas about the tragedy in a form of short statements. This creates a ‘polyphonic’ space with a “diversity of responses evoked by the photographs.”<sup>32</sup> As Morris-Suzuki presumes, this hypermedia feature privileges the Internet among such conventional media as museums or films, as it encourages viewers to constantly redefine their position towards the past, relating their own lives in the present to the events of the more or less recent

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<sup>30</sup> T. Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*. London: Verso, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

history.

On the other hand, rapid evolution of new media creates many challenges to historical knowledge in general and to collective memory in particular. The main consequences of ‘mediatisation’ of memory are the increasingly booming number of historical images in popular culture, extensive commercialisation and marketing of history, blurred understandings of the ‘historical truth,’ and more common observation that both history and memory today experience a state of crisis. Digital technologies have an immense capacity to communicate notions of past. Although this power has not yet been completely explored, it is undoubtedly influential to public perception of history. The concept of media memory, thus, will define a complex interrelation between public memory and new media: it will focus on ways in which these two entities ‘shape one another’ within the context of postmodernity.<sup>33</sup> I introduce it as a new theoretical construct to frame all processes and transformations happening to collective recall in the new media age. The selected term of ‘media memory’ highlights the ‘formative’ influence of media on memory, for it symbolises the fact that all images of the past represented in new media are “moulded by the nature of such media themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet, the basic question is how to approach media memory. As stated in the beginning of the section, this notion is rather ambiguous and vague and therefore requires specific tools of analysis. As mentioned above, memory, in general, is an imaginary conception. It illustrates the relation between one’s life in the present and the events of the past, and hence there is no opportunity to study the functioning of memory directly. In fact, none of the established categories of memory (neither personal, nor collective, let alone media memory) can be approached through methods usually applicable to material things. As such, are there any alternative means of analysis? How can one research, describe and, what is more important, comprehend media memory?

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Considering the question above, I propose that media memory should be studied through corresponding practices of memorialisation and practices that imply memorialisation. In other words, this form of recall can be ‘examined’ through its media. With reference to the digital sphere, for instance, this can be virtual memorials, online archives, digital images representing the past (or related with the past), as well as discussions of historical issues in blogs, social networking services, etc. Today the Internet offers a whole range of tools for reconstruction of personal and collective recollections, so that online sphere includes different artefacts, memorabilia and digital objects. Studying them can help understanding the working of media memory.

Another relevant issue is finding concepts used to express media memory. This is a problem of terminology: choosing a set of terms and ideas for description of this peculiar type of recall. Do we need any particular language for that? If yes, then, what are those specific notions? Following Douwe Draaisma, Aleida Assmann, Andrew Hoskins and Marita Sturken, I suggest using metaphors as a means for framing of our knowledge about memory. “Acting as figures of thought rather of speech” they let us inquire into the hidden mechanisms of remembering.<sup>35</sup> Metaphorical thinking is essential to the study of memory. There is a common belief among memory scholars that it would be completely impossible to define memory without metaphors. In this context, metaphors are, of course, more than figures of speech. They act as scholarly instruments used for exploration of very subtle phenomena, which are generally hard to grasp.

It is not surprising, thus, that most of the research on memory rests upon, and is reflected through metaphors. Assmann, for instance, assumes, that in order to understand ‘operations’ of memory, one has to employ the metaphors of writing, photography, film or the

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<sup>35</sup> A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 139.

computer, for these are the media that “provide the most important models of memory.”<sup>36</sup> She also notes that in the twenty-first century the Internet became a dominating metaphor of memory, as it replaced a formerly prevalent metaphor of writing (which, according to Assmann, was predominant for more than two thousand years) with the “mega-trope of the electronic net or the Web.”<sup>37</sup> Sturken uses the metaphor of ‘tourism’ in her study of the memory caused by events of 9/11 and the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. The author describes the U.S. citizens’ relation towards the tragic past as ‘tourists of history,’ pointing with this metaphoric expression at the passivity of Americans with regard to world events. ‘Tourists of history’ are those who distance themselves from national trauma through “consumerism, media images, kitsch souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural re-enactments.”<sup>38</sup>

In the case of media memory, metaphors should be taken as compulsory analytical tools, as there is no other way to understand such memory except for metaphorical thinking. In the following section media memory will be described primarily in metaphorical terms, where the metaphors for its description will be drawn from the related field of digital culture and information technologies. Thus, it will be attributed with the qualities essential to new media. Like current digital technologies, media memory is ubiquitous and dynamic. It is subject to principles of connectivity and digital networking, and, similar to the features of digital content, it generates fluid and visually explicit representations of our past. Generally, the concept of media memory implies that new media and memory are investigated as a single unit with the use of the same analytical instruments.

Generally, media memory should be examined as a multi-layered phenomenon, which, on the one hand, follows the logic of its media, and on the other, has a certain logic in itself.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.137.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> M. Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 9.

My intention in this regard is to put the notion of media memory into a ‘tangible’ shape and to ‘measure’ its actual scale through placing it within the three interconnected dimensions. I will consider media memory, firstly, from the view of respective media, secondly, in terms of its structure and functioning and, thirdly, in terms of its effect on the collective past. The first dimension (“New Media” section in this thesis) probes the digital media. The main questions to be posed are whether new media can be considered actual media of memory or not, and whether they are sufficient to generate a new form of memory. The second dimension (“Dynamics of Media Memory”) highlights the structural peculiarities, if not of media memory as such, then of those digital technologies that are responsible for its emergence. It will explain the principles of dissemination, communication and development of memory in the dynamic environment of new media. From this perspective it should be clear how media memory emerges and functions. The third dimension (“Media Memory and Collective Past”) is about the transformative power of media memory. By virtue of this, one can determine the impact exerted by media memory on our vision of history. It will help to measure the extent to which digital means transform images, representation and our attitude towards a collective past.

### ***1.2.2. New Media***

It is common knowledge that media are central to collective memory. An act of remembering is impossible without media, without textual sources, memoirs, artefacts, monuments, personal accounts, and it is only by virtue of media that various representations of the past become available to the public. Media grant us an almost exclusive opportunity to transmit the knowledge of past times from one generation to the next. They provide a ground for reconstructing collective memory, which can be ‘created’ and ‘maintained’ solely through medial forms. As Assmann points out, collective recall is dependent on media, for, unlike psychological memory, it requires specific tools in order “to be created, established,

communicated, continued, reconstructed, and appropriated.”<sup>39</sup> It is, thus, essential that collective past does not manifest itself in a direct way, but is mediated through images, speech, artistic objects, commemorative acts, as well as through all modern means of communication.

The importance of media in communicating the past is supported by the fact that media are, in general, an essential source of popular knowledge. Without media one would not obtain as much information about the world as one does through mediations, as most experience of external things and phenomena comes to a human in a form of mediated representations (and re-mediations). This power of media currently has an amplified scale. In the age of digital mass communication when one is ‘forced’ to live ‘media live,’ one “experiences a mediated world rather than reality itself.”<sup>40</sup> Whatever one learns about physical, social and cultural dimensions of reality, one learns through the media. ‘Mediality’ has become the default condition of modern society with new media connecting humans to the external world.

Although the original purpose of media is conveying different messages, their power stretches far beyond that. In his landmark work *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan urged us to switch attention from the content to the medium itself, which he expressed in a brief and now widely known phrase “the medium is the message.”<sup>41</sup> Throughout this study, the scholar argues that new technologies are powerful social agents and that due to a set of intrinsic qualities they can cause a societal change. It is not the content, but the nature of the medium as such that impacts on different aspects of a society. According to McLuhan, media can be the powerful ‘manipulators’ of social reality, imposing their own visions and interpretations of events and ideas. But this, of course, should not be

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<sup>39</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> G. Weimann, *Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality*. London: Sage, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge, 2001.

taken literally. Under the ‘power’ of media contemporary theorists, generally, mean the effect that new technologies put on our perception of the world. Media do not stay ‘neutral’ to the contents that they represent; they do not offer the pure reflections of things or past phenomena. In each case of mediation they create a specific perspective on a mediated subject.<sup>42</sup>

Given that all media have their possibilities and limitations, each of them “opens its own access to memory,” defining ways of how a historical matter is communicated to the public.<sup>43</sup> Writing, recorded sound, photograph, digital image, projection or virtual installation all have different potential for representation of the past, which influences, to a greater or lesser extent, our understanding of history. Thus, the meaning of the same event, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 for example, may change, depending on whether the latter is represented in personal accounts of eyewitnesses, films of the ‘New Wave’ movement, the famous novel by Milan Kundera or in an online gallery of documentary photographs.<sup>44</sup> It is the capacity of media to shape and reshape our perception of a collective past, as all media “shape the modalities of our thinking, perceiving, remembering and communicating.”<sup>45</sup>

Social memory is a medial construct and therefore it is subject to the same rules and principles as the media of its construction. The nature and functioning of such memory transform with time and, accordingly, with technological development in each historical period, since every epoch invents new means of communication. A significant change, for instance, occurred in the nineteenth century with the advent of photography. Because of the general fascination with photographs and a belief that they “grant a direct access to the past,”

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<sup>42</sup> A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> see, for instance, *the Joke* (1969) directed by Jeromil Jeres, Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984, and Paul Goldsmith’s ‘Prague1968’ at [www.paulgoldsmithphotography.com](http://www.paulgoldsmithphotography.com)

<sup>45</sup> Erll, ibid.

the character of social memory at that time switched from text to image-oriented.<sup>46</sup> Public recall is dominated by media. It is largely determined by the structure and qualities of respective media technologies and hence, it is no wonder that the evolution of memory corresponds with progress in the technological sphere.

In view of this media dependence, while studying memory one has to pay close attention to the technological conditions offered in each period. In other words, any research on social memory starts with research on media, and hence “memory research is often simultaneously media research.”<sup>47</sup> This argument gains even more relevance when considering the case of new media, for, as Hoskins assumes, the latter have “ushered in [new] mediatised regimes of memory that effect a new texture of the past.”<sup>48</sup> According to the scholar, the crucial distinction of modern digital technologies lies not only in their ubiquity, but also in their “self-reflexive, and self-accumulative, ‘media logic’.”<sup>49</sup> “This poses new conceptual and empirical challenges” to our remembering, which becomes imbricated in today’s constantly growing media-scape.<sup>50</sup>

First of all, it is worth mentioning that ‘new media’ generally imply a set of computing technologies and digital devices enabling all forms of communication in our time. A wide range of technical phenomena falls under this category, however the most outstanding among them are personal computers, tablets, smartphones, CDs, DVDs and the World Wide Web. Since these technologies appeared, they have been examined in a number of ways: they were considered as part of ‘media archaeology’ by Friedrich Kittler and Geert Lovink, included into ‘media history’ by Lisa Gitelman, interpreted as cultural forms by Lev Manovich and even as information machines by Mark Poster. Thus, for instance, Gitelman calls for studying

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<sup>46</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 208.

<sup>47</sup> Erll, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>48</sup> Hoskins, “The Mediatisation of Memory”, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 28 and p.31.

new technologies as “unique and complicated historical subjects;” Manovich analyses them “by placing [them] within the history of modern visual and media cultures”; and Poster explores the relationship “between humans and information machines.”<sup>51</sup> Despite all obvious merits of these aforementioned approaches I suggest to leave them aside and to look at digital technologies from another perspective that is more suitable for the purposes of current study. For the purpose of this research, new media should be considered not only as agents of communication, but also as mnemonic agents that render collective recall.

Contemporary scholars characterise the digital age as a new period in the development of public remembering. Assuming that the advent of computing technologies ‘revolutionised’ recall, they see new media as a cause and a catalyst of transition to a new form of social memory. Yet, the question why one regards these technologies as ‘highly innovative’ remains unanswered. As Astrid Erll notes, “what might first appear to be intuitively evident becomes distinctly more complicated when considering concrete processes of cultural remembrance.”<sup>52</sup> In this case, the ‘newness’ of modern technologies should not be taken for granted (as ‘new’ technologies emerge in each particular time) and one has to take a closer look at their core qualities. To understand the logic of memory, it is necessary to understand the logic of relevant media. What are those *new* features that trigger the emergence of a *new* memory? Metaphorically speaking, are the new media sufficient enough to live their own lives, dictate their own rules of functioning and hence impose new modes of social remembering? In what follows, my intention is thus twofold: firstly, to highlight the key qualities of new media and, secondly, to test their ‘mnemonic potential,’ exploring whether these media are fit for transmission of memory or whether their role of mnemonic agents is overestimated by modern theorists.

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<sup>51</sup> L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> Erll, op. cit., p. 120.

## *Digital Unconscious*

Attributing digital technologies with the term ‘unconscious,’ borrowed from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, one deliberately points at some hidden or inaccessible parts of new media. From this psychoanalytic perspective and in its traditional interpretation, the ‘unconscious’ signifies that area of the human psyche that lies beyond an individual’s awareness and which “an individual does not have conscious access to.”<sup>53</sup> It is buried deep inside the human mind and represents a vast field of psychic structure. By analogy, one can presume that the ‘unconscious’ of new media is also a large unexplored area, but what does it actually involve?

The only possible way to find that hidden level of technological psyche is to examine the core of all digital means. For that purpose, one should neglect the habitual way of interaction with new media (which is graphic interface) and take a look at the underlying structure. The aim is to reveal the ground residing beneath the colourful wallpaper, which one usually interacts with. What one discovers as a result of this search is information. It is discrete data, which is sampled, quantified and, after all, organised into particular data-sets. Since all digital media are information-based, data and code are intrinsic to their nature.

Code is the language by means of which the digital universe is created, replicated and permanently enlarged, however the main issue of such language is its incomprehensibility for a human. The data that lies at the core of all new media, has a dematerialised or ‘disembodied’ character; it seems ‘to have lost its body’ and become abstract, so that a human has no chance to operate it directly.<sup>54</sup> It is intangible and thus, uncontrollable force, hidden within each digital medium. It operates on the ‘subconscious’ level of modern technologies, leaving a human unaware of its presence, yet, holding a strong position.

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<sup>53</sup> M. Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> C. Paul, *Digital Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008, p. 174.

Nevertheless, certain attempts to approach the ‘digital unconscious’ of new technologies are being made. These are the net-artists who, while using different means of artistic expression, appeal to the Web, one of the most sophisticated media of current time. Their aesthetic experiments target the most hidden parts of the Internet, as they ‘turn it inside out,’ exposing those elements, which generally remain covert. As a rule, net art projects challenge everything that relates to the inner structure of the global medium – databases, IP-addresses, source-code, algorithms and programming commands. In this case, net artists act as psychoanalysts or researchers, exploring subconscious levels of global networking, even though they carry out such research for artistic purposes.

For example, some creative experiments with subliminal structures of the Internet can be found in the project *I:I* made by the Swedish born artist Lisa Jevbratt. As the artist states, she wanted to produce a new overview of the Internet, so that a user could experience it as purely ‘numerical space’ with an abundance of generally hidden information, such as IP-numbers, ‘undeveloped sites and cryptic messages.’<sup>55</sup> The work presents five separate interfaces connected to a large database of IP-addresses. These interfaces, however, have an uncustomary form, as each of them is a snapshot of the Web-structure.

Overall, the concept of ‘digital unconscious’ should not be taken literally. Rather, it presents a metaphor which, like all other metaphors listed in this section, helps conceptualise the overarching concept of media memory. The idea of a hidden technological psyche preconditions the mnemonic capacity of electronic means. In other words, suggesting that new media have a deep, subliminal structure allows the assumption that they likewise have a potential for recall. As Hoskins admits, “contemporary memory is thoroughly interpenetrated by a technological unconscious in that there occurs a ‘co-evolution’ of memory and

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<sup>55</sup> L. Jevbratt, *I:I*, 1992-2002, [http://128.111.69.4/~jevbratt/1\\_to\\_1/index\\_ng.html](http://128.111.69.4/~jevbratt/1_to_1/index_ng.html), retrieved 16.07.2016.

technology.”<sup>56</sup> He adds that such “memory is readily and dynamically configured through our digital practices and the connectivity of digital networks.”<sup>57</sup>

### *Remediation*

Another great power of digital technologies is their ability to ‘remediate’ all the existing media forms, including traditional (book, text, picture) and modern ones (video, sound record, animation). The term ‘remediation’ was first introduced by Bolter and Grusin in their collective work *Remediation: Understanding the New Media*, whereupon it became widely acknowledged in contemporary media, cultural and memory scholarship. In a basic sense, ‘remediation’ means that one medium can ‘refashion’ or ‘re-appropriate’ another. This is not exclusive only to new media, but is likewise inherent to traditional agents of communication, for, as Bolter and Grusin admit, remediation processes took place “throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation” and thus, can be identified in a medieval manuscript, seventeenth-century painting, photography and other mediated forms.<sup>58</sup>

However, if old media are also able to remediate, then what are the special effects that the new electronic means offer? Their advantage lies in the very manner they repurpose other types of media. In this relation, there are a number of ways. Firstly, they can reproduce traditional formats in their original shape without bringing any changes. The difference between old and the new reproductions, in this case, is the virtual base of the latter. Secondly, digital media can improve conventional media while supplementing them with extra qualities.<sup>59</sup> Thus, for instance, digital photo albums can be enhanced through the addition of sound. Thirdly, new technologies provide various tools for accessing, editing and merging the contents of older media. This is most evident in the environment of the computer, where

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<sup>56</sup> A. Hoskins, “Digital Network Memory”. *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. ed. A. Erll and A. Rigney. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> J. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding the New Media*. Cambridge: the MIT Press, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> T. Flew, *New Media: an Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 37.

digital editing programmes, such as Adobe Photoshop, Corel VideoStudio and MAGIX Music Maker provide infinite malleability.

### *Pervasiveness*

‘Pervasive,’ ‘ubiquitous,’ ‘all-embracing,’ ‘all-penetrative’ are the most frequent terms used to describe the scope, condition and effect exerted by modern technologies on our lives. Moreover, new metaphorical expressions of ‘media ecology,’ ‘mediapolis’ and ‘media life’ have recently been invented to characterise even greater embeddedness of new media in all spheres of human activity. Today one witnesses an expansion of media forms, media industries, media structures and networks fusing and infiltrating into all tangible and intangible aspects of society. As Knut Lundby points out, “high modern societies are media-saturated societies,” in which neither the daily performance of individuals, nor operation of huge corporations and enterprises are conceivable without employment of information technologies.<sup>60</sup> The general impact of these technologies can be described as massive, as none of the social spheres remained untouched by the new digital sphere.

In not so distant past (literally a few decades ago) media represented autonomous entities, which only at certain points intertwined with societal institutions, such as, finance, politics, religion, popular culture and entertainment. They still fulfilled an intrinsic role of ‘mediation,’ however, taking an independent position towards other spheres. This ‘separation’ or ‘independence’ was apparent even from titling of published material at that time, books like *Mass Communication and Society*, *Mass Communication and Public Health*, *Mass Communication and Politics* and other wordings similar to “mass communication and...”<sup>61</sup> Today, on the contrary, media seek for a total integration with aforementioned fields. Due to ongoing processes of mediatisation and digitalisation, the digital environment has permeated

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<sup>60</sup> K. Lundby, (ed.). *Mediatization: Concepts, Changes, Consequences*. NY: Peter Lang, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> S. Livingstone, “On Mediation of Everything”. *Journal of Communication* 59, 2009, p. 2.

into all segments of society including the business, political and educational as well as the sectors of family, religion, health and others. Nothing remains outside of new media domain, which is ubiquitous and all-inclusive.

According to Sonia Livingston, the current pervasiveness of communication technologies brings mediation to every social dimension, thus causing a state where ‘everything is mediated.’ As the presence of media intensifies, one confronts a ‘heavily mediated world,’ in which mediated politics, mediated culture, mediated gender and mediated identities become an integral part of human existence.<sup>62</sup> Deuze reinforces this argument with his concept of ‘media life,’ suggesting that “media should not be seen as somehow located outside of lived experience, but rather be seen as intrinsically part of it.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, omnipresence of media, as Deuze assumes, has reached such a degree that they became invisible to human “in the sense that [...] we become blind to that which shapes our lives the most.”<sup>64</sup>

### ***1.2.3. The Dynamics of Media Memory***

This section explores the ‘structure’ and ‘functioning’ of memory in our media-saturated time. It is an attempt to understand specific rules and conditions, which our memory has been subjected to in the rapidly changing environment of new media. Recent transformations in the technological sphere resulted in the fact that the domain of memory has significantly reconfigured. It underwent those transformations that were determined by major developments in cultural, political, social and economic spheres. Thus, such processes as mediatisation, digitalisation, connectivity and globalisation were crucial for memory, as they altered the ways people produce, maintain and disseminate knowledge of the past in modern

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> M. Deuze, “Media Life”. *Media Culture Society* 33 (1), 2011, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

times.

This part of my thesis is focused on those structural changes that currently take place in the new media environment. I suggest that media memory is ‘moulded’ and ‘shaped’ by dynamic processes and forces. It emerges from dynamics, which are inherent to new media, and therefore ‘dynamics’ as such can be understood (figuratively) as the structure of media memory.

In the beginning, however, I would like to refer to the now classical study of public memory by Pierre Nora. Although memory is an abstract entity, Nora provides an exemplary model of how to examine the structure and inner working of social remembering. For that reason, his work deserves particular attention. Another reason to reference Pierre Nora in the beginning of my research is the following. Throughout this chapter, I seek to establish a dialogue between the two modes of memory: the one mediated through physical spaces, cultural objects and notions (collective memory) and the other enabled by virtue of new digital means (media memory). It is not my intention to juxtapose them (since I also suggest, that the latter mode originates from the former), but to draw a comparison with a view of finding possible similarities and distinctions between the two.

It is Nora who, while revising French history in his fundamental work *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, brings out specific sites ‘embodying’ the national memory of France. These sites, *lieux de memoire*, ('sites of memory') are represented by a diversity of different notions: actual places (Paris), architectural constructions (the Eiffel Tower), literary texts (*In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust), people (the historian Ernest Lavisse), honorific dates (the centenaries of Voltaire and Rousseau) as well as national symbols (*La Marseillaise*, France's national anthem) and many others. Nora advocates for a symbolic meaning of such sites, supposing that they ‘crystallize’ in themselves features of

French national identity.<sup>65</sup>

The author interprets them as the only true remnants of the French past. In his view, these places are a final refuge of collective memory, for only in them “a certain sense of historical continuity still persists.”<sup>66</sup> By saying this Nora indicates the actual inability of contemporary societies to remember. According to his assumption, the end of the twentieth century denoted a total rapture with the past, when modern civilizations have not simply lost the ability to remember, but they refused to “live with their memories.” He links this loss of the past to the conditions of present time, which involve the processes of globalisation, the overall spread of communication technologies and increased velocity of life in general. As a consequence, instead of natural ‘lived’ memory we have to deal with different reconstructions of the past, those artificial memories which are manufactured and imposed by state authorities, mass media, huge corporations and other institutions. Nora points at a strange paradox: current time strives for ongoing reproduction of memory solely because the latter does not exist. We are overwhelmed by a striking amount of fabricated ‘pasts’ in our culture, and at the same time experience the decline of ‘real memory.’ In opposition to the current situation he gives examples of primitive societies, where ‘real memory’ was possible due to the celebration of traditions, rituals and a specific perception of time inherent to primeval people. Pre-modern cultures managed to “live within memory” through their commemorative practices, which blurred sharp distinctions between the past and present.<sup>67</sup>

As for today, Nora suggests that *lieux de memoire* are the only true means preserving the last traces of a collective past. A precise definition of this term would be as follows. *Lieu de memoire* is any item, object or intangible notion, which under certain historical circumstances acquired the meaning of a memorial. According to Nora, modern societies

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<sup>65</sup> P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”. *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

show a tendency to create *lieux de memoire* (that is to invest objects and places, material things and non-material entities with a symbolic sense), as this is how they rescue collective memories from oblivion; this is how they create cultural and historical heritage.

The very idea of memory as stable and ‘crystallized in particular sites’ (in the *lieux de memoire* proposed by Nora) seems to be irrelevant to the shifting environment of new media. As technologies constantly change, so do all notions belonging to the digital domain. The environment of the Internet might be, in this regard, the most striking example. It represents a transforming, constantly expanding universe with an intention to comprise all possible things and phenomena. It is obvious, of course, that these things do not come online in their original form. What the World Wide Web distributes are numerous remediations of images, texts, sounds, photographs and narratives, which are all subject to digital alteration. Nothing remains unchanged on the Internet and memory is not an exception.

Rather than a static concentration of images of the past, remembering on the Web is an active, dynamic process, and it is about how our memories are being constantly reshaped and reconfigured in the virtual realm. Thinking about media memory one has to think in terms of dynamics: dynamics of new media, of digital networks, of hypermedia environment and of the act of remembering as such. It is the concept of dynamics that is crucial to media memory, for it provides a key to understanding the way memory operates within the ‘medial frameworks’ of digital technologies.<sup>68</sup>

A ‘dynamic’ approach to memory was put forward by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney in the introduction to *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* and it resolved many problems of modern memory studies. First and foremost, the authors accentuate the performative aspect of memory, arguing that each act of remembering implies

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<sup>68</sup> A. Erll and A. Rigney (ed.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, p. 2.

an “active engagement with the past.”<sup>69</sup> To remember means to set up a dynamic relation between the two times, to make a revision of past events from today’s perspective, which is the only way of keeping collective memories ‘alive.’ The emphasis, thus, shifts from preservation of the past ‘as it was’ to articulation of it in the present. Secondly, the work aspires to set a linkage between the fields of memory and media which perhaps is not new, considering that some other memory scholars have already acknowledged the centrality of media. However, the merit of Erll and Rigney’s approach lies in their very specific interpretation of media. The latter are introduced as “complex dynamic systems” “caught up in a dynamics of their own.”<sup>70</sup> Technologies are never stable: they interact, merge, fuse, network, and re-appropriate each other, creating a ‘dynamic’ environment for the reconstruction of memory. Thus, Erll and Rigney demonstrate that the dynamics of memory are to a larger extent conditioned by the dynamic nature of media structures.

Finally, the authors put additional stress on ‘remediation,’ seen as a driving force of memory. Remediation, that is a circulation of the same memory-matter in different media, is essential to collective remembering. Particularly, the concept implies that a single story, image or narrative of a collective past can ‘travel’ across various media; it can be re-appropriated, modified or refashioned in accordance with the representational logic of each medium. In this way, many historical events, personal biographies, politically and socially significant stories are ‘kept alive’ through replication in different media formats. As Erll and Rigney observe, “no historical document (from St. Paul’s letters to live footage of 9/11) and certainly no memorial monument (from the Vietnam Veteran’s Wall to the Berlin Holocaust Memorial) is thinkable without earlier acts of mediation.”<sup>71</sup> Remediation should be understood as another dynamic force that moves memories across time, space and national borders.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

Generally, the dynamics of memory in contemporary culture are closely tied with the processes of ‘mediatisation,’ ‘globalisation,’ and ‘connectivity’ currently going on in the society at large. Due to their scope and profound impact on all spheres of human activity, these processes are defined by Friedrich Krotz as ‘meta-processes,’ which is a superior term for describing a long-term cultural change. Krotz insists that meta-processes are multimodal and multidimensional, and therefore they are “important for people on the micro level, for institutions and organisations on the meso level, and for culture and society on the macro level.”<sup>72</sup> It is almost impossible to investigate a meta-process as a single process, as it involves multiple transformations, interconnections and developments in all human fields. Besides, it is hard to identify temporal borders of a meta-process for, as Krotz suggests, there is no clear indication of when it starts or ends. Using the concept of meta-process one can trace the dynamics of an ongoing change, and come to a general understanding of the situation that one currently finds oneself: “we do not live in a stable culture and society, but in a rapidly and fundamentally changing world.”<sup>73</sup>

The meta-process of ‘mediatisation’ is perhaps the main reason why today, instead of ‘collective,’ ‘social’ or ‘cultural’, one uses more frequently such words as ‘mediatised,’ ‘mediated’ or ‘digitalised’ to describe public memory. In a general sense, the term ‘mediatisation’ symbolises an impact, created to our life with advent of communication technologies. More specifically, the concept implies that new media did not merely affect certain aspects of society, but that they have permeated all existing social, political and cultural institutions (of work, leisure, religion and family, for example). Mediatisation is about the omnipresence of media in our everyday life. Contemporary commercial and business sectors, cultural and entertainment industries, private and public communication are unthinkable without modern technologies. (See the “New Media” chapter of this thesis for

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<sup>72</sup> Krotz, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

detail).

Stig Hjarvard gives a comprehensive definition of mediatisation in his article “Mediatization of Society,” in which he presents communication technologies as “agents of social and cultural change:” “by the mediatization of society, we understand the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic.”<sup>74</sup> He describes this process as “characterized by a duality in that the media have become integrated into the operations of other social institutions, while they also have acquired the status of social institutions in their own right.”<sup>75</sup>

Like all other aspects of modern life, memory becomes mediatised that is, subject to ongoing processes of mediatisation.<sup>76</sup> Contemporary ‘memory-scape’ changes together with ‘media-scape,’ which is not surprising considering that new digital technologies provide all necessary facilities for the reconstruction of past. In a certain sense, memory-making now becomes more convenient and easy than it was earlier with the sole existence of traditional media. Today one witnesses the following trend. All current forms of remembering (individual, cultural and collective) migrate from static traditional ‘sites’ into new media environments. This metaphoric expression symbolises the “embeddedness of remembering and forgetting in digital media and in our sociotechnical practices.”<sup>77</sup> It also means that today one has to search for new terms and conceptual instruments to comprehend the dynamics of memory. It is reasonable, in this regard, to use the term ‘media memory.’ (I call it ‘media memory,’ even though the same phenomenon can be described with other terms, for instance, the term ‘new memory’ proposed by Hoskins). If mediatisation of memory is a process, then it is media memory that results from that phenomenon.

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<sup>74</sup> Hjarvard, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> A. Hoskins, “Anachronisms of Media, Anachronisms of Memory: From Collective Memory to a New Memory Ecology”. *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 279.

<sup>77</sup> Hoskins, “The Mediatisation of Memory”, p. 28.

Another meta-process, and thus another driving force of memory in a modern highly mediatised world, is connectivity. As media theorists observe, the current conditions of a society should be characterised “in functional terms by network and connectivity,” for today social structure as such represents an expanding array of networks. In support of this argument, one can cite Manuel Castells, who in his ground-breaking study *The Rise of the Network Society* claims that all “dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks.”<sup>78</sup> This ‘global networking’ involves political networks of national and international organisations, financial networks of stock markets and banks, networks of entertainment and creative production, of media and advertising agencies, as well as the networks of smart phones, tablets, laptops and other computing devices. An apparent advantage of networks, according to Castells, is their openness and an unlimited potential for growth, which means that they can always integrate new elements and hence expand. Moreover, different kinds of networks interact with each other, intersecting at certain points (‘nodes’) and setting dynamic interconnections and interdependencies.<sup>79</sup> Thus, adaptation of a networking structure turns a society into “a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance.”<sup>80</sup>

Modern society is built on principles of connectivity, which demand both individuals and institutions always to ‘stay connected.’ This social networking, of groups, corporations and governmental bodies, becomes possible due to the ‘technical support’ generously offered by digital means of communication. Needless to say, without new media the global connectivity of societies would not achieve its current stage or, even further, one would not consider this process complex and multidimensional and, in other words, it would not be a meta-process. These are precisely the digital networks, the networks of new media that

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<sup>78</sup> Castells, op. cit., p. 500.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. xxxv.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 501.

facilitate the connection of all other networks of social institutions, international organisations, commercial groups, as well as the networks of informal social communication. It is with the advent of digital technologies (mainly, with the Internet and mobile phones) that the concept of connectivity was forged and deeply embedded in our lives.

So too, our memory on both individual and collective levels now becomes instantly ‘networked.’ Apparently, this feature is relevant primarily to those forms of remembering that are practised through the World Wide Web, which is the most impressive networking system. The modern stage of the Internet, known as Web 2.0, opens up new horizons for reconstruction of the past, where our collective memories are distributed and reshaped throughout a host of communicative platforms and digital applications. The Internet provides a startling diversity of ‘venues’ for the construction of our memory, ranging from social networking systems (Facebook, Myspace) to image-hosting and video-hosting services (Flickr, Youtube) and encyclopaedic portals (Wikipedia), not to mention forums, blogs, personal web-sites and many others.

In the modern paradigm of memory studies, the term ‘network’ has been recently introduced by Andrew Hoskins, who insisted on a “temporally and spatially adequate perspective on memory that would deliberately highlight the dynamics of mediated memory.”<sup>81</sup> It is the metaphor of the ‘network’ that allows him to create such a perspective, emphasising the fact that memory is “configured through our digital practices and the connectivity of networks.”<sup>82</sup> He argues that this type of memory, ‘digital network memory’ as he calls it, is emergent through active participation of users and therefore the speed of its construction is incredibly high.

‘Globalisation’ is the final and, perhaps, most frequently discussed meta-process that challenges our memory and in the meantime, stimulates appearance of new forms of

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<sup>81</sup> Hoskins, “Digital Network Memory”, p. 92.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

remembering, is globalisation. Much has been said on this subject in recent decades, as globalisation achieved truly massive dimensions. Many perspectives and theories were invented in an attempt to conceptualise this complex process and to approach it within the context of different academic disciplines (economics, politics, environmental studies, literature, gender, etc.). For obvious reasons, these approaches are not covered within the framework of the current research. Instead, I will focus on general effects of globalisation and particularly its impact on memory.

Like all other meta-processes, globalisation involves several dimensions or several aspects of global change. Conceptually, it implies transformation of the spatio-temporal understandings of people, that is, changing perception of time and space and, as a consequence, changing behaviour (for instance, increased mobility of people). On a cultural level, it facilitates close cooperation among local, national and multi-national cultures. In terms of politics and finance, globalisation boosts the growth of transnational organisations and corporations.<sup>83</sup>

With the global mobility of people and the proliferation of digital media and transnational networks, our memories also become mobile. They travel across national frontiers and come onto the global stage, where they acquire a status of a common issue. If earlier the construction of collective memory was the ‘business’ of a country, in the twenty-first century this situation has changed. Nations appropriate and intervene with ‘foreign’ collective recollections, giving their accounts and expressing critical views with regard to the histories of other states. It is on this global stage that a nation is no longer able to preserve the integrity of its memory or prevent it from external interference. Overall, the exuberance of ‘pasts,’ belonging to different countries, creates heterogeneous and highly contestable space,

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<sup>83</sup>Krotz, op. cit., p. 21.

in which “potentially competing memories are crowded into small places.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, globalisation, according to Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, has a double-sided impact on memory. On the one hand, “local memory practices have global reverberations,” that is, they are echoed in different international contexts, but on the other “the transnational effects of mutual influence and imitation are equally palpable on the national level.”<sup>85</sup>

All three aforementioned meta-processes are closely interrelated and all are equally important for the development of memory in the current time. It is interesting how a combination of these driving forces leads to the emergence new derivative forms of media memory. ‘Digital network’ memory, as one instance, was already examined above. Another such case is ‘globital’ memory, which is a result of two dynamic processes –globalisation and digital connectivity.<sup>86</sup> The subdivision on ‘globital’ or ‘digital network’ memory is arbitrary, as all these notions fall under the huge umbrella of media memory. However, such a diversity of concepts and classifications indicates that the latter type of memory currently gains its momentum.

#### **1.2.4. Media Memory and the Collective Pasts**

The collective past represents a symbolic category, but still it is of great value to members of a community to whom that past is attributed. It is a vision of previous events, experiences and personalities, shared by a group of people who have something in common (for example, ethnicity, citizenship or religion) and who are thus united by a sense of common past. Collective past is always ‘*our* past,’ meaning that it belongs to a collectivity, whose

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<sup>84</sup> A. Assmann and S. Conrad (ed.). *Memory in a Global Age*. Hampshire: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> A. Reading, “Memory and Digital Media: Six Dynamics of the Globital Memory Field”. *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2011, p. 241.

members identify themselves as part of a whole – of a “community, a state, a nation, a race, a society, a civilization.”<sup>87</sup> And although a collective past is an imaginative construction, it serves some important practical purposes, such as promoting collective identities, generating state policies, establishing social norms and legislation and many others. Each society determines its own ways of appropriating its past, selecting different narratives and representations for each particular purpose.

Awareness of a collective past comes in the form of collective memory, as “all awareness of the past is founded on memory.”<sup>88</sup> The term ‘collective memory,’ however, is a figurative one. Unlike psychological memory, which is a scientifically proven capacity of the human mind, collective memory does not indicate the ability of a society to remember. It is rather a metaphor, symbolising all social activities aimed at creating, sustaining, and developing historical images. Initially, the concept of collective memory was forged by Maurice Halbwachs, who was the first to stress the social dimension of remembering. Instead of viewing recall as a psychological phenomenon he elevated its social function, thus arguing that society was an essential ‘framework’ for the articulation of memories.<sup>89</sup> Reconstruction of past events, according to Halbwachs, is only possible within a group of people communicating with each other through a shared symbolic system (language). As a true sociologist, Halbwachs considers humans as social beings, who acquire general knowledge about the world through collective interaction. It is only through interaction with each other that individuals produce an understanding of their past.

As seen from Halbwachs’ argument, collective memory is not an actual mnemonic capacity. Communities and states do not have an ability to remember, but have the means to construct different versions of their past, and a range of materials and instruments for such

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<sup>87</sup> G. Cubitt, *History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 199.

<sup>88</sup> D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 193.

<sup>89</sup> M. Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

construction is diverse. Thus, in order to compose ‘master narratives’ of their history, nations use documents and relics, monuments and places, ideas and theories, not to mention different stories, texts, biographies, personal accounts and many others. The term ‘collective memory’ is generally used to characterise how societies preserve and transmit historical knowledge, how they incorporate issues of their past into their present, as well as ‘deliberately forget’ or black out particularly disturbing aspects of their history. It results from cooperation between individuals, institutions and media, and should be understood as a process of reconstructing historical visions by a social group (rather than ability).

It is the idea of collective memory that is closest and most relevant to the phenomenon of media memory, which is the focus of my project. According to my argument, media memory is a relative concept, and hence needs to be defined in its relation to other modes of recall. Reference to collective remembering then appears to be the most beneficial option. Moreover, comparison of these two memories is essential, when one deals with issues of history (the Soviet past) and representation of such issues in the new media environment (Internet images).

Thus, I propose to define media memory as a derivative form of collective memory that emerges and functions within the framework of a new digital environment. However, whilst media memory shows much resemblance with Halbwachs' *la mémoire collective*, the principal focus of this concept is different. If collective memory is concerned with the reconstruction of a shared past in general, then media memory defines ways in which the past is reconstructed through new media. Collective memory establishes our relationship with the past, whereas media memory shows how this relationship is being transformed under the influence of new technologies. In general, media memory is about how a collective past is represented by the media, in the media and through the use of the media.<sup>90</sup> It symbolises all those “radical

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<sup>90</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg (ed.), *On Media Memory*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 1.

transformations in contemporary media that similarly impact upon how, what and why individuals and groups remember.”<sup>91</sup>

Contemporary memory scholars estimate the influence of new technologies in a number of different ways. Some state that “technological advances transformed the temporality, spatiality and indeed mobility of memories.”<sup>92</sup> Others assume that “the very organization of this high-tech world threatens to make categories like past and future, experience and expectation, memory and anticipation themselves obsolete.”<sup>93</sup> However, I would like to start with a general observation, suggesting that our imaginary landscape of a collective past is now oversaturated. Various representations of historical events and phenomena flow from one digital platform to another, replicating each other, changing in form, and multiplying in scope and number. Remediative capacities of modern technologies make the past omnipresent in our life: it becomes ever-accessible through such forms as online museums and digital archives, news and TV programmes, docufictions and docudramas, digital art and computer games. We have started to reproduce our remembrances to such an extent that a ‘hypertrophy’ of virtual pasts now permeates reality. The main questions that should be posed in this regard are first: what are the reasons for growth in reproduction of the past? And, second, what can be the possible consequences of the same process?

The most apparent and pragmatic reason of such enhanced memory-making is the availability of cheap means to represent, distribute and render different matters. And although it is somewhat self-evident, it is worth mentioning that ‘keeping the past’ today is an easy business, affordable to anyone who is interested in storing recollections as digital copies.<sup>94</sup> Unlike previous epochs, when public recall relied exclusively on museums, architectural

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<sup>91</sup> Hoskins, “The Mediatisation of Memory”, p. 28.

<sup>92</sup> Erll and Rigney, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>93</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins and A. Reading (ed.). *Save as... Digital Memories*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 5.

monuments, archives and physical objects, the current Information Age provides many alternative ways for retrieving, recording and saving traces of the past in a virtual sphere. Contemporary ‘technologies of memory’ create a favourable environment for the replication and revision of collective remembrances, as if provoking modern societies to constantly turn to their past.<sup>95</sup>

In the meantime, beyond the surface of digital reproducibility lies another reason we are fascinated with earlier times; it can be described as the inevitable fear of forgetting, which is inherent in contemporary culture. As Huyssens assumes, modern civilizations are “ill with amnesia” and it is, in his view, a major symptom of postmodernity.<sup>96</sup> Thus, contemporary nations multiply and enhance their collective memories, as if looking for an explanation of their current living in past experiences. The new millennium brought ideological changes. It showed a decline of the Modernist paradigm and a beginning of the time for self-reflection. At the turn of the century all Western societies looked back into their past in an attempt to overcome “the crisis of that structure of temporality that marked the age of modernity.”<sup>97</sup> In a similar way, the upsurge of public memory is observed by other historians. Jacque Le Goff notes that concern with the past is “shared by the public at large, which is obsessed by the fear of losing its memory in a kind of collective amnesia.”<sup>98</sup> In Le Goff’s opinion, this also results in a decay of history, as far as the latter becomes replaced by increasingly fabricated memory. Jeoffrey Cubitt goes further in his assumption that both public fascination with remembering and a fear of amnesia indicate a crisis of memory. He describes the current state of memory as “an unhealthy mnemonic condition,” as “a kind of neurotic bingeing – something excessive and obsessive.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Sturken, op.cit., p. 75.

<sup>96</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Cubitt, op. cit, p. 95.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

The fear of forgetting in the epoch of digital reproduction, indeed, is not groundless.

Electronic media seem to ‘work hard,’ generating plenitudes of content and, accordingly, plenitudes of representations of the past. And even though such (digital) memory is not restricted in terms of storage or access, as one can save unlimited portions of information and, subsequently, retrieve them at any time, it, nonetheless, impedes the very processes of remembering. In a situation of constant data overload, when one is being “overwhelmed by torrents of images and sounds,” remembering itself becomes a problematic issue, as there is simply too much information to recall.<sup>100</sup> The surplus of data on TV, the Internet, mobile devices and tools benumbs sensitivity, so that, according to Assmann, a human turns passive to memorising of information.<sup>101</sup> This is relevant to collective memory as well. If the society keeps on producing multitudes of historical narratives every day, then how can it choose the proper ones to remember? How can one know which versions of the past should be preserved and transmitted to future generations, and which, on the contrary, should be sent into oblivion? An overload of ‘histories’ thus works in the same way as an overload of data, provoking societal numbness, rigidity and unwillingness to remember the past. In the “Seven types of forgetting,” Paul Connerton states that forgetting today is inevitable and that, furthermore, it becomes a necessity in a time of increasingly evolving information technologies. Modern society has to learn how to forget. He calls it “forgetting as annulment,” meaning that the surfeit of digital memories grown in the twenty-first century to a greater hypertrophied scale, must be somehow discarded.<sup>102</sup>

Another threat to public memory, and hence another ground of fear ‘to lose our past in amnesia’, is caused by an instability of digital distribution. Digital data is immaterial. It is intangible and liquid, and so are all the contemporary digital systems. The storing capacity of

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<sup>100</sup> T. Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*. NY: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

<sup>101</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 400.

<sup>102</sup> P. Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting”. *Memory Studies* 1(3), 2008, p. 65.

modern archives (those based on computing and multimedia technologies) is, of course, tremendous, but despite this, they seem to be “far more fragile” than their physical counterparts.<sup>103</sup> Like all computing technologies, they require constant renewal. They have to be either updated or replaced by new modernized versions and, in other words, their material life is too short. In this context, digital archives cannot guarantee that the images of past will last long term. It is in this new media environment that our memories risk becoming ‘outdated,’ ‘distorted,’ ‘damaged’ or even completely ‘erased’ in the case of a system’s breakdown.

So, does media memory helps to remember our past or does it, conversely, erase our recollections? As Assmann puts it: “Is digital writing another medium of memory, or is it a medium for forgetting”?<sup>104</sup>

I suggest, that media memory is both. It is an attempt to struggle with a fear of forgetting in the digital age and, paradoxically, at the same time, it is another cause of collective amnesia. The more we are afraid to lose information about previous times and experiences, the more mediated memories we produce, hoping to preserve in such a manner the remaining traces of history. But this enhanced reproduction of the past, in turn, creates a sense of numbing, of anaesthesia that leads to even greater collective forgetfulness (and, as some historians consider, to a loss of historical consciousness). Such is the impact of media memory. It is about the very “relationship between remembering and forgetting being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll.”<sup>105</sup> It might even be so that habitual categories of remembering and forgetting become less appropriate and obsolete in the new media domain, and that we now have to look for new ‘updated’ terms to describe our

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<sup>103</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 399.

<sup>104</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 400.

<sup>105</sup> A. HuysSEN, “from Present PastS: Media, Politics, Amnesia”. *the Collective Memory Reader*. ed. J.. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi and D. Levy, Oxford, 2011, p. 431.

current state of recall.

Yet fighting for a shared past in the digital realm is a way of keeping public memories ‘alive.’ Although, for instance, Huyssen considers traditional agents of memory (museums, architecture, visual arts) the only possible means to resist cultural amnesia, I suggest that media memory, in this relation, should not be discarded. It is important to understand the essence of the phenomenon (media memory) that we currently deal with, but, first and foremost, we have to acknowledge its existence. Our relationship with the collective past has been transformed due to the recent changes taking place in public culture, social institutions, mass communication and general ideology of time. Because of this, we witness the emergence of a ‘new memory,’ of a memory that operates in today’s media- saturated environment.<sup>106</sup>

### *Fluidity of Memory*

The fluidity of memory is conditioned by fluidity of digital content. New media seem to produce endless flows of data, circulating across digital platforms (desktops, laptops, smartphones and tablets) independently and for their own sake. By virtue of digital writing, this data gets amplified and versioned, it gets copied, edited, mixed and sent from one digital device to another thousands of times. It is precisely the form of a digital code that allows us to constantly overwrite our past, creating multiple versions of the same event, the same idea or the same image. The main problem of digital media, in this regard, is that the records of our past are no longer ‘fixed’, as they were throughout previous centuries in the stable material carriers, such as wax tablets, papyrus, paper, print or even audio and videotapes. With the advent of information technologies, as Assmann points out, one experienced a shift of a paradigm “by which the concept of written record is being replaced by the principle of

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<sup>106</sup> A. Hoskins, “New Memory: Mediating History”. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21 (4), 2001, p. 333.

continuous rewritings.”<sup>107</sup> The static and stable repositories of our memories (traditional archives, for instance) are now replaced by dynamic information carriers, where data can be reorganised, restructured and modified permanently and at an incredibly high speed. The new media shift the accent from preservation to flux, sending the images of the past into an endless journey with a variety of different routes, paths and itineraries, and the main point of this is that our memories never stop travelling.

The best illustration of how the accounts of our past are being continuously reshaped and altered is, perhaps, Wikipedia, the now famous web-based platform that gathers information on all branches of knowledge, including ‘histories’ of all kind. Thanks to collective authorship, this platform has become not only the most popular encyclopaedia of the current time, but also “a global place of memory” with manifold representations of the past being housed.<sup>108</sup> It is an open digital space where narratives, images and versions of history are being produced and rewritten by literally anyone who has a computer and access to the Web. The Wiki application allows users to compose articles on any historical matter, and to revise all previously created materials. If such materials seem imprecise (to whomever reads them), it is as easy to change them as the simple operations of ‘copy,’ ‘paste’ and ‘delete.’ The revision and ‘editing’ of history online becomes simple.

A general user today is granted every opportunity to write and rewrite a collective past; these are common people who become authors or co-authors, editors or co-editors, creators or co-creators of history, even though the ‘historical accounts’ produced in this way may not be historically accurate, in any sense. As a consequence, the knowledge of the past remains ‘unpreserved.’ It is not protected from the excessive, redundant transformation, distortion and vanishing; it is vague, as mutable as all information in the digital realm. Yet, fluidity of

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<sup>107</sup> Assmann, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> C. Pentzold, “Fixing the Floating Gap: the Online Encyclopaedia Wikipedia as a Global Memory Place”. *Memory Studies* 2 (2), 2009, p. 255.

current memory also has many benefits. The most obvious advantage is the ability of digital media to open multiple perspectives on collective past, thus providing a variety of visions, narratives and interpretations of the same historical event or phenomenon. It is due to its fluid character that the Internet embraces official and non-official, mainstream and alternative, prominent and partly forgotten recollections that altogether construct a multi-dimensional ‘portrait’ of history. The fluid nature of media memory thus has a double-sided impact. On the one hand, it compromises the reliability of the historical knowledge, which is now endangered, however on the other, it grants new versatile opportunities for reconceptualisation of past experiences. Fluidity of memory brings about the question of authenticity.

### *Authenticity*

The question of authenticity is central when one reflects upon the manner of how digital reproduction and all related processes of mediation and remediation affect the sense of collective past. With the spread of digital communication technologies our memories become increasingly re-produced and re-mediated. Resulting from it, an original meaning of past events may be, if not lost completely, then drastically transformed and confused. Each representation of the past in the digital realm is “a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment” that may absorb and proliferate certain meanings pertaining to aspects of both the past and the present.<sup>109</sup> On the one hand, remediation maintains a memory-matter (as it facilitates its articulation in different media), but on the other, a surplus of mediated representations of the same event appearing in various digital forms and genres creates a feeling of ‘artificiality’ and of unnatural proximity of the past, thereby threatening its genuine

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<sup>109</sup> L. Basu, “Towards a Memory Dispositif: Truth, Myth, and Ned Kelly lieu de memoire, 1890-1930”. *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. A. Erill and A. Rigney (ed.). Berlin. De Gruyter, 2009, p. 141.

meaning. Is it not the condition predicted by Walter Benjamin already in the twentieth century, when he stated that the mass reproduction of an item (mechanical reproduction at that time) would eventually lead to decay of its aura or authenticity?

As if foreseeing that the ‘age of mechanical reproduction’ would evolve into the current digital age where the capacity to reproduce is even greater, Benjamin warned us against excessive technological copying. In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, the German philosopher maintained that the processes of industrial replication destroy authenticity of a thing, what he defined as a ‘loss of aura.’<sup>110</sup> Aura, in Benjamin's understanding, is a quality of a special value, typically inherent to authentic objects, such as historical artefacts and genuine pieces of art. According to the author, aura creates a sense of spatial and temporal distance, providing a viewer with an experience of uniqueness and ‘otherness’ transmitted from the place and time when the item was produced.<sup>111</sup>

Benjamin introduces the concept of aura purposely, to discern the two fundamentally different notions: an original artwork and replicas that became largely available due to the growing power of mass technologies. The latter symbolise the death of aura, which, however, is not always a negative process, but can have a positive effect too. As Benjamin indicates, mechanical reproduction can change intrinsic purpose of an object while liberating it from “its parasitical dependence on ritual.”<sup>112</sup> If in the past, “the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind,” today, art is no longer bound with the cult. According to Benjamin, the reproduced items lose their ritualistic function because of the lack of aura. The scholar concludes that in modern age “the criterion of

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<sup>110</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. *Art in Modern Culture: an Anthology of Critical Texts*. ed. Francis Franscina and Jonathan Harris. London, 1992, pp. 297-308.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, NY: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 6.

authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production” so that the only criterion that matters instead is constant reproducibility.<sup>113</sup>

As for today, the ‘aura’ of our past is endangered as never before. The authenticity of historical knowledge is now put in doubt, and it is a result of the ‘placement’ of sources, representations, documents, artefacts and other historical data in the virtual space of new media, where an excessive mutation of items is unavoidable. As Amit Pinchevski notes, “with digitisation the principle of reproducibility reaches its ultimate stage: rather than Walter Benjamin’s notion of reproduction, which implies temporal seriality and hence some kind of originality to be re-produced, the more adequate contemporary term would be transduplication, as digital copies are equally manipulatable and utterly interchangeable (film, image, audio, video).”<sup>114</sup>

By far more than modern ‘masses,’ postmodern society is concerned with recent technological developments and new opening possibilities to “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” through reproduction.<sup>115</sup> In this context, one should admit that the modes of reproducibility in the age of the digital are extremely diverse, and not limited to conventional methods of multiplication or serialism, which were inherent in modernity and hence critiqued by Benjamin. Contemporary media ‘are not interested’ in mere copying of objects any more. Instead, they strive for reproduction of entire environments; they reconstruct those alternative ‘worlds,’ that one calls ‘virtual’ or ‘hyperreal,’ and that nonetheless, subvert our understanding of actual reality. Simulation enacts there a dominant principle, and originality is an obsolete term. It is in this virtual reality where the concept of authenticity is completely undermined, as there is simply no original, but only countless interchangeable copies. Thus, for instance, searching for an authentic item on the Internet is absolutely pointless. In the realm of the Web

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> A. Pinchevski, “Archive, Media, Trauma”. *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK, 2011, p. 255.

<sup>115</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. London: Pilmico, 1999, p. 217.

one copy derives from another, leaving no chance to discover what is actually ‘authentic’ and what is ‘fake.’

Blurred distinctions between original and copy, authenticity and artificiality, genuine knowledge and fiction in new media environments make representations of past likewise look non-authentic. The more copies of images, stories and narratives of the past one produces by virtue of digital writing, the harder it is to define the original meaning of an actual historical matter. As a general consequence, instead of ‘reconstructed’ or ‘represented’ we have more frequently started to use the terms ‘produced,’ ‘manufactured’ and ‘fabricated’ with relation to different issues of collective past. In that case, digital technologies (primarily the Internet and television) should be regarded not mere agents of memory, but as the actual ‘media of its production.’<sup>116</sup>

### *Authority*

The question of authority is another concern of media memory. Digital media generate an arena in which the “right to narrate the past” is no longer a privilege of governments or experts, but, on the contrary, it allows almost anyone to create a historical account.<sup>117</sup> It is in this new media space where official and non-official, national and local, private and public institutions seek to establish their hegemonic visions of the past and to promote their own interpretations of history. Needless to say, in most cases these attempts fail. Instead, they lead to numerous ‘tensions and contestations’ among different bodies, which still struggle for predominance of their interpretations, regardless of whether the latter are accepted by the general public or whether, for some reason, they are disproved and disputed.

The idea of collective memory implies that a particular, agreed upon version of the past

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<sup>116</sup> Hoskins, “New Memory: Mediating History”, p. 336.

<sup>117</sup> Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg, *On Media Memory*, p. 10.

becomes “the shared or common property of the members of a given society.”<sup>118</sup> The society, in turn, preserves and maintains this image as part of collective identity, as it integrates the members, while making them feel connected through a sense of a common past. Such ‘shared memory’ represents an element of collective ownership, an intangible yet significant basis of any social group. Today, however, this idea is challenged. The digital environment is understood mere as a space of ‘contestation’ for the past than of its ‘sharing;’ it is full of ongoing disputes and controversies regarding the ways the national, cultural, political and historical legacy of a state should be interpreted and represented. In current media-saturated time, political and social elites seem to have lost their monopoly to put forward a single ‘dominating’ version of history. Politics of memory is still exercised by authorities, but the question is whether it achieves its goals or not. Contemporary media form a space of struggle between ‘official’ and ‘non-official’ recollections, ‘popular’ memory and ‘counter-memory,’ and it is, thus, not surprising that this ‘war’ is waged among different parties.

In this regard, one should return to the example of Wikipedia, which was partially examined above. As mentioned, the Wiki rests upon principles of collective authorship, implying that any person connected to the Web regardless of physical location, national, cultural or professional background, can take part in the construction of wiki-knowledge. An easy-to-use interface and encyclopaedic character of this platform stimulate the high public involvement, which leads to the production of articles on virtually all subjects, including those of history and of collective pasts. Given the latter, Wikipedia can be regarded as a site for construction of our memory, a “global memory place,” accommodating corporate, national and global collective recollections.<sup>119</sup>

What distinguishes this ‘site of memory’ from many others, both virtual and physical ones, is the specific organisation. It represents a combination of two vital elements: first,

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<sup>118</sup> Cubitt, op. cit., p. 223.

<sup>119</sup> Pentzold, op. cit. p. 255.

accounts of the past (articles) and, second, a ground to discuss these accounts (forums). Thus, every article in Wikipedia is accompanied by a so-called ‘talk page,’ which allows users to debate editing issues.<sup>120</sup> Technically, these talk pages look like traditional online forums. However, they symbolically “fulfil a vital function in serving the role of a low-cost arena for resolving conflicts,” as users, generally, have quite divergent, contradictory opinions.<sup>121</sup> Thus, to edit an item, one has to negotiate with other ‘authors,’ explaining or, sometimes even, defending one's view.<sup>122</sup> Creators of Wikipedia invented talk pages with good reason, as they knew that the production of collective knowledge might bring about misunderstandings, disagreements and even collisions among the members of this heterogeneous online community. To have such ‘places of negotiation’ is especially important when it comes to the memory of tragic events, unresolved historical issues or unsettled political conflicts, as these are the cases provoking the largest public controversy. The wiki-accounts of wars or terrorist attacks are, for instance, always accompanied by a vigorous discussion on relevant talk pages.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 257.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

## **Chapter Two| Soviet Memory**

### **2.1. The Current State of the Soviet Memory**

The Soviet past is a realm full of controversies, contestations and ever-going struggle over symbolic meaning. Like any unresolved issue, it makes us return to it over and over again. Although it has been almost a quarter of a century since the collapse of Communism in Russia, memory of Soviet times still “appears in many different and contradictory shapes.”<sup>1</sup> Conflicting and often contradictory historical accounts are now being produced by both state authorities and the Russian public at large which obstruct the still unstable vision of the Soviet period. Today, according to Alexander Etkind, “no consensus on the crucial issues of the Soviet past has been reached” in Russian society, and the seventy-four-year history of the USSR still contains pages that require profound re-examination.<sup>2</sup> At the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russians inevitably look back at their collective past, as they try to overcome the uneasy historical experience of the previous century.

The lack of an univocal, unambiguous understanding of the Soviet past is the major problem for contemporary Russian memory. No adequate vision of the Communist epoch has been shaped in Russia thus far, and the cornerstones of Soviet history remain ‘unprocessed’ on either the official level (state discourse) or in public recall. These two levels inform each other. As Maria Ferretti notes, it looks as if “Russia is unable to cope with its [Soviet] past” and therefore “*the past refuses to become the thing of the past,*” but instead, it insistently pervades Russia’s present.<sup>3</sup> She also admits that Russian collective memory today experiences

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<sup>1</sup> K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone, *Contested Pasts: the Politics of Memory*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> A. Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> M. Feretti. Rasstroistvo pamiati: Rossiia i Stalinizm,” retrieved from <http://polit.ru/article/2002/11/20/474876/>, 22.11.2014.

a ‘decay’ and that this decay is caused precisely by inadequate treatment of the Communist legacy. Thus, in her view, “today’s Russia is a country without memory, where fragmentary recollections do not compose one single picture.”<sup>4</sup> The decay of collective memory in Russia will persist, until one comprehends, remembers and memorializes the Soviet past in appropriate ways.

Throughout recent decades Soviet history has been re-interpreted many times. These interpretations vary dramatically, depending on who stood at the helm of Soviet or Russian power. During both the Late-Soviet phase and in post-Soviet transition the leaders constructed historical versions that would fit their political goals. As ruling parties ‘adjusted’ public memory to their political agenda, they cared little about historical justice, moral guilt or a ‘balanced’ vision of the Communist era. But even when attempts at reconciliation with the troublesome past were made, they inevitably failed. One such attempt was undertaken by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who in the mid -1980s introduced Glasnost (‘openness’). What Gorbachev aimed at was letting people know the ‘whole’ truth about the previously hidden (and painful) aspects of Soviet past – he thought it would help to achieve accord in society. What Glasnost brought, contrary to Gorbachev’s initial intention, was an avalanche of historical revelations that caused public frustration and disappointment with the Soviet regime. People were overwhelmed by the inflow of memory, however, nobody (neither the Soviet authorities, nor the general public or even professional historians) at that time knew how to deal with it. As an outcome, the Soviet past remained ‘undigested.’

Following Gorbachev’s resignation and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, the relationship between Russia and its Soviet past became even more perplexed. It was during the early post-Communist years that the rulers of the new independent Russia subjected all facets of Communism to rigorous criticism. Under the guidance of president Boris Yeltsin the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Soviet period was literally, crossed out of the broad Russian history. In schools, for instance, the teaching of Soviet history was avoided, whereas state television, newspapers and literature largely distributed negative representations of the Soviet epoch. The president himself dubbed Communism an “aberration from Russia’s essential development” and emphasized that the establishment of Communist power in 1917 was a great mistake. Obviously, total rejection of the Soviet past did not help the making of memory in the post-Communist transition and the condition of collective recall only worsened. To deprecate public memories of the Soviet period meant to deprecate the lives of the several generations of people who had lived under Communism for almost three quarters of a twentieth century. In other words, one could not simply ‘erase’ such a vast and significant period.

Today the relationship between Russian culture and Russia’s Soviet past is characterized by profound ambiguity and vagueness.<sup>5</sup> First and foremost, one observes an ever-growing collective nostalgia for ‘all the things Soviet,’ which remain more a symptom of a disease rather than a healthy trend. Thus, Soviet symbols, ideas and myths are now an integral part of Russian politics and culture, let alone the commercial sphere where the subject of the Soviet past is extensively exploited. Modern Russia alludes to its Soviet past, and allusions to the Soviet epoch prevail in Russian media, political forums, artistic scene and even consumer markets. Yet, despite this, the general public has not reached an agreement on the Soviet past. Russian society, in this context, is still split into two opposing camps: those who are nostalgic for the Communist epoch and those who fiercely criticize it. Russians are uncertain about the meaning of Soviet history, and thus a mix of different moods, including nostalgia, irony, scepticism or even aggression, is inherent to any discussion of the Soviet subject.

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<sup>5</sup> E. Dobrenko and A. Shcherbenok, “Between History and the Past: The Soviet Legacy as a Traumatic Object of Contemporary Russian Culture”. *Slavonica* 17 (2), 2011, p. 77.

Nonetheless, one fact is clear: no proper memory work has yet been done with regard to the Communist period. Neither during Gorbachev's Perestroika, nor during Yeltsin's rule was Soviet history adequately reconsidered, and this is why vestiges of the Soviet past keep on reappearing in Russia's present. As Etkind claims, "the unfinished business is one of the reasons for the obsessive return of history in contemporary Russian culture and politics."<sup>6</sup> He adds that Russian "civil society and the intrepid reading public are haunted by the unquiet ghosts of the Soviet era," precisely because the Soviet past remains 'unburied.'<sup>7</sup>

To paraphrase Etkind, I suggest that the Soviet past is not simply 'unburied', but it is also a 'living' past. It is a 'live' past, as it persists in contemporary Russian culture and continues to transform it in a radical way. Thus, repercussions of the Soviet era echo in all forms of Russian cultural production. They do so in literature, films, visual art and other sites. The Soviet past is a living past because one constantly sees it in novels and advertisement texts, blockbusters and remakes of Soviet films, TV series and even computer games. Memory of Soviet times, in this connection, can be regarded as a generative force that stimulates production of new, and sometimes unexpected, cultural trends. In today's Russia there are directors, artists and writers who do the requisite 'memory work.' In their films, artistic installations and books they reflect upon the most arguable issues of Soviet history. In Etkind's view, "excavating the past buried in the present, the scholar of post-catastrophic (post-Soviet) culture watches memory turning into imagination." He maintains that "in Russia, many authors and readers seem to share a desire for a poetic re-enactment of the catastrophic past."<sup>8</sup> Who else but artists, in the broad sense of this word, would dare to shovel the 'unburied' remains of the Soviet past? If the authorities cannot yet provide a consistent

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<sup>6</sup> Etkind, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 211.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

vision of the Soviet period, then who, apart from the artistic intelligentsia, would offer alternative (though maybe fictional and creative) interpretations?

Today the general public participates in the production of Soviet images too –and furthermore, the Russian population is passionately involved in the process of reconstructing the Soviet past. Like filmmakers or writers, common people attempt to reconsider the Soviet epoch, even though such reconsideration often takes unusual, perverted forms. As Etkind observes, the work of memory in post-Soviet culture can be “extended into those spaces that defeat rational ways of understanding the past.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, to comprehend their past, Russians use multifarious tools, which are not limited only to museums, monuments or films, but include non-conventional media and cultural genres, such as the Internet. The now increasing number and diversity of Soviet representations on the Internet prove precisely that this medium is crucial in the production of post-Soviet collective memory. Uploaded by average Russian users, images on the Web expose sometimes creative, but sometimes grotesque and absurd visions of the Soviet period. Particular examples of Soviet imagery on the Web will be examined in the third and fourth chapters of my thesis.

Generally, I assume that the current condition of memory in Russia is, to a large degree, determined by those practices of memorialization that prevailed in the Soviet Union and in the years of post-Communist transition. The Soviet experiment left a long shadow, so that its after-effects are still visible in contemporary Russian culture. As Evgeny Dobrenko and Andrey Shcherbenok note, “two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian society and culture are still dependent on their Soviet heritage, which is upheld and rejected, often simultaneously, in practically all fields of symbolic production, from state ideology to architecture, from elite literature to mass culture.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, if one wants to understand the relationship with the Soviet past in modern, post-Soviet Russia, one has to look at the origin

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> Dobrenko and Shcherbenok, op.cit., p. 77.

of the Communist regime. Why were Soviet leaders so concerned with the construction of dominant, official memory? And how did they skew history towards that end? Did alternative non-official recollections exist in the USSR, in the meantime? As a historical and cultural phenomenon, the Soviet Union gave birth to multifarious forms of public recall: each of them deserves particular attention.

Below I will examine different ways the collective memory functioned both in the USSR and in the aftermath of its collapse. I will trace the birth, development and transformation of public recall under the Soviet regime, whereupon I will look at the state of memory in post-Soviet Russia. The underlying purpose of this chapter is to explore why the Communist era is currently a hot topic of public debate and how the Soviet past has been re-appraised in modern Russian society.

## **2.2. The Past under State Control: The Politics of Memory during the First Half of the USSR's Existence**

“Few states have tried to control collective memory more assiduously than the Soviet Union” – asserts James Wertsch while describing the case of the USSR in his study of collective remembering.<sup>11</sup> He argues that “this control took on different forms during different periods, but it was at work in one way or another throughout.”<sup>12</sup> One can hardly criticise or question Wertsch’s argument. The Soviet Union, indeed, presented a society where public memory was put at the service of ruling elites. Like in any authoritarian state, in the USSR these were the authorities, who constructed the dominant representation of the past and thus shaped collective recall for the entire population. As another historian, Geoffrey Cubitt notes, “those who seek to consolidate and extend or to capture or to resist power have a vested

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<sup>11</sup> J. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge; NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

interest in shaping the ways in which the past is represented” and for them production of memory is an essential means to retain their ascendancy.<sup>13</sup>

Generally, collective memory in the USSR was largely affected by operations of power, as at any stage of the Union’s development each Soviet leader created his own version of the past and imposed this version on the general public. Under Communism the authorities had a monopoly on deciding what to remember and what to forget, or whom to commemorate and whom to erase from official memory of the state. However, as I examine below, it was during the first half of the USSR’s existence that state control over public memory took an extreme form. None of the Soviet dictators controlled the production of memory as tirelessly as did the first two, Lenin and Stalin, as they ascended to rule. Thus, first Lenin, and then Stalin, acted as *Grand Creators* of public memory, who constructed and pushed forward the dominant ideologically charged versions of a collective past. Those official constructs were the only ones allowed within the Soviet state, whereas all alternative non-official accounts of the past were subjected to disapproval, if not to complete annihilation. According to Mikhail Geller and Aleksandr Nekrich, “in the decades after the Bolshevik revolution an unparalleled expertise was developed in manipulating the past and controlling history.”<sup>14</sup> This strict control over public remembering persisted in the USSR until Stalin’s death in 1953.

The Bolsheviks started to implement the politics of remembering shortly after the establishment of their rule in 1917. As Eric Hobsbawm in his *Inventing Traditions* argues, the rulers of the newly established national regimes (e.g. Communist, National Socialist) ‘invent’ certain collective remembrances artificially, doing it with a view to affirm and consolidate their power. They appropriate these ‘invented’ images of a national past as a ‘legitimator of

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<sup>13</sup> J. Cubitt, *History and Memory*. Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> M. Geller and A. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: the History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*. NY: Summit Books, 1986, p. 10.

their political action.<sup>15</sup> Collective recall in such states, according to Hobsbawm, is replaced by ideology, for in them the ruling elites dictate *what* and *how* to remember to a wider public. Hobsbawm's argument fits well in the Soviet context. The Bolsheviks used collective memory as a tool to legitimize their authority. As an “organization that had prescribed a law unto itself,” the Bolshevik party realized that the freshly planted Soviet regime required an anchor in public memory, and that only a link with the past could have justified all deficiencies of a new political order (dictatorship of the proletariat).<sup>16</sup> The members of the Bolshevik government, thus, were assured of the need to implant a brand new and univocal collective memory. They required an image of the past that would fit their political agenda.

The core of the new Soviet memory was constituted by the narrative of the October Revolution. According to the Communists, this event was of invaluable importance. It signalled the beginning of a new era not only in Russian history but in the entire history of humankind. The Soviet leaders diligently stressed (and mythologized) the significance of October, assuming that “only owing to this revolution had the Soviet Union become a great power and established the most progressive social system” in the world.<sup>17</sup> Rooted deeply in Marxism-Leninism, Bolshevik ideology depicted the revolution as a premise for the construction of a socialist society. Lenin himself insisted on the inevitability of the insurrection, stating that it was only through a ‘violent revolution’ that a dictatorship of the proletariat and subsequent socialism could be achieved.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in his view, the uprising should be guided by a vanguard party, for only a group of politically conscious people could lead the proletariat in the right direction.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> G. Hosking, “Memory in a Totalitarian Society: The Case of the Soviet Union”. *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind*. ed. T. Butler. Oxford, 1989. p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> W. Laqueur, *The Dream that Failed: Reflections on the Soviet Union*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> V. Lenin, *The State and Revolution. The Marxist Teaching on the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*. Perking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970. p. 17.

Such ideological implications presented sufficient grounds to memorialize October immediately after the time that events of 1917 took place. The tale of the revolution explained the origin of Communist power and therefore matched the goals of the newly emerged political elite. In other words, October was an effective ‘myth’ to justify the Bolsheviks’ upheaval in 1917 and to validate their further performance at the head of the Soviet state. Thus, already during the first years of their rule, the Bolsheviks sought to inscribe the narrative of October in public memory. They appropriated for that purpose a striking variety of tools. These included, but were not limited to, visual propaganda, the periodical press, commemorative ceremonies and the production of historical accounts. Speaking in Pierre Nora’s terms, shortly after the overturn, the Bolshevik party initiated a large campaign on the creation of *le lieux de memoire*, specific ‘sites of memory,’ in which the remembrance of October was ‘crystallized’ and ‘imprinted’ on the consciousness of the Soviet people. Consequently, during 1917-1922 the material and symbolic *lieux de memoire* sprang up in the USSR on a tremendous scale: statues of revolutionary figures were installed, buildings were embellished with Marxist quotations, streets renamed after the revolution, as well as the revolutionary festivals of May Day held and the anniversaries of October celebrated. In Moscow alone, as Richard Stites notes, there were about fifty to sixty monuments to revolutionary activists erected over the period between 1918 and 1921. These sculptures commemorated Russian and European revolutionists and were a part of Lenin’s huge ‘Plan for Monumental Propaganda,’ an initiative launched for educating the Soviet population about Communist ideals.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the construction of new monuments was accompanied with the simultaneous removal of the old tsarist statues. In this manner not only did the Bolsheviks implant the new Soviet memory, but also symbolically broke up with the pre-revolutionary past, liquidating the reminders of ‘former’ imperialist Russia.

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<sup>19</sup> R. Stites, “The Origin of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution” in *Symbols of Power: The Esthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. C. Arvidsson and L. E. Blomquist. Stockholm, 1987, p. 34.

Another site of memory that was created and carefully planned by the Soviet government, were the annual celebrations of the October Revolution. Presenting a set of symbolic actions, these festivities were the vital media of Soviet memory. They portrayed the revolution in an exalted light and made the general public ‘experience’ and reconsider the events of 1917 in a way that suited the ideological purposes of the Bolshevik party. Rites, in general, constituted a great part of the official Soviet culture, as they were employed to communicate ideologically informed representations of the past. Peter Burke, for instance, assumes that rites help to re-enact the past and hence they are powerful mnemonic agents.<sup>20</sup> Paul Connerton, likewise, acknowledges the power of rituals, describing them as highly ‘formalized acts’ that “tend to be deliberately stylized, stereotyped and repetitive.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Stites states that ritualism was essential to early stages of the Bolsheviks’ rule, as it was through rites and ceremonies that the Bolsheviks ‘infused’ the newly established socialist system with a ‘religious (sacral) element.’<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the first celebration of October took place in November 1918 (a year after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power) and held simultaneously in both Russian capitals: Moscow and Petrograd. The choice of the cities was not random. Both cities were rival centres of power in 1918 and hence, in both cities, the celebration of October involved careful preparation. For instance, two special agencies – the Organizing Committee for the October Festivities in Moscow and a similar Central Bureau in Petrograd – were set up to manage all arrangements for the holiday. These bodies, in turn, comprised a number of autonomous departments, where each dealt specifically with such issues as arts and decoration of venues, music and theatrical

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<sup>20</sup> P. Burke, “History as Social Memory”. *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind*. ed. T. Butler. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge; NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> R. Stites, “Bolshevik Ritual Building in the 1920s” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*. ed. S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch and R. Stites. Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 295.

performances, finances and transportation, lighting and construction.<sup>23</sup> Each aspect of the first commemoration of October was thought over in minutest detail, for, as Bolsheviks assumed, there should have been no spontaneity while celebrating ‘the Greatest Event in the History of the World.’ Obviously, for the Soviet authorities this celebration was of utmost importance, therefore they spared neither human nor financial resources for organizing the festivities.

The festivities in November 1918 were conducted on a truly grand scale. The two-day (7 and 8 November) cultural programme of the holiday included theatrical plays, musical concerts, screening of films, poetry readings and fireworks, as well as official marches in the centre of the city, demonstrations and gun salutes to signal the opening of the ceremony. In Petrograd the public, for instance, watched a so-called ‘naval show,’ which demonstrated the splendour and power of the Baltic Fleet positioned on the Neva river.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, In Moscow, October was commemorated with a number of special events, such as the unveiling of a statue of Marx and Engels in Revolution Square and the appearance of Lenin in parade in front of the Kremlin.<sup>25</sup> The overall mood of the holiday was joyful, as it conveyed, to a large extent, the spirit of mass festival inherited from traditional Russian culture. Thus, describing the first celebration of October, contemporaries used the epithets of ‘magical,’ ‘enchanting,’ and ‘stunning’ with regard to the festive environment in Moscow and Petrograd during those days. The celebration indeed was a spectacle: it was, one and the same time, mysterious and carnivalesque. It was a colourful manifestation of the new Soviet order and a projection of Communist ideals to the general people through a prism of joyfulness. Speaking about early Bolshevik festivals, James von Geldern argues that they were powerful instruments for manipulating public consciousness. He maintains that political elites used such festivals with a view to ‘indoctrinate the population’ about Marxism-Leninism at the core of the regime.<sup>26</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> A. Rabinowitch, *The Bolshevik in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007, p. 358.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 365.

<sup>25</sup> Stites, op. cit. p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> J. Geldern. *Bolshevik Festivals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 10.

his view, “festivals, along with the other propaganda media, allowed the party to develop new identities that would legitimize its rule and assist its difficult transition from a revolutionary underground inspired by ideology to a ruling power.”<sup>27</sup>

The control of public memory was vital for the regime. The stability of the new order was largely dependent on the earliest recollections of the Soviet population. Thus, from 1918 until 1922 Lenin, together with his closest associates, was preoccupied with *the very manner* of how the events of 1917 would be remembered by the population both in the USSR and abroad. To construct a univocal narrative of October became a top priority of the Soviet political elite, which devoted itself fully to this memory-making process. In this connection, it is not surprising that the first account of the revolution was produced by a key member of the Bolshevik government itself as early as 1918. It was Leon Trotsky, who, serving as Commissar of Foreign Affairs, wrote *the History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*. It should be noted, however, that this book was created mainly for the purposes of promoting socialism abroad. Although meant primarily for the foreign audience (German workers), Trotsky’s *History* presented the Bolsheviks’ upheaval in a way that would be typical for all accounts of the revolution in the USSR. It portrayed October as a genuine revolution of workers and peasants, who, according to Trotsky’s work, had been dissatisfied with the old political regime. It also ‘explained’ the role of the Bolshevik party, which, as the *History* stated, only supervised the masses as they went on revolt.<sup>28</sup> In Trotsky’s *History* the Bolsheviks’ actions were completely justified: the Bolsheviks did not stage the conspiracy, neither did they aim to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. They acquired their power legitimately and exclusively due to wide popular support.<sup>29</sup> Such representations of October served as a master narrative over the entire Soviet period.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> J. White, “Early Historical Interpretations of the Russian Revolution 1918-24”. *Soviet Studies* 37 (3), 1985, p. 333.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Generally, it is hard to overestimate the role that October played in the Soviet culture of remembrance. Throughout the entire existence of the USSR the memory of the October Revolution would be exploited by all Soviet leaders as a ‘foundation tale’ of Communism.<sup>30</sup> Literally each head of the USSR, from Lenin to Gorbachev, would invest considerable time and resources in commemoration of October, treating it as the cornerstone of Soviet history. For more than seventy years (1917 to 1991) the revolutionary narrative served as a story of the creation of the first socialist society and the truthfulness of this story was *officially* never put in doubt.

During Stalinist period, practices of memorialization continued being censored by the state and kept under strict control. Yet, such control was significantly reinforced. As all aspects of culture, including visual arts, press, literature and cinema, were streamlined and aligned with ideological needs of the Communist Party, so too was the public recall highly ‘nationalized.’ In Stalinist society, like in any authoritarian society, memory became a part of ‘state property,’ which existed only to the extent that was necessary to maintain the regime. Every record of the past could have been easily erased or misrepresented and every evidence or eyewitness could be destroyed.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the General Secretary personally took part in the construction of Soviet memory. Proclaiming himself a ‘supreme historian’ and the only person with full knowledge of truth about the past, he wrote historical articles, read the drafts of school textbooks, commissioned films on historical subjects, and supervised writers and directors when they created history-related works.<sup>32</sup> Thus, from 1929 to 1953 it was mainly Stalin who took charge of writing and re-writing history in the Soviet state.

One of the greatest of Stalin’s ‘merits’ in the production of official memory was the introduction of a new history textbook, the one that would be studied in all Soviet schools,

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<sup>30</sup> F. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*. NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Geller and Nekrich, op. cit., p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 295– 299.

colleges and military training academies. The textbook was called *A Short Course in the History of the All-Russian Communist Party* and published in 1937. Although it presented a combined product of several historians, each of whom wrote different sections and participated in the general editing of the publication, none of their names were mentioned on the title page, except for the name of Shestakov, who was formally acknowledged as chief editor.<sup>33</sup> Rather than favouring the authors, all credits for the *Short Course* were given to Stalin. He was the one who initiated the creation and gave the overall direction for this textbook; he was the one who made the revision and approved the final draft. It is thus quite essential that the release of the *Short Course* in September 1937 was a cultural sensation and the significance of this event was at that time greatly overstressed. It evoked positive appraisals in scientific circles and the press, where both scholars and journalists hailed the text as an absolute ‘victory’ on the ‘historical front.’<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, Marxist historians took the book as an exemplary model for all further historical publications. They likewise recommended the *Short Course* to all groups of the Soviet population. According to Marxists, it was not only pupils or students, but also peasants, workers, political activists and agitators, who should read the small text.<sup>35</sup> Thus, this school textbook was used widely for educating the Soviet masses.

The *Short Course* became the canonical text of the Stalinist years, as it demonstrated an unquestionable Stalinist vision of the Soviet past. The textbook narrated events in a way that was chosen by the General Secretary himself, who cared little about the truthful representation of facts or adequate assessment of historical actors. Disproving all previously existing historical schools (e.g. the Pokrovsky school), Stalin created his own history of the

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<sup>33</sup> A. Banerji, *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2008. p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> D. Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*. London: Harvard University Press, 2002. p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

USSR, in which he interpreted the data according to his own consideration. But what kind of history was it?

Stalin combined an inconsistent amalgam of events and figures drawn from both the Soviet present and Russian national past that in his construct. As Geller and Nekrich note, history in the Stalinist era “took the form of a monstrous mixture of Marxism and nationalism,” two elements that seemed to be totally incompatible with each other.<sup>36</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Stalin still honoured Marxist ideas with all relevant memories of Lenin and October revolution (like the Bolsheviks did), but on the other, he actively promoted a glorious Russian past, which involved a broad historical period starting from Kievan Rus’ and up to the New Era. Setting a link between Soviet present and Russian past, as Stalin assumed, should have helped to consolidate his power.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, the General Secretary hoped to evoke a sense of patriotism among Soviet people. Stalin’s message was clear. If Russian predecessors managed to build a state, then he too would be able to construct an empire, even though for that purpose some radical measures would be used.

While incorporating the Russian past in the new Soviet history, Stalin selected only those actors that he considered useful. These were the talented generals, dedicated heroes and prominent Russian tsars and princes. In the same manner, he picked from history examples of foes and traitors, to show whom the state should have hated most. The list of Stalin’s favourite characters included princes Alexander Nevsky and Yaroslav the Wise, heroes Minin and Pozharsky, as well as tsars Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great.<sup>38</sup> The latter two were particularly privileged. It was Ivan and Peter who among all Russian tsars deserved special attention and the highest praise from Stalin. Moreover, Stalinist culture openly celebrated the personality cults of these two autocrats.<sup>39</sup> *A Short Course in the History of the All-Russian*

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<sup>36</sup> Geller and Nekrich, op. cit., p. 295.

<sup>37</sup> Banerji, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>38</sup> E. Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Banerji, op. cit., p. 61.

*Communist Party*, for instance, provided extensive description of their lives and deeds, while saying almost nothing about other no less prominent Russian tsars. Stalin's admiration for Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible was limitless: he glorified them as true national heroes and exemplary rulers, who successfully managed the state. Thus, in his view, not only did they consolidate the Russian empire, but also modernized and enlightened the society that otherwise would have lived in the Dark Ages. Association with Ivan's and Peter's rule allowed Stalin to present himself as an heir to Russian tsars. In this way, he clearly declared himself as flag-bearer of the 'glorious' autocratic tradition.

Stalinist visions of the past reached the Soviet population through pictorial art, literature and, to a great extent, cinema. The General Secretary commissioned a plethora of artistic production, as he wanted his images of history to prevail in paintings, literary works, operas and films. Be it Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) or Alexi Tolstoy's novel *Peter I* (1930-1934), all were produced at the official direction of Stalin. Every single production required Stalin's personal approval. Moreover, the leader often personally intervened with the artistic process as such. He told writers and directors which subjects to choose and how to represent the main characters. Thus, for instance, he constantly watched Eisenstein and Tolstoy, when the two were creating their works. Working under the guidance of Stalin, Tolstoy produced a whole series of the Petrine-oriented pieces, which included several plays and novels.<sup>40</sup> Eisenstein, similarly, screened a number of films devoted to the Russian tsars, *Ivan the Terrible* and *Alexander Nevsky*.

As for the cinema, it was, undoubtedly, the most popular 'historicizing' medium in the Stalinist era. Stalin personally was very fond of films, for he thought that they were an effective means for both entertainment and indoctrination of the Soviet masses. It was through the moving picture, that the General Secretary could send his ideological message to the general public in the most direct way. As Evgeny Dobrenko notes, "occupied with the

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<sup>40</sup> Brandenberger, op. cit., p. 56.

ideological constructing – via history – of its own legitimacy and new Soviet identity, Stalinism relied on the cinema, seeing in this ‘most important of the arts’ the most effective form of propaganda and ‘organization of the masses’.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Stalinist culture produced a number of historical films that portrayed Russian tsars, revolutionary activists and prominent military leaders in an exalted, romanticized manner. Such films were designed specifically to promote a Stalinist ‘mixture’ of Soviet and Russian history. They informed the Soviet present with images of a Russian national past better than any other artistic medium.

Considering various ways of how the Soviet authorities manipulated and controlled representations of the past during the first half of the Soviet period, that is until Stalin’s death in 1953, one concludes that there was no such concept as ‘public memory.’ Collective recall was successfully appropriated by the Soviet state, which replaced all forms of cultural memory with official ideology. Whatever the public learned about the past ‘appeared in the light of the doctrine of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin,’ whereas all other alternative interpretations were simply banned and excluded.<sup>42</sup> After the October revolution, the Soviet leaders started to furnish history in a manner that suited their political agenda. Metaphorically speaking, they established a total control ‘over the past,’ a tactic common to all authoritarian states.

### **2.3. Late Socialism and the Emergence of Counter-Memory**

As stated above, the Soviet authorities did their utmost to force an official vision of the past upon the population. Led by the adamant leader, the Communist government promoted only those historical representations that served political and ideological needs of the regime. Yet, the hegemony of state-sponsored memory in the USSR was, at some point, challenged.

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<sup>41</sup> Dobrenko, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Geller and Nekrich, op. cit., p. 10.

As the Soviet Union entered the phase of so-called *late Socialism*, state control over public memory was significantly reduced and, as a consequence, the Soviet underground culture witnessed the emergence of alternative, non-official memories. During late Socialism the authorities kept on producing and distributing official accounts of the past among the general public, yet the influence of such accounts diminished and, conversely, at the same time collective *counter-memory* gained its momentum.

In this section, I study the notion of counter-memory as part of collective memory in the USSR. I suggest that counter-memory was inherent primarily to late Soviet culture, which altered largely from the preceding cultures of the oppressive Lenin's and Stalin's rule. Different in spirit, political and social atmosphere, the period of late Socialism opened a way for development of alternative recollections. It is during that time that counter-memory started to question the official 'master narrative' advanced by the Soviet political elites. While characterizing the term 'counter-memory,' Yael Zerubavel asserts: "the master commemorative narrative represents the political elite's construction of the past, which serves its special interests and promotes its political agenda, – counter-memory challenges this hegemony by offering a divergent commemorative narrative representing the views of marginalized individuals or groups within the society."<sup>43</sup> In what follows, I will examine the questions *how* and *why* proliferation of counter-memory was possible precisely during the second half of the Soviet Union's existence.

'Late Socialism,' a term used to describe the three final decades in the history of the USSR, was a period of a great change in political, cultural and ideological facets of the Soviet society. It was in 1953 when the death of Stalin, the most brutal Soviet dictator, marked the beginning of a new phase in the regime with the birth of a more open and dynamic culture, in

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<sup>43</sup> Y. Zerubavel. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1995. p. 11.

which both the public and artistic intelligentsia felt, to some degree, a freedom to express themselves. As the purges of intellectuals stopped, the inmates returned from the labour camps and the level of censorship was significantly brought down, a new cultural atmosphere was established, which encouraged the Soviet public in active participation. Unlike the previous years of total oppression, during late Socialism, the Soviets, finally, got a chance to speak out: they started to produce new alternative forms of culture that laid outside of official discourse. Although such forms were often doomed to exist in the ‘underground,’ it was impossible to neglect them because of their overwhelming diversity. Throughout the 1960s-1980s there was an outbreak of informal trends, such as dissident literature, amateur jazz and rock music, nonconformist art, and the youth’s Western-borrowed trends in fashion.

The major cultural upheavals, however, coincided with two particular rulers, Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev. Thus, an overall ‘relaxation’ of Soviet cultural life commenced with the Khrushchev’s *Thaw* (mid 1950s –mid 1960s) and was continued during Gorbachev’s policies of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* (1986-88). Khrushchev was the first to break the shackles of the previously imposed censorship. Under his reign arts and literature eventually “came up for air and tried to breathe, to probe long-neglected themes of interior spiritual life, the bleakness of the countryside, the victims of Stalinism, and the glossed over problems of adultery, sexuality, divorce, illegitimacy, and alcohol abuse.”<sup>44</sup> Thaw brought many important shifts to the Soviet cultural scene, including such aspects as the emergence of intellectual literature and the influx of foreign cultural production, – yet it only partially and with great caution, opened a way to freedom of expression. An almost total liberalization of culture would be achieved later due to the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, who with his policy of *Glasnost* (‘openness’) would create an unprecedented space for public debate.

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<sup>44</sup> R. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 124.

It is this *relative* openness and freedom of late Socialist culture that provided new ways for the development of public memory in the 1960s - 1980s. Although the Soviet authorities continued to implement the politics of memory, a new more favourable cultural environment, similarly, enabled the Soviet population to transmit ‘unsanctioned’ versions of the past. As a result, collective recall, like all other aspects of Soviet culture, underwent a profound transformation: it was enhanced by multiple non-official representations of the past that were distributed through unauthorized publications, informal communities, underground art, as well as different forms of oral communication, such as jokes, anecdotes, and ‘doublespeak’. Thus, Svetlana Boym assumes that the development of counter-memory became “a common feature of alternative intellectual life in the USSR during the period of 1960s - 1980s.”<sup>45</sup> She adds that such memory was predominantly non-institutionalized as it “depended largely on informal networks, personal connections and friendships.”<sup>46</sup> Considering counter-memory as a phenomenon and a specific term, the scholar Ann Burlein highlights a few other qualities, which are heterogeneity and close interrelation with the mainstream recall. In her view, counter-memories are “‘counter’ not because they are foreign to the mainstream, but because they draw on mainstream currents in order to redirect their flow.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, counter-recollections exist along with the formal hegemonic memory, while resisting and constantly questioning the official accounts of the past.

In the mid-1960s – 1970s the main ‘producers’ of counter-memory were the so-called ‘dissidents.’ Generally, the Soviet dissident network presented an underground organization that challenged vital components of the socialist regime. The fact that this organization produced multitudes of counter-memories is hardly surprising. By the early 1960s many

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<sup>45</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. NY: Basic Books, 2001, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> A. Burlein, “Countermemory on the Right: the Case of Focus on the Family” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. M. Bal, J. Crewe and L. Spitzer. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999, p 216.

Soviet intellectuals, including prominent writers, artists, philosophers and political activists, became ‘dissidents.’ The very notion of ‘dissident’ means someone who resists the official discourse. It is one, who opposes the dominant political agenda, ideological doctrine, state institutions or mainstream culture, as one openly expresses divergent views. According to such description, an overwhelming majority of Soviet intellectuals in 1960s – 1970s were dissidents, who “criticized the existing political order” of the USSR in their search for social justice and individual freedom.<sup>48</sup>

The Soviet dissident movement as such emerged in 1964, at the closing stage of Khrushchev’s Thaw and the beginning of the stagnant, autocratic rule of Leonid Brezhnev. Ideologically, the dissidents got inspiration from Khrushchev’s liberal reforms and the idea of openness that the leader proclaimed in his famous “Secret speech.”<sup>49</sup> As mentioned above, Khrushchev ‘liberalized’ the Soviet society (even though just partially as the regime, of course, remained authoritarian and *not* democratic) and encouraged the public to participate in the social and cultural life of the USSR. Dissidents took Khrushchev’s call for liberalization as a starting point for their underground activity, so that they “became probably the most vocal and articulate advocates of the politics of *glasnost* (openness).”<sup>50</sup> For instance, in many of their uncensored publications they stood for pluralism of public opinions, freedom of thought and speech. In this regard, however, it is a mistake to assume that the dissident movement had a particular political programme. Such a programme in fact, did not exist. Neither did the dissidents offer a unified plan for reformation of the Soviet system. *Glasnost* was the main thing that they strove for, as they wanted openly to express their opinions in all public spheres, be it politics, literature or arts. Generally, the dissidents were justice and truth-seekers, who did not give up their ideals of *Glasnost* even during repressive Brezhnev’s rule.

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<sup>48</sup> J. Bergman, “Soviet Dissidents on the Russian Intelligentsia, 1956-1985: the Search for a Usable Past”. *Russian Review* 51 (1), 1992, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> S. Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat”. *Public Culture* 13 (2), 2001, p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193.

While searching for truth and objective assessment of political reality, the dissidents likewise sought for unbiased accounts of the past. In their view, Soviet history had many bleak spots and misinterpretations. In some particular cases, the dissidents could not agree with official representations of past events, actors or entire periods. Hence, they attempted to reverse this situation by producing their own recollections. Thus, in the 1960s – 1970s the Soviet intellectual scene saw an inflow of counter-memories, which were generated by dissident historians, writers, poets and those underground thinkers who sought to reveal the truth about the past. Unsurprisingly, such counter-memories were heterogeneous. The dissidents did not provide a uniform vision of the past. Instead, they expressed a stunning array of views “ranging from left to right, liberal to neofascist, orthodox Marxism-Leninism to Russian Orthodox religion.”<sup>51</sup> Generally, one can regard dissident counter-memory as a plurality of different voices that burst out in the underground of late Socialism.

Yet, there were certain issues on which the dissidents shared a univocal opinion. Thus, despite the overall heterogeneity of dissident culture, some particular instances of the Soviet past received either positive or negative evaluation in all dissident accounts (historical articles, literary works or graphic art). One such instance was the legacy of Stalin. It was with respect to the Stalinist period that the dissidents expressed identical views: the Stalinism, according to them, was a ‘dark age’ that hindered the development of socialism and “crippled every area of Soviet life, beginning with Soviet agriculture which had yet to recover from Stalinist collectivization.”<sup>52</sup> Stalinism, generally, lay at the centre of Soviet underground discussion. Many Soviet intellectuals, and especially those who suffered from Stalin’s repressions before, craved for historical justice. They wanted to expose the whole truth about the atrocities that had been committed by the ruthless dictator. For example, Roy Medvedev, a

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<sup>51</sup> R. Medvedev and S. Cohen, *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union from Roy Medvedev's Underground Magazine Political Diary*. NY: Norton, 1982, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> R. Miliband, “Stalin and After: Some Comments on Two Books by Roy Medvedev”. *Socialist Register* 1973, p. 382.

leftist political theorist and historian of late Socialism, attempted to demonstrate the full scale of Stalinist horrors in a number of unauthorized publications. In his monograph *Let History Judge*, Medvedev, like many other Soviet dissidents, brought to the surface such crimes of Stalin's rule as the unprecedented number of innocent victims, poor preparation for WWII and the perversion of the very idea of Communism.<sup>53</sup> He also stressed the fact that Stalin bore full and total responsibility for all crimes committed. Medvedev, together with other dissidents, certainly opposed the political rehabilitation of Stalin.<sup>54</sup>

Considering dissident memory as such, one should also examine the manner in which recollections were disseminated among members of this underground organization. Indeed, it was specific. To distribute accounts of the past (although not only them, but all illegal publications) dissidents used so-called *Samizdat*, which was, at one and the same time, a form of unauthorized press and a dynamic social practice. The Samizdat method (literally meaning 'self-publishing') was both simple and creative, and typically looked as follows. The original author typed a text with a few carbon copies, whereupon these were handed out to other members of the samizdat network. If others appreciated the text, they likewise produced a few copies.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, when in some points a 'reproducer' did not agree with an author, they could modify the copy according to their own consideration. It is through Samizdat that dissident recollections, as independent voices of counter-memory, reached different regions. Ann Komaromi describes Samizdat as "mode of existence of the text"; following her description, one can also define Samizdat as a "mode of existence of counter-memory" in late Socialism.<sup>56</sup>

Dissident recollections, however, were just the first stage in the development of counter-memory during late Socialism. The cultural upheaval of Khrushchev's Thaw only partially

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Brezhnev, who came to the Soviet power after Khrushchev, partially rehabilitated Stalin.

<sup>55</sup> H. Min Joo, "Voices of Freedom: Samizdat". *Europe-Asia Studies* 56 (4), 2004, p. 572.

<sup>56</sup> A. Komaromi, "Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics". *Slavic Review* 71 (1), 2012, p. 71.

released alternative voices of remembrance. In other words, it was just the beginning. A true outburst of counter-memories struck the USSR later, in the mid-1980s, when the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev initiated Perestroika, his massive campaign to restructure the Soviet society.

Gorbachev's Perestroika generally marked the time when all forms of public memory began to flourish. Official and non-official historical narratives overwhelmed the Soviet population through the periodic press, novels, films, archival reports and new textbooks on history. A special policy of Glasnost, which was implemented as part of Perestroika, contributed much in this regard. Glasnost meant a significant reduction of state censorship, and above all, it meant that all previously 'forbidden zones' of the Soviet past were finally allowed to be revealed.<sup>57</sup> Gorbachev himself insisted on the necessity of Glasnost. In his view, a fresh and sober revision of Soviet history was vital for reforming the society. Only removing blank pages from Soviet history, as Gorbachev assumed, would enable the USSR to progress steadily towards a bright new future.<sup>58</sup> What he could not foresee, however, was the true effect that Glasnost would have on the Soviet public. Faced with plenitudes of shocking disclosures about the Soviet past, people would become critical: they would start drawing their own conclusions about the country, which they had been living in for the past seventy years.

Implemented in 1986-1988, the reform of Glasnost "unleashed the energy of history" and caused a high public interest in the issues of the Soviet past.<sup>59</sup> As Robert Davies notes, in the course of those two years "tens of millions of Soviet citizens became passionately involved in studying their country's past, and in rethinking the principles and practice of

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<sup>57</sup> Y. Yakovlev, "Flagships of Glasnost". *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's reformers*, ed. S. F. Cohen, K. Heuvel. NY: Norton, 1989, p. 197.

<sup>58</sup> Banerji, op. cit. p. 97.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

Soviet socialism.”<sup>60</sup> At that time everyone, literally, felt the need to reflect upon both the historical legacy of the Soviet Empire and the current state of the socialist system in general. Again, this was prompted by the policies coming from above. Gorbachev’s initial intention for Glasnost was to foster public participation in the social, political and cultural life of the Soviet state. According to him, Glasnost was to be “extended not only to the official media and creative intelligentsia but to the public at large,” so that all citizens, regardless of their age or professional occupation, could have expressed their special interests freely.<sup>61</sup> The leader tolerated such pluralism of public opinion, suggesting that it would help to accomplish the overall plan of Perestroika. Thus, for instance, in one of his addresses to the Writers’ Union, Gorbachev openly welcomed constructive public criticism: “We don’t have an opposition. How then can we monitor ourselves? Only through criticism and self-criticism. And most of all through Glasnost.”<sup>62</sup>

Practically, Glasnost allowed informal groups and independent social movements to exist within official discourse of the USSR. Consequently, during 1986-1988 multitudes of self-constituted groups, clubs and associations came out of the underground and penetrated official Soviet culture. Such groups consisted mainly of young people (and ‘former’ dissidents), who shared common interests in different areas, including everything from music or art and to political or environmental issues. The most prominent among them, for instance, were ‘the Trust Group,’ ‘Club for Social Initiatives,’ ‘Epicentre,’ ‘Klub Perestroika,’ as well as others.<sup>63</sup> Many of them formed a prototype for political opposition to CPSU (‘Communist Party of the Soviet Union’), as they expressed ‘radical’ anti-Soviet sentiment. As Kathleen Smith argues, all the informal associations of late 1980s “were bound to test the regime’s

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<sup>60</sup> R. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev’s Revolution*. Preface. London: University of Birmingham, 1989, p. vii.

<sup>61</sup> K. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> Banerji, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>63</sup> G. Hosking, *The Road to post-Communism: Independent Political Movements in the Former Soviet Union, 1985-1991*. NY: Pinter Publishers, 1992. pp. 11-15.

commitment to liberalization and its tolerance for diverse agendas and independent policy initiatives.”<sup>64</sup> What is more important, however, is that such informal associations were the principal carriers of counter-memory. It is through these clubs that counter-recollections began to spread across the USSR at a tremendous pace.

The most significant organization that should be discussed, in this context, is Memorial Society, which emerged in 1987 as an informal social organisation. Memorial deserves particular attention. Firstly, because it is a very broad public movement. Already in 1989, it included “180 or so branches with perhaps 20,000 active members.”<sup>65</sup> Secondly, Memorial is an example of a bright cultural and political movement, which on the one hand represented oppositional interests, but on the other existed within the Soviet system and not in the underground any more. Secondly, it survived not only Gorbachev’s Perestroika, but also the collapse of the USSR and remains today an active organization that deals with problems of reconsidering the Soviet past.

The original and underlying purpose of Memorial was to commemorate victims of Stalin’s regime, that is, those who suffered from unfair Stalinist persecutions, illegal arrests, executions, imprisonment in labour camps and exiles. The group aimed at constructing a just and comprehensive memory of Stalinist crimes – the kind that would facilitate the rehabilitation of Stalin’s victims. The group’s organizers insisted that the Stalinist past still needed attention. Although some attempts to disclose the crimes of the dictator were undertaken by the Soviet government, the unlawful Stalinist rule still required a thorough re-examination.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, at the onset of Gorbachev’s Perestroika, the newly emerged Memorial started its work on restoring historical justice. Its foremost task, for instance, was to create a full database of the repressed, to build monuments commemorating Stalin’s victims, as well as to

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>65</sup> Hosking, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 85.

found an independent research centre devoted to the study of Soviet history.<sup>67</sup> A no less important mission was educating the Soviet population at large and attracting attention to the problem of the Stalinist legacy. For that purpose, young activists of Memorial went on anti-Stalinist demonstrations, organized exhibitions, published articles in popular journals and launched a number of other educational programmes to promote a correct vision of the Stalinist epoch among the general public.<sup>68</sup>

Within a couple of years, Memorial turned from a mere informal group into an impressive popular movement, which attracted people of different ages and social categories to participation in a broad anti-Stalinist campaign. Throughout big cities and provincial towns of the USSR thousands of Soviet citizens joined the movement, as they wished to settle accounts with the troublesome past. Although almost four decades had passed since Stalin's death, the memory of the repressions persisted in public minds. This was the main reason why the Memorial gained such enormous popularity. The trend united all those who fought for truthful representation of the most obscure period in Soviet history.

The counter-memory of late Socialism was a powerful force. It was also destructive, for being opposed to official discourse, counter-recollections undermined the grounds of the Soviet system. As Cubitt notes, "resistance to the 'dominant' reading may – perhaps with the assistance of some counter-hegemonic social agency, such as a revolutionary political party or a dissident religious or intellectual movement – develop into something that is itself organized and socially rooted, and that has the potential to challenge and destabilize, and even possibly in the end to overthrow, the previously hegemonic reading."<sup>69</sup> The wider counter-memory spread within the Soviet population, the more people questioned the legitimacy of the regime and hence, expressed dissatisfaction with their own country. The alternative accounts of the

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<sup>67</sup> Banerji, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>69</sup> Cubitt, op. cit., p.226.

past, which predominated during Glasnost, caused a true wave of protest against the Soviet government. Obviously, counter-memory contributed largely to the disintegration of the USSR in 1991.

#### **2.4. Denouncing the Soviet Past during the Yeltsin Era**

The August 1991 failed coup signalled not only a shift to a new regime, but the end of an entire era and the beginning of a new stage in the history of Russia. In their failed attempt to seize power, the members of GKChP (from Russian *Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Chrezvychainomu Polozheniiu*, meaning ‘The State Emergency Committee’) precipitated the breakdown of the USSR and the subsequent establishment of independent state of the Russian Federation. The Communist period suddenly became a part of the country’s *past*, whereupon “everything referring to Russian life began to carry the prefix ‘post’ – post-Soviet, post-Glasnost.”<sup>70</sup> It was August 1991, which, like October 1917, opened a new ‘post-communist’ page in Russian history, while simultaneously closing the seventy-four years in existence of the failed Soviet Empire. The post-Communist transition to democracy – the time when Boris Yeltsin held presidential office – was notable for an extremely negative attitude towards the Soviet past. As Soviet rule was eventually overthrown, anti-Soviet sentiment prevailed in the official Russian discourse. During 1991 – 1996 virtually all aspects of the historical, political and cultural legacy of the former Union were officially denounced, and ‘all things Soviet’ were subjected to rigorous criticism.

The first Russian president himself was an ardent fighter with Communism. In the aftermath of the August coup Yeltsin launched his huge campaign on de-communization of

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<sup>70</sup>S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. p. 218.

Russia.<sup>71</sup> From the late 1991 to 1993 he used every opportunity to vilify the collapsed Communist regime and to expose the evils of the single-party state. In his formal statements, Yeltsin, for instance, often referred to Communist rule as a ‘nightmare’ or ‘antihuman system,’ thereby emphasizing the fact that in 1917 Russia embarked on the wrong way of development.<sup>72</sup> According to Yeltsin, the entire Soviet period represented a great mistake, which now had to be, by all means, eliminated from public memory. In his view, from the Revolution and until 1991 the Russian people lived in a ‘state of terror,’ characterized by “mass repressions, strict political monopolism, class purges, isolation from the rest of the world and a generally hostile, fearsome environment.”<sup>73</sup> The Revolution itself was treated by Yeltsin as a ‘destructive force’ that led to “the loss of many of Russia’s positive achievements.” As he stated, the Bolsheviks were driven by the radical idea “to raze everything to the ground,” so that in pursuit of their political goals they ruined “the civil society, the premises of democracy and private ownership.” For Yeltsin, in 1917 “an extra tough mobilizing model of social development emerged,” which “concentrated all resources in the hands of the ruled-by-one-party state.”<sup>74</sup>

Yeltsin’s critique of the USSR was pervasive and uncompromising and touched upon manifold aspects of the collapsed Soviet power. Among them, the Communist Party, as the central institution of Soviet government, deserved Yeltsin’s most negative assessment. The president often claimed in his speeches that for more than seven decades, people suffered from the limitless dictatorship of the CPSU. The Party, in his view, subjugated the entire society to its will and saw no barriers at all, thus interfering even with the private life of Soviet citizens: “any manifestation of independence was taken under the vigilant Party’s

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<sup>71</sup> R. Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. p. 77.

<sup>72</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Zapiski prezidenta.” Moskva: *Ogonek*, 1994.

<sup>73</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Poslanie prezidenta Rossii Federal’nomu Sobraniiu RF: Rossiia za kotoruiu my v otvete.” 1996. Retrieved from <http://www.intelros.org/lib/elzin/1996.htm>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

control,” and “any disobedience was harshly suppressed.” As an outcome, people lived in “a suffocating, poisonous atmosphere of total restraint (non-freedom)” – such was Yeltsin’s verdict.<sup>75</sup>

Discussing the collapse of the USSR in his annual reports, Yeltsin emphasized the initial inconsistency of the Communist project. In his opinion, it was doomed to failure from the very beginning of its existence. Yeltsin’s words on this point were as follows: “the tragic outcomes of the Soviet experiment were predictable and consequential,” for neither the Soviet economy, nor the political system appeared to be functional. He stated in a similar vein that due to the drawbacks in the regime the USSR fell well behind Western developed countries, which at that time, conversely, made significant scientific and technical progress. The Union, as Yeltsin assumed, simply could not keep up with time and therefore it “collapsed under the weight of an all-embracing crisis, while being torn apart by economic, political and social contradictions.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, according to Yeltsin, what modern Russia inherited from its predecessor was a broken economy, a “cumbersome system of government” and a degraded social structure – all symptoms of a heavy disease needing a special cure.<sup>77</sup> Together with these major issues, Russia also took over the burden of “old prejudice, ideological doctrines and standards of political behaviour,” which was not easy to shake off.<sup>78</sup>

Apparently, discrediting the Soviet past was a conscious decision for Boris Yeltsin. It was a special tactic employed by the president with a view to promote his own regime. Thus, he created a negative image of Communism deliberately, so as to contrast it with the image of

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<sup>75</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossii k sograzhdanam.” *Izvestia*, 20 August 1992.

<sup>76</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Poslanie prezidenta Rossii Federal’nomu Sobraniyu RF: Rossiia za kotoruiu my v otvete.” 1996. Retrieved from <http://www.intelros.org/lib/elzin/1996.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Iz vystupleniya prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii po Rossiiskomu televideniu”. *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 18 February 1993.

<sup>78</sup> B. Yeltsin, “Poslanie prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Federal’nomu Sobraniyu.” 16 February 1995. Retrieved from [http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie\\_presidenta\\_rosii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnom\\_u\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_o\\_dejstvennosti\\_gosudarstvennoj\\_vlasti\\_v\\_rossii\\_1995\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie_presidenta_rosii_borisa_elcina_federalnom_u_sobraniju_rf_o_dejstvennosti_gosudarstvennoj_vlasti_v_rossii_1995_god.html).

the future political system.<sup>79</sup> The negation of the preceding rule, as Yeltsin (falsely) assumed, should have helped to project a more positive vision of the state that he intended to build. If the collapsed Soviet power was authoritarian, oppressive and ‘antihuman,’ then the new post-Communist Russia would be liberal and civilized. He emphasized this contrast, pledging to construct a new democratic society that would be radically different from the Soviet model. It was especially during the first two years of his presidency that Yeltsin promised to build a complete antipode of the USSR – a new Russia distinguished by “a market economy, democratic polity, human rights, popular control over the government, and a ‘normal’ life for its citizens.”<sup>80</sup> He drew a sharp line between old (‘negative’) Soviet and the new (‘positive’) Russian states, thus, trying to demonstrate the deficiencies of the former and the mythic advantages of the latter.

Yeltsin’s drive against Communism peaked in 1996, when in the run for the presidential seat he competed with Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF).<sup>81</sup> The 1996 Russian presidential election, which in the final round presented a contest of the Communist (Zyuganov) and the liberal democratic (Yeltsin) contenders, most blatantly demonstrated how anti-Communist and anti-Soviet propaganda worked for the victory of the latter. Ultimately, Yeltsin would not have succeeded in this political fight, if, as part of his presidential campaign, he had not employed the negative, selectively extracted representations of Soviet history. The strategy for promoting his candidacy was the following. In order to neutralize his main competitor, Yeltsin, together with a team of advisers, ‘advertised’ calamities and hardships that happened to common people in the Communist USSR. Thus, throughout the campaign, the pro-Yeltsin’s media distributed images of Stalinist repressions, famines of the 1930s, the civil war and even the

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<sup>79</sup> G. Gill, *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 36.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>81</sup> R. Davis, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*. Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.

Brezhnevite consumer shortages with a purpose to remind Russian citizens about the dark side of Communism.<sup>82</sup> A remarkable example, in this regard, was the series of posters *Vote or Lose* (1996) that constituted part of Yeltsin's promotional campaign and apparently, targeted younger Russians.<sup>83</sup> Featuring only the short slogan "Vote or lose" and two contrasting images, each of these posters presented what life was under the Soviet regime and how it was after the fall of Communism. For instance, under the word 'vote' a positive image of a Western denim jacket was displayed, whereas under 'lose' appeared a negative image of a prisoner's coat.<sup>84</sup> In this manner, the advertisements showed the difference between the freedom of democratic present and oppressions of the Communist past.

By evoking the bad memories of the Soviet past, Yeltsin and his supporters clearly sought to assimilate those memories with the CPRF: "'The Communist Party has not changed its name and it will not change its methods' stated the posters on the eve of the run-off election."<sup>85</sup> Yeltsin's campaign 'warned' the voters about a possible return of the Soviet-era mischief in case of Zyuganov's victory. As a result, Russian citizens had to choose not between the two candidates, but between the two systems—between the current half-failed democratic and the Communist systems – the latter one that seemed to bring back the bygone 'harsh times.'<sup>86</sup> And as 'the lesser evil,' the majority of people favoured the former, for they did not wish to reinstate the Soviet regime.

As part of his anti-Communist drive, Yeltsin insisted that the material and symbolic vestiges of the Communist system should be removed from the surface of the new democratic Russia. One of the first steps undertaken by the Russian government in this regard was the elimination of Soviet-era place names and the return of their pre-revolutionary equivalents.

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<sup>82</sup> M. McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: the End of Polarized Politics*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1997, p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> K. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics of Memory during the Yeltsin Era*. NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 144.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.131.

<sup>86</sup> McFaul, op. cit., p. 27.

Thus, throughout different Russian regions towns, streets and squares were given back the names that for centuries existed in tsarist Russia. The most poignant example in this connection was the return of original names to major Russian cities: Leningrad became St Petersburg, Sverdlovsk Ekaterinburg, Gorky Nizhniy Novgorod and Kuibyshev Samara.<sup>87</sup> Another similar way to reject the Soviet past was the demolition of revolutionary statuary and busts of former Communist leaders. As Boym notes, after the August coup Russia again saw (as it had after the October Revolution 1917) “the fantastic spectacle of moving and flying monuments.”<sup>88</sup> A true wave of iconoclasm swept over Russian grounds, whereby dozens of Soviet statues were taken down and thereafter either completely destroyed or gathered in places invisible to the public. In this way, already by late 1992 many Russian squares were cleared from busts of Lenin and other Communist leaders in what looked like a great post-Communist symbolic ‘purge.’ It is remarkable that the destruction of these monuments resembled a popular fest in which many Russian citizens took an active part. The general public showed no mercy for the fallen stone idols. Encouraged by the promise of a new democratic state, people joyfully broke up with the old oppressive regime in anticipation of forthcoming changes. For instance, down of a monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the director of Cheka (*Chrezvychainaia Komissiia po Bor’be s Kontr-revoliutsionnoi Activnost’iu i Sabotazhem*, meaning ‘Commission for Combating Counter-revolution and Sabotage’) under Lenin, represented a mass spectacle. Muscovites willingly participated in the removal of the so-called ‘Iron Felix’ that was taken down from Lubyanka Square on the night of 22 August 1991, the day after the August coup.<sup>89</sup> According to Graeme Gill, destruction of statuary is typical when one political regime challenges another. He argues that it is a symbolic act,

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<sup>87</sup> Gill, op. cit., p. 183.

<sup>88</sup> Boym, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>89</sup> M. Yampolsky, “In the Shadow of Monuments: Notes on Iconoclasm and Time”. *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-century Russia*, ed. N. Condee. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995. p. 106.

which metaphorically demonstrates a total rejection of the forerunning power.<sup>90</sup> The toppled monuments of the Soviet leaders thus manifested the willingness of the new Russia to repudiate its Soviet past. “The treatment of these statues was perhaps the most literal and spontaneous deconstruction of the Soviet state by the Russian republic, and represented a literal attempt to ‘trash’ Soviet history.”<sup>91</sup>

Not only single sites but entire cities were subjected to ‘de-communization.’ In this connection, Moscow, as the former administrative and symbolic centre of Communism, was substantially modified. More than any other Russian city in the 1990s, it underwent the process of renaming its streets, squares, metro stations and saw the destruction or repurposing of monuments that commemorated Communist ideals. To transform the urban fabric of the ex-seat of the Soviet leadership was especially important given that in 1991 Moscow became the hub of the new Russian government. It was exactly in Moscow that the denouncement of the Soviet legacy reached a dramatic level. Besides the general demolition of Communist statuary, the city witnessed the closure of many other monuments associated with the Soviet rule. For instance, in November 1993 Yeltsin issued a special decree, ordering the Central Lenin Museum to be shut down. This museum during the Soviet period served as a means of ideological propaganda and hosted materials on the history of the CPSU.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from Yeltsin, it was also Yury Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow elected in 1992, who largely contributed to the transformation of the city’s landscape. Remaking the capital of Russia was Luzhkov’s primary target. He positioned himself as a mighty anti-Communist leader, and sought to invest the city with a new architectural image, different from that of the Soviet times. Although Luzhkov did not have a clear concept of the future city’s appearance, he nonetheless wanted to mould it in a way that would eliminate the symbolic markers of the

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<sup>90</sup> Gill, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>91</sup> B. Forest and J. Johnston, “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow”. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (3), 2002, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

former USSR. According to Luzhkov, the new Moscow's cityscape had to evoke a sense of patriotism and national pride among citizens. With that end in view, the mayor commissioned the construction of huge pieces of monumental art – sculptures and architectural ensembles that symbolized the best achievements of Russian people. For instance, such projects as Victory Monument at Poklonnaia Hill, the sixty-metre-tall statue of Peter the Great and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, all initiated by Luzhkov, expressed the new post-Communist Russian identity.<sup>93</sup> As Luzhkov suggested, these newly erected landmarks helped Russians to switch attention from the gloomy pages of Soviet history to more positive images of future Russia.

The final, but no less important form of symbolic denouncement of the Soviet past lied in the replacement of state insignia, which included the flag, emblem and anthem. All of these three components were changed in Yeltsin's Russia. The Soviet-era flag that featured the hammer and sickle on a red background was abandoned almost immediately, when on 31 December 1991 Yeltsin approved the pre-Revolutionary Russian tricolour as the national flag.<sup>94</sup> The latter originated from the tsarist period and had been officially used in Russia for more than three hundred years from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the Bolshevik's upheaval in 1917. In a similar way, the president chose a state emblem: through an adaptation of the tsarist pre-Petrine image of a double-headed eagle as a national symbol of Russia.<sup>95</sup> Yeltsin's choice was not accidental. To restore pre-revolutionary insignia meant to stress the continuity with the old national traditions that for ages existed in the Russian state. At the same time, it meant a decisive break with the Soviet era, which was treated by Yeltsin and his allies as a deviation from the country's essential historical development.

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, *Mythmaking*, p. 106 and p. 124.

<sup>94</sup> R. Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007. p. 104.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

The change of the state anthem, however, appeared to be a more difficult task. As Service indicates, the Russian government could not immediately find an adequate substitute for the USSR anthem. Composed by Aleksander Aleksandrov, the Soviet anthem presented a lively and moving tune that had been widely acknowledged by the Russian people, and hence its abandonment was a rather tricky issue. Yet in 1993 Aleksandrov's music was replaced with the 'Patriotic Song' of Mikhail Glinka, a classic nineteenth-century Russian composer. This new Russian hymn differed much from its Soviet forerunner and enjoyed little popularity. Generally, none of the three national symbols (flag, emblem and anthem) of the new Russia received large public support. Common people did not recognize the new insignia that had been swiftly and hastily imposed by the Russian government. The changed flag, emblem and hymn could not instantly transform the mentality of people, who still kept vivid memories of 'old' Soviet times.<sup>96</sup>

Yet in his effort to condemn the Soviet past, Yeltsin was not alone. He found supporters among new democratic activists, former dissidents and even those who once had been passionate proponents of Marxism-Leninism, but had converted their views to anti-Communism either during Glasnost or shortly after the disintegration of the USSR.<sup>97</sup> Inspired by Yeltsin's democratic rhetoric, those proponents believed that as soon as the system transitioned to democracy, the situation in the country would improve. Thus, many liberal-minded politicians and intellectuals regarded Communism as a hindrance that prevented Russia from successful development in the twentieth century. In 1993 a state Duma deputy Valery Babkin, for instance, published his famous article "*Kommunizm – fashizm dlia bednykh*" (meaning in Russian, "communism is fascism for the poor,") in which he equalled the Soviet regime to Hitler's Nazism.<sup>98</sup> Stating that "history of the Communist ideology was

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<sup>96</sup> Service, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>97</sup> Davis, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*, p. 40.

<sup>98</sup> V. Babkin, "Kommunizm – fashizm dlia bednykh". *Izvestiia*, 24 April 1993.

the history of hypocrisy and abuse of the Russian people,” Babkin blamed Bolsheviks for “granting to Russia more than seventy years of destruction, corruption and humiliation.”<sup>99</sup> In conclusion, the author stressed that Communism, as a ‘dark force,’ should never again be admitted to the power in Russia. Similar though less explicit critique of the Bolshevik government followed from Mark Zakharov, a famous director and playwright, who called for a total abandonment of the Soviet past. In a brief, but incisive article “*Otkaz ot leninskogo naslediiia – ne kraiinost’, a neobkhodimost’*” (meaning in Russian “rejection of Leninist legacy is not extremism, but a necessity”), he condemned the deeds of the founder of Communist regime. Thus Lenin, in Zakharov’s account, was an outstanding manipulator of public minds, who within a short time directed the multi-million Soviet masses in a way that benefited a small group of the Bolsheviks.<sup>100</sup> The first Soviet leader was also accused of establishing “the most aggressive, armed party of a new type” and “liquidation of such notions as moral and conscience.”<sup>101</sup>

Zakharov’s and Babkin’s articles colourfully illustrate the manner in which the Soviet legacy was treated in the period of post-Communist political turmoil. There were many other similar instances, in late 1991 – 93 the Russian press, television and literature “were dominated by a total repudiation of the Soviet past.”<sup>102</sup> The media virtually abounded with negative representations that covered all phases of Soviet rule. It was not only Stalin, but also Lenin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev whose actions were criticized at large. Such newspapers as *Izvestiia* (“News”), *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (“Independent Newspaper”) and *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (“Russian Newspaper”), for instance, systematically published materials to expose gloomy moments of the Communist era. The directors followed the same ‘anti-communist’ trend and hence, shot multitudes of anti-Stalinist, anti-Leninist, anti-Brezhnev

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> M. Zaharov. “Otkaz ot Leninskogo naslediiia – ne kraiinost’, a neobkhodimost’. *Izvestiia* 23, October 1993.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Marsh, op. cit., p. 104.

and anti-Gorbachev films which, in most cases, dramatized the crimes of Soviet leaders. The most poignant example in this regard, was the sensational, half-documentary and half-publicist work *The Russia We Lost (Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*, 1992) by Stanislav Govorukhin.

Govorukhin's film featured two contrasting images: the idealistic, romanticized image of pre-revolutionary Russia and the sinister image of the Soviet state established by the Bolsheviks. Obviously, the former was portrayed as an 'absolute good,' while the latter as an 'absolute evil,' for the director openly sympathized with tsarist times and expressed hostility towards Bolshevik's actions. Govorukhin, thus, depicted what Russia looked like before and after the Revolution of 1917. If under tsars "peasants were healthy and happy, workers earned a living wage, projects such as the Trans-Siberian Railroad made the country powerful, and vibrant aristocratic and intellectual cultures flourished," then the Soviet authorities turned it all into a 'hell on earth.'<sup>103</sup> It was Lenin who killed the Romanov family, initiated the Red Terror, executed innocent people and robbed peasants. In this film, Govorukhin put forward a true indictment of Communist rule: the Bolsheviks led by Lenin were responsible for the destruction of a wealthy, prosperous and economically developed tsarist Russia, the Russia that had been irrevocably lost.

Assessing Yeltsin's attempts to create a new Russian nationhood in the period of post-Communist transition, one assumes that such attempts had little success. The president failed to provide citizens with a coherent vision of the country's future and to explain what was meant by Russia's 'unique' path that would be different from the Soviet one. The problem was in Yeltsin's adamant, almost radical desire to break with the Soviet past. He put enormous stress on the construction of negative, unpleasing images of the collapsed Union, as he drew public attention to the errors of Soviet power. Clearly, this total denial of the Soviet

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<sup>103</sup> S. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012, p. 19.

legacy did not contribute to the formation of new Russian identity. People were too concerned with issues of *their* past, rather than focused on how to move forward. The bleak and depreciated memories of the state, in which Russians spent almost three quarters of the century, were like a burden that hindered the making of the nation.

By the early 1990s the Soviet ‘metanarrative’ had already been disproved, whereas an alternative substitute for it was not yet created.<sup>104</sup> As a result, people found themselves in a turbulent, uncertain situation, when the absence of a clearly-articulated vision of the new Russia made them ask paramount questions “who are we?” and “where are we going?” For such questions no one (and the state authorities in the first instance) at that time could grant an adequate answer.

## **2.5. Creating a Usable Past in Today’s Russia**

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, memory of Soviet times in today’s Russia is inconsistent and fragmentary. Too many versions and too many contradictory interpretations of Soviet history do not present one clear picture, thus debates about the meaning of the collapsed Communism inevitably continue. Yet, the absence of a univocal narrative does not prevent Russian political elites and other prominent actors from using the Soviet past for their own ends. Soviet concepts and myths are now selectively appropriated in Russia’s politics and commerce, whereas the general public is swept by a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet period. Putting it simply, Russians do not yet grasp the meaning of the Soviet epoch, but they do appropriate certain aspects of its heritage in different spheres of Russian

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<sup>104</sup> Gill, op. cit., p. 212.

reality. In this connection, one can characterize the Soviet past as Russia's 'usable' past, for it is precisely the *past* that 'serves the needs of the present.'<sup>105</sup>

In this section, I examine the spheres where the symbolic legacy of the USSR has been exploited in the extreme. I suggest that modern Russia uses its Soviet past on three major levels: *political*, *commercial* and *personal*. The latter often takes the form of nostalgia for Soviet life, but it can also symbolize other personal references to the Communist period.

*Political* use of the Soviet past is, perhaps, the most obvious and significant one. As Etkind notes, "discussions of current policy issues rarely go without reference to [the Soviet] historical experience." He maintains that, for instance, "concepts and labels like 'Stalinism,' 'the cult of personality' and 'political repressions' are rhetorically employed as often as modern legal or economic terms."<sup>106</sup> Not only the concepts, but Soviet symbols and myths also "make up an important part of Russia's political present," regardless of whether the general public likes it or not.<sup>107</sup> As an overall trend today, the Communist past has been, at least partially, rehabilitated, and a generally positive, sympathizing vision of Soviet history has been promoted by authorities of the Russian state.

Like politics, Russian commerce is experiencing a revival of Soviet themes. Soviet-stylized items are now increasingly popular in the consumer market, while allusions to the Soviet period predominate in advertising campaigns. The Russian commercial sector seems to be oversaturated with the Soviet past, which is not accidental given that the demand on Soviet aesthetics is enormously high. Below I argue that *commercial use* (like political), is another way to present the USSR in a positive light. However, commercialization of the Soviet past does not help an understanding of history, but it only lulls a consumer, who pays for idealized and simplistic representations of the Communist epoch. Appropriated in commerce, Soviet

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<sup>105</sup> J. Olick, "From Usable Pasts to the Return of the Repressed". *The Hedgehog Review* 9 (2), 2007, p. 19.

<sup>106</sup> Etkind, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

symbols have been robbed of their original meaning. They are nothing but empty shells, ‘signifiers without a signified,’ meant to create a charming, deceptive image of the bygone Soviet times.

The final, third level of appropriation of the Soviet past is closely related to the two above mentioned. I call it a *personal use* by design, as I suggest that on the personal level (like on the level of collective memory) the Soviet past has not been completely ‘digested’. Personal use means a variety of individual references to the Communist period. Be it idealization, uncertainty or scepticism she – all distinctly manifest themselves in public discourse. The attitude of contemporary Russians towards the Soviet past is still uncertain and it is not yet clear how this attitude will develop in the future. However, as recent polls show, today a great part of the citizenry, regardless of their age or professional occupation, demonstrate a generally positive view of the Soviet period. It is a nostalgia for the USSR that takes a leading place among all public sentiment. It looks as if Russians ‘selectively’ remember only positive aspects of Soviet life, while forgetting atrocities, injustice and the low standard of living that were inherent to the Communist regime. Why is this the case? Does this mean that people are not well aware of their country’s history? Or is that an impact of those historical versions that common Russians receive ‘from above’ – from the government, political groups and the state-controlled media? The latter option seems to be most likely, for as Etkind notes, “it is not historical knowledge that is at issue but its interpretation.”<sup>108</sup> He explains that individual memory “inevitably depends upon the schemas, theories, narratives, and myths” that are constructed and imposed by those who stay in power.<sup>109</sup> Thus, even if a person has their own recollections of Soviet times, their vision of that period can be affected by current political agenda and dominant, official representations of the past.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

The three forms of appropriation of the Soviet past in today's Russia are discussed at length below. As I distinguish them, I assume that they are closely interconnected and inform each other reciprocally. For instance, commercialization of the Soviet past would not have taken such a tremendous scale, had there been no demand for Soviet-style items. It is obvious that the latter is prompted by an overall public nostalgia, for people buy Soviet retro mainly because of nostalgic sentiments. Nostalgia, in turn, could never be so pervasive without the political rehabilitation of the Soviet past, which was initiated by current Russian authorities. As Etkind notes, "nostalgia for the Soviet past has been purposefully spread by the state-controlled television, and its manifestations have become increasingly frequent on the printed page and the computer screen."<sup>110</sup>

### Political Use

Soviet symbols, ideas, myths and clichés are now being revitalized and re-appropriated at the level of state policy, which is, to a great extent, to the merit of current Russian president Vladimir Putin. Unlike his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Putin realized that the outright rejection of Soviet history did not help make an independent Russian state. To label the whole Soviet period an 'aberration' had been Yeltsin's glaring mistake, which now was to be fixed by Putin. Thus, during his presidency Putin sought to reconcile the Soviet past with the Russian present, to stress the continuity between the two epochs and to restore popular respect for some of Soviet values.<sup>111</sup> In the years after 2000, a partial rehabilitation of the Communist legacy became Putin's strategy for Russia and, apparently, this strategy appeared to be more beneficial than the one offered previously by Yeltsin.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>111</sup> Marsh, p. 111, and Service, p. 195.

At the outset of his presidential term Putin strove for a balanced vision of the Soviet past that could have satisfied both the radically-minded democrats (anti-communists) and those feeling nostalgic for Soviet times. Thus, on the one hand, Putin recognized some political and economic flaws of the Communist system, but on the other, he highlighted the fact that the seventy-four-year-history of the USSR demonstrated many outstanding achievements. For instance, in his early speeches Putin often referred to the rich scientific and cultural heritage of the USSR: “Are Stalin’s camps and repressions the only thing we can recall about the Soviet period? And how about Dunayevsky, Sholokhov, Shostakovich and the achievements in space exploration? How about Yuri Gagarin?”<sup>112</sup> Admitting the significance of Communist rule, the new president appealed to the majority of the Russian population, as a large proportion of citizens had spent their entire lives under the dictatorship of the CPSU. For them it was important to know that the Communist regime was not a complete failure. Putin acknowledged the scale of the Soviet experiment: “The country lived in the conditions of the CPSU’s monopoly for seventy years, which was the life time of a whole generation.”<sup>113</sup> He understood that a denouncement of the Soviet past was a wrong political strategy, which hurt the feelings of many contemporary Russians.

As Putin characterized the Communist epoch, he noted both its pros and cons, avoiding abrupt, critical statements like those predominant during Yeltsin’s presidency. In doing so, the president wanted to reach a compromise between the nostalgic pro-Soviet and harsh anti-Soviet sentiments that split Russian society into two opposing camps. For example, in the so-called “Millennium Manifesto,” a programme document released on the eve of Putin’s inauguration, he provided a neutral and more or less adequate assessment of the preceding regime.<sup>114</sup> He stated that “it would be a mistake to deny the unquestionable accomplishments

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<sup>112</sup> V. Putin, “Zaiavlenie prezidenta RF”. Kremlin, 4 December 2000.

<sup>113</sup> R. Guseinov, “Orientiry prezidenta”. *Trud* 132, 20 July 2001, retrieved from [http://www.trud.ru/article/20-07-2001/27235\\_orientiry\\_presidenta.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/20-07-2001/27235_orientiry_presidenta.html).

<sup>114</sup> R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*. NY: Routledge, 2004. p. 46.

of those times,” but added that “it would be an even bigger mistake not to recognize the huge price that the society paid for that experiment.”<sup>115</sup> In the same Manifesto Putin indicated the deficiencies of the Soviet economy, which, according to the president, had a “cumbersome and deformed structure.” Such an economy, in Putin’s view, turned out to be a heavy burden during post-Communist times (the 1990s), for it impeded Russia’s transition to a new market-oriented economic system. As Putin concluded, “Our current difficult economic and social state in the country is, to a large extent, the price that we pay for inheriting an economy of the Soviet type.”<sup>116</sup>

Yet, it is obvious that in many of his statements that Putin sympathizes with the USSR (and feels nostalgic for the country, in which he himself spent a substantial part of his life), rather than tries to find faults with it. Thus, in his annual message to the Federal Assembly in 2005, the president dubbed the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century.” He admitted that for the Russian people it was a “true drama,” when in 1991 “tens of the millions of our fellow citizens and compatriots found themselves outside of the Russian territory” and at the same time “the epidemic of disintegration swept over the Russian Federation itself.”<sup>117</sup> In his recent speeches, the president kept looking back at the Soviet period, approving his earlier words about the breakdown of the USSR. For example, in an interview given to the three federal television channels in 2011, Putin (who at that time was Russian Prime Minister) claimed that it had been a mistake of the late Soviet authorities to let the state collapse. The aftermath of this collapse, according to Putin, was horrifying, for in the 1990s Russia witnessed “the total decay of the social sphere, the collapse not of single enterprises, but entire industries, as well

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<sup>115</sup> V. Putin, “Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii”. *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 30 December 1999.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> V. Puttin, “Poslanie prezidenta Rossii Federal’nomu Sobraniiu”. Moscow, Kremlin. 25 April 2005.

as non-payment of pensions, salaries and an overall outbreak of criminal activity.”<sup>118</sup> Further in this interview, Putin pointed at the link between Soviet and modern Russian periods: “And what is the Soviet Union? It is Russia, in fact, just called by a different name.”<sup>119</sup> In addition, he remarked, though briefly, that the Soviet epoch featured many positive aspects.

Putin’s favourable attitude towards the Soviet past does not stem only from nostalgic feelings. There is, obviously, a pragmatic reason for it. Putin needs the Soviet past and he makes most extensive use of it, but the question is why? The answer is simple: a positive image of the USSR is necessary for consolidation of the modern Russian state. Until people feel confident about their past, it is impossible to move forward, and the president is well aware of this fact. One needs to accept, to ‘digest’ Soviet history. Only in that case can Russia develop further as a nation and a state. In other words, Russians would *have to* believe in the worthiness of their Soviet past.

It is not surprising that resurrection of pride for the former USSR became part of the president’s general policy.<sup>120</sup> While Putin referred to the Communist legacy, he selectively picked the best achievements that drew public attention only to the highlights of that time.<sup>121</sup> In a similar manner, many Soviet landmarks, symbols and iconic images received positive re-assessment under Putin’s initiative, and it is precisely on his advice that even the most controversial events of t Communist history were invested with a univocal meaning. A poignant example in this regard is the president’s vision of the October Revolution itself. Discussing 1917 in an interview given to *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Putin called for an unambiguous interpretation of the Bolsheviks’ ascendancy: “Let’s call things by their real names [...] and for a start let’s stop feeling ashamed and referring to what happened eighty-two years ago in

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<sup>118</sup> Interview with Vladimir Putin. 17 October 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Marsh, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

the city on the river Neva as ‘the October coup’.”<sup>122</sup> He maintained that “coups last for days, weeks or months,” however the event of 1917 impacted Russian history for almost a century and therefore it should be called a genuine revolution. Putin emphasized the importance of October, claiming that it “shook the entire world,” what “defined its greatness,” regardless of whether one likes it or not.<sup>123</sup> Putin’s statement was, perhaps, the first positive re-assessment of the Bolshevik upheaval since the collapse of the USSR.

Another symbol of Communism, which has been treated by Putin with respect and a certain caution is the embalmed body of the founder of the Soviet state Vladimir Lenin. Located in the heart of Moscow, on the Red Square, Lenin’s corpse represents a true site of Soviet memory. It is “an emblematic sign, the exemplary embodiment of an ideological message, a prescriptive image for feeling and action, icon and fixture.”<sup>124</sup> The Lenin mausoleum reminds Russians of the Communist epoch and symbolizes the immortality of Communism. After the collapse of the USSR the question of what to do with Lenin’s body evoked much controversy, as the public expressed opposing views. Some advocated a reburial of the first Soviet leader, while the others proposed that the body should remain in the mausoleum. During Putin’s rule, suggestions to rebury Lenin have been repeatedly made by politicians, representatives of state Duma and pro-democratic activists. Yet Putin’s opinion on this issue remained unchanged. He sharply rejected the idea to remove Lenin’s body from Red Square. As the president assumed, the non-removal of Lenin’s corpse helped to maintain the consensus among different parties.<sup>125</sup> He stated that “many people still linked their lives with the name of Lenin” and therefore for them “the reburial of the Bolsheviks’ leader would signify that they had worshipped the wrong values, fulfilled the wrong tasks and lived for

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<sup>122</sup> Service, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> P. Rethmann, “The Discreet Charm of Lenin”. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 26 (4), p. 589.

<sup>125</sup> R. Guseinov, R. “Orientiry prezidenta”. *Trud* 132, 20 July 2001, retrieved from [http://www.trud.ru/article/20-07-2001/27235\\_orientiry\\_presidenta.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/20-07-2001/27235_orientiry_presidenta.html).

nothing.”<sup>126</sup> According to Putin, the removal of Lenin’s corpse will disturb the balance in Russian society.

Putin’s most controversial attempt to revitalize the symbols of the USSR was his decision to restore the Soviet anthem. Thus, during the first year of his presidency Putin issued a special decree, according to which the music for a new national anthem was adopted from the old Soviet one composed by Aleksandr Aleksandrov in 1943. Contemporary political theorists note that this was a very radical move of the newly elected president. Although the words for a new anthem were appropriately revised, the famous Aleksandrov tune was a blatant reminder of the Communist epoch and, particularly, of Stalinist repressions. In this connection, the ‘old-new’ anthem caused great public discord. Among those who opposed Putin’s choice were functionaries, prominent cultural actors, artists, rock musicians and even the ex-Russian president Boris Yeltsin. The latter, for instance, assumed that bringing back Aleksandrov’s music would make it difficult for Russian citizens to discard negative memories of the Communist period. The activist Grigori Yavlinsky, the head of the liberal party “Yabloko”, called the restoration of the Soviet hymn a “non-constructive and harmful” step. He warned that the adoption of such an anthem would lead to “a schism in Russian society.”<sup>127</sup> In a similar vein, a coalition of Russian artists, writers and actors signed a joint petition to protest against the new anthem. In their view, “people would never respect an anthem which trampled their convictions and offended the memory of Soviet political repressions.”<sup>128</sup> However, despite all the critical statements about the new anthem, the president made it clear that he would not change his decision. Putin favoured the composition by Aleksandrov because it “inspired generations of Soviet athletes to strive for gold, was

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> “Utverzhdenie muzyki Aleksandrova v kachestve gimna RF – shag k raskolu obshchestva, schitaet Yavlinsky”, retrieved from [www.yavlinsky.ru](http://www.yavlinsky.ru).

<sup>128</sup> M. Warren, “Putin Revives Soviet National Anthem”. *The Telegraph* 09, December 2000.

played for the first man in space and honoured the victory over Nazi Germany.”<sup>129</sup> This was almost a direct appeal to the Soviet past.

### Commercial Use

Under ‘commercial use of the Soviet past’ I mean all forms of reference to the Communist epoch in the commercial sector. This is a truly diverse range of phenomena, as the Soviet theme became a common means for promotion of goods and services in modern Russia. As a rule, today stylized Soviet aesthetics can be employed both in the décor of a popular restaurant and a fashionable collection of clothes by a prominent designer. One calls this appropriation of Soviet-era symbols, images and names in commerce ‘Soviet retro.’ Practically all direct and indirect allusions to the USSR in advertisements, marketing or branding fall under the category of Soviet retro. It is noteworthy that Soviet retro enjoys increasingly high popularity among Russian consumers. Although on the surface the notion of Soviet retro seems to be self-evident, it is yet not clear what function retro-styled goods perform in Russian society. Why do they sell well today? Why is there such great demand for things that remind one about the Communist period? Given that, the notion of Soviet retro deserves particular attention.

The term ‘retro’ itself is a short form of ‘retrograde,’ which comes from the Latin *retrogradus*, meaning ‘moving backward’ or ‘retreating’. The semantic implication of the word entails a sense of backwardness and a tendency to degenerate, so that it can be used for description of anything that goes from better to worse. In contemporary culture, the term ‘retro’ often signifies a half-distorted and half-longing reference to the recent past: it symbolizes an ironic play with the elements of the ‘not-so-distant’ history.<sup>130</sup> Retro style

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<sup>129</sup> “Discord over Putin’s Anthem Demands”. *Birmingham Post*, 6 December 2000.

<sup>130</sup> L. Goralik, “Rosagroeksport syrka: simvolika i simvoly Sovetskoi epokhi v segodniashnem rossiiskom brendinge”. *Teoriia mody: odezhdha, telo, kul’tura* 3, 2007, retrieved from [http://linorg.ru/sov\\_brend.html](http://linorg.ru/sov_brend.html).

reproduces an epoch in a simplified manner, whereby certain aspects of this epoch become available for mass reception via pastiche. Retro is like ‘a mechanism that makes the past ready for a wider consumption,’ even though the product as such is simplistic by nature.<sup>131</sup> Usually, the retro-styled items construct a positive image of the period. They help to create a picture in which an individual feels comfortable about unresolved issues of collective memory.

As for Soviet retro, it fits the above stated description well. As Linor Goralik assumes, this is the Soviet retro, which today reconciles the country and its citizens with their ‘not-so-distant’ past. It represents the Communist period accordingly. In the retro-perspective Soviet time is portrayed as ‘a set of simple and charming principles and situations.’<sup>132</sup> The key word, in this regard, is ‘simple,’ for the retro-styled commodities, brands and commercials characterize Communism as the time when ‘everything was simple and good.’ Furthermore, Soviet retro ascribes to the Communist epoch such qualities as bright, glorious, heroic, and ‘cosy.’<sup>133</sup> All of them add to a generally positive, comforting image of the USSR.

What are the most obvious manifestations of Soviet retro? And which particular forms does it take in contemporary advertising? The first and the most obvious case is the so-called ‘retro-naming,’ which illustrates the employment of Soviet names in modern commercial appellation. Thus, to include the Soviet titles in the names of clubs, cafés or restaurants has become commonplace in contemporary Russia. It is now both a fashionable trend and effective strategy to attract public attention. For instance, such names as ‘Born in the USSR,’ ‘Back in USSR’ or ‘Vodka Bar – USSR’ are today used for appellation of pubs in a variety of Russian regions.<sup>134</sup> The state name of the Soviet Union blends in the titles of these institutions

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Goralik, op. cit.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> M. Golomidova, “Verbal’nye simvoly SSSR v sovremennoi kommercheskoi nominatsii”. *Sovetskoe proshloe i kul’tura nastoiashchego*, N. Kupina I. O. Mikhailova. Ekaterinburg, 2009, p. 337.

well, for it calls forth the positive associative meanings of the Soviet ‘commonwealth, social security and equality.’ In other words, people are attracted to such institutions because of warm, nostalgic memories about the good old Soviet times, during which everyone enjoyed equal social benefits, and friendship was not an empty concept. As Marina Golomidova indicates, the use of the USSR’s name in this context creates (even though ironically) the illusion of a lost paradise – an epoch when people were close, and not disconnected due to the harsh rules of the market economy.”<sup>135</sup> According to Golomidova, the nostalgic effect of these names can be reinforced through the addition of a short explanatory slogan, like “‘USSR Restaurant’ is charm, warmth, heartedness. We invite you in a romantic walk across time.”<sup>136</sup>

Often retro-names also bear, besides the nostalgic, an ironic or playful character. Institutions named in this way look as if they invite a visitor to take part in a staged performance, where all decorations and props ironically imitate the Soviet period. Irony and playfulness, even better than nostalgia, arouse interest among different social groups. To illustrate this, one can cite numerous ‘named-after-Lenin’ parties that currently take place in Russian nightclubs. One of them, called “Lenin, PARTY, Komsomol,” jokingly re-appropriates a famous Soviet motto.<sup>137</sup> Name “Glavpivo 2 April Theses” looks like a puzzle that merges the two seemingly incompatible notions: *glavpivo*, meaning in Russian ‘main beer’ and ‘April Thesis’ (*Aprel’skie tezisy*), alluding to Lenin’s revolutionary programme issued in 1917. No less notable, in this regard, is the name of a Petersburg restaurant “Lenin@lives,” which combines a popular Soviet formula “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live” with a graphical sign of the Internet environment.<sup>138</sup> The mix of Soviet and Internet stylistics sounds like a promise of a playful communication, a game with all simulated

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

attributes of Soviet life. Such a name obviously appeals to younger groups of the Russian population.

Apart from Soviet names, visual or graphic symbols of the USSR are likewise employed in modern Russian commerce. Thus, Soviet aesthetics, including the revolutionary red and gold colours, state emblems, badges, agitation and advertisement posters, shots from the Soviet cartoons and films, now stimulates an active distribution of goods. The bright and bold Soviet visuals markedly distinguish an item among similar others. A red star or a Vladimir Mayakovsky's drawing can serve as an identification sign in the contemporary oversaturated market. Goralik argues that the graphics of Soviet posters, logos, and TV-title sequences is currently used by many commercial organizations. In her view, visual elements of Soviet retro predominate in the advertisements of electronic and perfume stores, hotels' interiors and restaurant decoration.<sup>139</sup> Another scholar, Iulia Pikuleva, shares the same opinion, stating that "the drawings of Soviet posters are now a top pick of advertising campaigns."<sup>140</sup> As Pikuleva suggests, the famous Soviet poster *Did you Volunteer?* (1920) by Dmitri Moor has been cited and transformed for commercial use extensively. Needless to say that ideological meaning of such posters had vanished long ago and, without this meaning, they became mere 'templates', open to any kind of symbolic investment. The now classical images of Soviet posters are clear, simple and recognizable by the Russian public, and therefore they are suitable for modern marketing communication. Today these posters are used to advertise shopping malls, food, cleaning products, newspapers and other items.

Not only are mass consumer goods or services marketed through the use of the Soviet retro, but also prestigious, expensive brands are sold because of their appeal to the Soviet

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<sup>139</sup> Goralik, op. cit.

<sup>140</sup> Iu. Pikuleva, "O stepeni pretsedentnosti Sovetskikh kul'turnykh znakov v sovremennoi reklame". *Sovetskoe proshloe i kul'tura nastoiashchego*, N. Kupina I O. Mikhailova. Ekaterinburg, 2009, p 156.

times. According to Olga Shaburova, Soviet concepts have today successfully entered the segment of ‘luxury.’ She draws an example of the jewellery trademark Gourji, which incorporates Soviet symbols in the design of its precious, high-class items. Thus, Gourji’s collection of cufflinks virtually replicates a few Soviet badges, such as the Soviet quality mark, the red star, the so-called ‘GTO’ (the “Ready for Labour and Defence of the USSR” sign), the ‘Wings’ (mark of a graduation from the Military Pilots’ Academy), the Young Pioneer’s badge and others.<sup>141</sup> Today these symbols of Soviet life are made of precious materials and represent an exclusive work. At the same time, they demonstrate a flagrant incompatibility of two semantic discourses: The Soviet, which is, in principle, non-consumerist (anti-bourgeois), scarce and standardized, and the other – the discourse of modern Russian culture, which symbolizes constant consumption, waste of money and purchase of luxury things. Shaburova calls this strategy the ‘glamorization of the Soviet’ and adds that it helps to sell a commodity or service at above-average price. The glamorous format alienates the Soviet from its nature. This, in Shaburova’s view, gives the birth to a new kind of formula “Soviet means bourgeois.”<sup>142</sup> Nonetheless, the glamorization of Soviet works well for the contemporary market, as it stimulates the selling of a brand even if the latter belongs to the category of luxury and hence has a high price tag.

‘Soviet in glamour’ makes one think about the new, unexpected uses of the Soviet past in the commercial field. It also makes one ask the same question of why Soviet retro now gains its momentum. Apparently, in the eyes of modern Russian consumers the word ‘Soviet’ has lost its negative connotations. Conversely, it acquires more and more positive meanings. The time when Russia stubbornly negated its Soviet past is now over, and, instead of this negation, an ever growing nostalgia for ‘things Soviet’ has taken its place. Russians long for

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<sup>141</sup> O. Shaburova, “Nostal’gia: strategii kommersializatsii, ili Sovetskoe v glamure”. *Sovetskoe proshloe i kul’tura nastoiashchego*, N. Kupina I O. Mikhailova. Ekaterinburg, 2009, p. 36.

<sup>142</sup> Shaburova, op. cit., p. 37.

the Soviet past, and this is perhaps the main reason why they pay for goods that allude to the Communist period.

### *Nostalgia for ‘all things Soviet’*

The fact that the Soviet past arouses increasingly high interest in Russian society cannot be denied. Another fact is also obvious. Today, more than twenty years since the collapse of the USSR, people have started to reflect upon Soviet experience critically. They now attempt to ‘process’ the most controversial period of Russian history and to ‘come to terms’ with the troublesome memories attached to that time. A few comments about the contemporary public vision of the Soviet period are represented below.

Multiple surveys conducted over recent years demonstrate a generally positive attitude towards the Soviet epoch. The polls show that in the minds of Russian citizens the Soviet past gradually acquires an image of a Golden Age, which refers mainly to the period of late Socialism (and not the first part of the Union’s existence). Today the Soviet 1970s –1980s are turned into an object of public nostalgia and a focus of idealistic vision. For instance, the Brezhnev rule is often esteemed as a period of ‘stability, equality and general well-being,’ precisely, as a time when a person enjoyed social security and received generous support from the government. Furthermore, the stagnant 1970s are attributed with qualities of a “highly developed cultural life and a warm, friendly environment,” in which it was easy to socialize and communicate with each other.<sup>143</sup> According to Vladimir Gel’man, such idealization of the late Socialist years looks like a great paradox, for the Soviet epoch cannot be, by any means, considered Golden Age of Russian history. Comparing the present standard of life in Russia with the one during the 1970s – 1980s, one assumes that the former considerably surpasses

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<sup>143</sup> A. Kustarev, “Zolotye 1970-e – nostal’giia i reabilitatsiia”. *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 2, 2007, retrieved from <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2007/2/ku1.html>.

the latter.<sup>144</sup> A former BBC journalist Alexander Kustarev, puts forward a similar idea, as he claims that today, in the twenty-first century, Russians suddenly became nostalgic for the 1970s.<sup>145</sup> The period of late Socialism has been transformed into a half-romanticized and half-mythologized construct, which now looks more and more appealing for the Russian citizens. People support this myth of the golden 1970s – 80s, as if willing to return to their past.

Apparently, nostalgia for Soviet times bears a selective character. Russians yearn for particular elements of socialist life, while dismissing the flaws that were inherent to the Soviet order. Thus, some aspects deserve an especially high appraisal from the contemporary Russian public, and among them, the Soviet achievements in culture gain the lead. Soviet cinema, pop music and ballet cause the strongest nostalgic feeling among the Russian population.<sup>146</sup> For instance, a journalist who monitors contemporary Russian TV programmes notes the following: “Sometimes, I have a distinct nostalgia for Soviet television, which, despite all its drawbacks, was of very good quality.”<sup>147</sup> A no less popular object of public nostalgia is Soviet sport, especially, ice hockey. Russians still remember the Soviet national teams and national championships with pride. Thus, a Russian sports commentator admits: “looking at current performance of the ‘Spartak’ team, many [people] nostalgically recall the times of old Soviet combinative and romantic hockey.”<sup>148</sup> Other ingredients of the Soviet epoch are likewise favoured by the Russian public and, hence, Soviet education, science, everyday life and even food and kitchen are recalled as ‘good quality.’ In general, both the great achievements of the Soviet past and its minor episodes can be a matter of nostalgia in modern Russia.

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<sup>144</sup> A. Starodubtsev. “Vechera v Evropeiskom: pochemu v segodniashnei Rossii vysok spros na Sovetskoe proshloe”. Retrieved from <http://www.idelo.ru/516/18.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Kustarev, op. cit.

<sup>146</sup> A. Mustaioki. “Nostalgiia po Sovetskomu proshlomu”. *Sovetskoe proshloe i kul’tura nastoiashchego*, ed. N. Kupina I O. Mihailova. Ekaterinburg, 2009, p. 211.

<sup>147</sup> Novaya Gazeta, 2 November 2006.

<sup>148</sup> Mustaioki, op. cit., p. 213.

Nostalgic vision of the Soviet past is subjective and personal, as it varies largely from individual to individual. Nonetheless, there is a certain logic in how different groups evaluate Soviet experience. The younger generations, for instance, are prone to sympathize with the USSR and to speak about socialism, mainly in positive terms. For them the Soviet Union presented a superpower that held its position firmly on the world stage (even though eventually this position crumbled). The romanticized attitude of youngsters is easy to explain. As long as they never, in practice, lived under Communism, they are not afraid of return of the Communist order. It is, however, more interesting to consider the opinions of people who had first-hand experience of living under the Soviet regime. How do they envision late Socialism? Paradoxically, many of those born and raised in the USSR express nostalgia for Soviet times too. Today, twenty years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the generation of ‘the last Soviet children’ look at the years of childhood positively perhaps, to remember childhood positively is just a normal human psychological reaction.<sup>149</sup> As Boris Kolonitskii indicates, “if a person was born in the late Soviet period, it is no wonder that he or she remembers that time as something good.”<sup>150</sup> For the last Soviet children to come from the USSR means ‘to come from their own childhood.’ Exactly this association makes them long for the Soviet epoch.

The above-discussed nostalgic sentiment is yet just one form of personal reference to the Soviet past. There are many other ones, and it is a mistake to assume that contemporary Russians share a single, univocal opinion of it. Some people, for instance, have a rather vague vision of the Soviet period, even though they lived under Communism their entire lives. In this case, they admit that the Soviet time had both good and bad moments. Others refer to the USSR with scepticism and therefore state that they by no means want to be back in the Soviet society. Thus, statements like the following are common: “I would not like to live in the

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<sup>149</sup> Goralik, op. cit.

<sup>150</sup> Starodubtsev, op. cit.

Soviet Union again and this is my personal feeling, the feeling of a man who lived there for seventeen years.”<sup>151</sup>

Why, then, is the Soviet epoch such a hot topic of current public debate? One can answer this question with the words of Olga Shparaga, who suggests that the notion of the Soviet period is topical because the Soviet past is a ‘living’ past. It is ‘alive,’ because it persists in Russia’s present and because its residues are still visible in Russian society and continue to shape it. As Shparaga maintains, the Soviet past is alive, as “we see it in architecture, we talk to our parents, we experience it on the level of social automatisms.” She also assumes that this live past provides an excellent opportunity to look at the present, “in order to see, if we became different.” The paradox of the Soviet past is this: it seems to be ‘past,’ but, as long as it has many connections with the present, Russians can look through it at themselves.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> O. Shparaga, “Sovetskoe proshloe v ramkakh pionerskoi vyderzhki: nostal’giia, ironiia, ottorzenie, ponimanie.” *Novaia Evropa*, 17. 07. 2013. Retrieved from <http://n-europe.eu/node/435997>.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Three|

### Online Visual Archives of the Soviet Past

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The ‘landscape’ of the Soviet past online is extremely vast and heterogeneous. Public vision of Soviet times projects itself on the Internet through myriads of different genres, so that it can take any form ranging from discussions in web blogs to virtual memorials to victims of Stalinism. It is in the new media environment that collective memory of the USSR develops in multiple, often unexpected directions, and it is precisely on the Web that different aspects of the Soviet past can be re-discovered, foregrounded and exposed in a brand new light. The number of post-Soviet digital recollections today inevitably grows, as more and more images of the Communist epoch circulate online and thus travel around social networking services, forums, virtual communities and other digital venues. Importantly, most of these memories are created by common people: virtually by anyone who, regardless of age, citizenship or geographic location, has access to the Internet. According to Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva, in social media like the World Wide Web, “‘the past’ is appropriated by common users, who prioritise a non-professional, bottom-up knowledge of history,” and who produce “interpretations and explanations which may seem paradoxical to professional historians.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. Rutten and V. Zvereva, “Introduction: Old Conflicts, New Media: post-Socialist Digital Memories” in *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in post-Socialist States*, ed. by E. Rutten, J. Fedor and V. Zvereva, London and NY: Routledge, 2013, p. 6.

Looking through a variety of post-Soviet digital recollections, I discovered a group of sites that differed markedly from others.<sup>2</sup> These were so-called ‘visual archives of the Soviet past’ that stood out from other user-generated memories of the USSR. And although they were not by definition actual ‘archives’, I called them so provisionally because of their ‘archival’ tendency to collect all types of representations that had a relation to the former Soviet Union. A notable point with regard to these sites was the diversity of their visual contents, as users uploaded and shared digital images of Soviet postcards, toys, posters, consumer goods, money, film shots, as well as of Soviet military equipment and medals. Russian people brought different fragments of Soviet life into the digital realm and they did so diligently, as if trying to gather, preserve and reanimate pieces of the Soviet past in this new virtual world. Most of the visual archives that I encountered on the Web looked like grassroots, non-professional and not-for-profit sites and, at first sight, seemed to deserve no scholarly attention. Yet, while studying them further, I realised that each of these sites represented part of a broader trend. To create such amateur Internet-based projects portraying life and culture in the former USSR was commonplace among contemporary Russian users who yearned to memorialise the Soviet period online. In total, I found at least eight or ten visual archives on the Russian Web. This, however, is only an indicative figure as other similar sites may exist or come into existence while I write this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Along with their image-based character, another striking feature of the visual archives was a purely idealistic attitude towards the Soviet period. Thus, browsing them I hardly found any image that represented the Communist epoch in a negative light, as no photos of Bolshevik crimes and no evidence of Stalinist terror were posted there. On the contrary, most

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<sup>2</sup> The term of post-Soviet digital memory is borrowed from E. Rutten, J. Fedor and V. Zvereva. *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States*. NY: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Sites that fall under the category of ‘visual archives’ are [www.greatflags.su](http://www.greatflags.su), [www.savok.org](http://www.savok.org), [www.back-in-ussr.com](http://www.back-in-ussr.com), [www.sovetika.ru](http://www.sovetika.ru), [www.sovietime.ru](http://www.sovietime.ru), [www.20th.su](http://www.20th.su) retrieved on 21.07.2016.

of the images presented only the brighter side of Communism. Visual archives neglect gloomy pages of Soviet history, while promoting a romanticised, idealised vision of the USSR, which is, perhaps, not accidental given that many of today's Russians share a positive attitude towards the Soviet epoch. In the previous chapter, I indicated that nostalgia for the USSR is a wide-spread phenomenon in contemporary Russia. I also mentioned that Russians are nostalgic for selective elements of late Socialist culture and particularly the Soviet 1970s-1980s, which became a focus of public idealisation. In the sections below I will develop this idea further, stating that post-Soviet nostalgia manifests itself distinctly in the digital space of visual archives. The latter support idealistic representation of the Soviet past, if not to say that they drive such representation to the utmost degree. It is in the visual archives that the Soviet Union is pictured as an imaginary wonderland, a paradise that was lost almost a quarter of century ago, but that, nonetheless, is still persistent in the minds of people.

Images in the visual archives contribute to what can be called 'mythologisation' of the Soviet past, which means that they carry alongside memory also a portion of fiction.<sup>4</sup> Thus, bright and colourful representations on these sites stand for a particular ideology. They symbolise 'glossy', embellished concepts of Soviet life and thereby obscure a truthful portrayal of past reality. When I researched visual archives, I was surprised by the number of mythic qualities that the former USSR acquired on these sites. For instance, the most common among them were 'myths' about happy Soviet childhood, secure life under late Socialism, and, of course, a myth about inevitable social equality in the Soviet state. Each myth was supported by one or several images and hence it looked convincing. In this context, visual archives should not be perceived as neutral containers of cultural memory, as they do not merely remind us about the USSR. Rather, they impose a certain ideology, an idealistic mode of thinking about 'all things Soviet.' Their function, in this regard, fluctuates somewhere

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<sup>4</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies*. NY: the Noonday Press, 1991, p. 107.

between memory and myth-making, and it is yet to be established which of these two contradicting trends prevails.

Given the controversial nature of visual archives and their overall prevalence on the Internet, I aim to examine these hitherto little explored instances of post-Soviet digital memory from different angles. My first and foremost task, in this context, is to answer the fundamental question why in the course of a few recent years such sites pervaded the Net (to be more precise ‘Runet,’ the Russian part of the Internet). If someone spends time and effort to create yet another visual archive, then what is the reason for such an initiative? What stands behind the recent public desire to bring traces of the Soviet past online? Secondly, I will look closely at the images involved in order to probe whether digital representations are suitable for transmitting memory. Since the visual component is predominant on these sites, it is reasonable to examine the featured pictures in detail. Do they have any intrinsic powers? How does the mnemonic function of a digital image work? Thirdly and finally, I will regard archival functions intrinsic to the websites under investigation. Can one archive post-Soviet memory online?

I will consider the above questions using the example of two visual archive web sites: *Back in the USSR: Remembering our Soviet Past* (<http://back-in-ussr.com>) and *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century’: Retro, Recollections, Nostalgia* (<http://20th.su>). Citing these two particular instances, I will define common trends and features, typical to all visual archives and thus, in what follows, both the format of these sites (their technical structure, interface and features) and their contents will be scrutinized.

### **3.2. Interactive Remembering**

Technically, a visual archive of the Soviet past looks like an online community that allows anyone, provided one has access to the Internet and command of the Russian language, to post a favourite image of the USSR or to create a topic devoted to the Soviet period. Likewise, any registered user can comment on materials submitted by others, thus sharing thoughts, ideas and recollections with a group of like-minded individuals. Like any typical web-based community, a visual archive enables online collaboration, as it provides space for extensive, polyphonic discussions around Soviet-related images. Generally, the form of a virtual community is essential to the contemporary stage of the Internet (which is “intrinsically participatory and focused on sharing, collaboration, and mutual meaning-making”).<sup>5</sup> Today, when technologies of Web 2.0 have superseded the old static sites, communities constitute a large part of the Global Net. Be it Wikis, blogs, social networking, or content-hosting services, all are maintained and supported by common users. In this connection Neil Siberman and Margaret Purser observe that modern “digital technologies offer a new medium not only for conversation and contact, but also for the construction of viable, continuous ‘memory communities’ that creatively reassemble fragments from a shared past into a dynamic, reflective expression of contemporary identity.”<sup>6</sup> They also note that “the potential of digital communities to restore a sense of collective memory is enormous,” for these are the communities of “active seekers, producers and preservers,” who wish to retain knowledge about the past.<sup>7</sup> Although Siberman and Purser invented the term of a virtual ‘memory community’ specifically to characterise social networking services, one can use it in

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<sup>5</sup> K. Theimer, *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011. p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> N. Silberman and M. Purser, “Collective Memory as Affirmation: People-centered Cultural Heritage in a Digital Age”. *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*. ed. E. Giaccardi, London and NY: Routledge, 2012. p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 16 and p. 26.

relation to visual archives as well: the latter are voluntarily ‘communities of memory’ that promote and distribute user-generated recollections of the USSR.

As a rule, each visual archive contains its own range of headings where some particular aspects of the Soviet past are illustrated and discussed. For instance, *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century*’ features up to fourteen different categories marked as “Soviet toys,” “How it was,” “Soviet personalities,” “Our way of living,” as well as a separate rubric “Collections,” which accommodates images of Soviet calendars, postcards, stickers and even food packaging. Browsing these categories, one can find an incredibly vast array of Soviet-era items, including depictions of well-known objects and those elements of Soviet culture that to date have been lost or forgotten.

Another visual archive *Back in the USSR* is structured somewhat differently. Unlike *Museum*, it does not have a clearly defined set of rubrics but instead, the site provides a news feed, which is a constantly updating list of stories about life in the Soviet Union. Thus, *Back in the USSR* suggests a user take a virtual journey back to Soviet times in order to see “what popular Soviet cars looked like,” “which Soviet actresses were the most beautiful” or “how Soviet people celebrated New Year in the 1970s.”<sup>8</sup>

Considering the question of who creates visual archives and why, I assume that these sites are designed specifically for memorialisation of the Soviet period on the Web. Despite the fact that one visual archive can differ from another in its form or content, they have one general purpose: to remind about objects, people and concepts of a not so distant Communist past. As visual archives comprise representations of all possible Soviet phenomena, they aim to revitalise and enhance collective memory about the USSR by showing comforting, bright

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<sup>8</sup> See “What popular Soviet cars looked like?” <http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/02/kak-mogli-by-vyglyadet-izvestnye-sovetskie-avtomobili.html>, “The most beautiful Soviet actresses” [http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/01/samye-krasivye-sovetskie-aktrisy\\_2.html](http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/01/samye-krasivye-sovetskie-aktrisy_2.html) and “How they celebrated New Year in 1970” <http://back-in-ussr.com/2014/12/kak-vstrehali-novyy-god-v-70-e.html> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

images of that epoch. Simply put, the sites are meant for ‘remembering’ the Soviet Union, which becomes obvious from a first look at their home pages. *Back in the USSR*, for example, claims its mnemonic function in its name, which consists of two parts: the first *Back in the USSR* and the second *Remembering our Soviet Past*. Both sites have stylized pseudo-Soviet logos. A similar name is given to *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century,’* which has subtitles of *Retro, Recollections, and Nostalgia.*

The creators of the visual archives are ordinary Russians, who were born in the USSR and lived at least a few years under Communism. For them, life in the former Soviet Union now seems to be more and more appealing, mainly because Soviet time was a period of their ‘happy’ childhood. Generally, they neither hide their sympathy towards the Soviet era, nor conceal the fact that they constructed their sites so as to preserve memory of that time. Thus, the creator of the *Museum of the USSR* who introduces himself on the ‘about’ page of the site as Alexander, notes: “I was born in 1983 in a country that no longer exists … and although I lived in the USSR for just ten years, I still feel nostalgic for that time.”<sup>9</sup> He adds that he often recalls his childhood, comparing “what was then and what is now.” Explaining the reason for creating his online project, Alexander states that its mission is “helping to remember the past, the familiar items.”<sup>10</sup> In his view, “today many Soviet things are lost, trashed, thrown in dumpsters, since there is no physical place to keep them in flats or cellars,” and this is how “we forget about everything that surrounded us in our distant childhood.” This is also how, as he assumes, “we forget about life in the Soviet Union.”<sup>11</sup> However, it is still possible, according to Alexander, to prevent a loss of memory. For this end one needs to ‘store’ Soviet things (and precisely, digital images of these things) in the virtual space of the Web. As long as residues of the Soviet past re-emerge online, the post-Soviet memory will persist. In this

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<sup>9</sup> <http://20th.su/about/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

regard, Alexander encourages everyone to contribute to his site by posting photographs of toys, labels, postcards or other things that originate from the Soviet period. In conclusion, he states: “the most precious thing we have is memory.”<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, visual archives help the making of post-Soviet memory, even if the articles that they feature are amateur, random and chaotically organised. I suggest that they are excellent venues for public contemplation upon material and symbolic vestiges of the Communist epoch. Rather than mere static ‘sites,’ they should be regarded as dynamic ‘digitally mediated platforms’ for constructing collective recall.<sup>13</sup> Thus, united by a common sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past, users of visual archives engage in the production of memory interactively, as they upload, discuss and comment on Soviet-related matters. As Roger Simon points out, today’s “digital technologies [and the Internet in first place] offer a productive space for assembling diverse groups of people to engage in an interactive practice of ‘remembering together,’” which is “more than just sharing out of information.”<sup>14</sup> Such practice “includes the public posting of (and response to) various experiences and understandings of, interests and investments in and questions and concerns about an event considered to be of historical significance.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, according to Simon, it can help re-establish one’s relationship with the past: “When ‘remembering together’, social media participants are not only articulating personal encounters with the traces of a particular history but, as well, collectively redefining what might be understood as the temporal and spatial parameters of a historical event.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, sites like visual archives facilitate not only memorialisation, but recognition and reconsideration of the Soviet past too.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> R. Simon, “Remembering Together: Social Media and the Formation of the Historical Present”. *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*. ed. E. Giaccardi, London and NY: Routledge, 2012, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Simon, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

To illustrate the interactive feature of visual archives I will refer to the site under investigation *Back in the USSR*. In particular, I will consider one entry on that site, which is titled “A Walk around Moscow in 1986” and which to date has received seventy-nine comments from the most active users of the site.<sup>17</sup> The article itself is created by the administrator Sergei, who moderates most of the site’s contents. To create the topic “A Walk around Moscow in 1986,” Sergei posted a set of photographs taken in the city throughout that year, and thus the pictures display different places, including landmark squares and streets, and less popular outskirts and industrial zones of Moscow. For instance, browsing them, one can witness the march of young pioneers in Red Square, the opening of the Goodwill Games, water-and-juice-vending machines in Moscow streets, interiors of Soviet shopping centres and restaurants, etc. However, it is remarkable that a vast majority of the photographs represent one phenomenon common for late Socialist culture: queuing, which became a distinctive sign of the Soviet 1970s – 80s. As a matter of fact, during that time, Soviet citizens had to stand in long, slowly moving lines in order to get almost any kind of consumer goods – and this is what the pictures demonstrate – lines in front of makeup and dairy stores, queuing for pastry and furniture, crowds of people awaiting their turn to buy alcohol, fruit and even to drop off glass bottles. No less interesting are the pictures that expose the burst of alternative culture in late 1980s, when non-conformist artists and musicians came out of the underground and started to perform openly, not fearing to be prosecuted by the state. Thus, photographs show a few controversial rock bands that at that time enjoyed extremely high popularity among the Soviet population.

As user Sergei uploads a set of images for the topic “A Walk around Moscow in 1986,” he provides a basic overview of events that happened during that year and mentions that “the twenty-seventh congress of the CPSU took place,” where “Brezhnev’s rule was called an

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<sup>17</sup> <http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/02/progulka-po-moskve-1986-goda.html> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

epoch of *stagnation*” and where “Gorbachev spoke about Glasnost.”<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, as Sergei explicates, “it was too early to talk about actual Glasnost and the full abolition of censorship.” This was, according to Sergei, due to the Chernobyl disaster which took place in April of that year and the fact that for a few days after it occurred, its true scale was concealed by the media. Commenting on the photographs further, Sergei notes that “dry law is still in effect, but Muscovites queue for alcohol and other deficiencies, they likewise attend the first rock-festival.”<sup>19</sup> While Sergei’s comments sound neutral and explanatory, the users seem to express a range of intense and controversial sentiments on the topic. Thus, they do not simply agree or disagree with what Sergei posts, but they share their personal experiences of life during Gorbachev’s Perestroika. For instance, user Gold Löwin states the following in response to images of Soviet queues: “Never did my family stand in lines either for carpets or furniture... we took money, went and bought [everything] easily.” She maintains that, “there was our [Soviet] furniture and it was good, and there were heaps of carpets, rugs.”<sup>20</sup> Contrary to this positive, idealised evaluation of the late Soviet years, some other users of the site remember Gorbachev’s rule with scepticism. Thus, the user Sergei\_Rychkov wonders whether “with the ascendance of Gorbachev everything went wrong, and Chernobyl, perhaps, happened not accidentally... This traitor Gorby indeed created much harm to the USSR.”<sup>21</sup>

The topic of “Moscow in 1986” on *Back in the USSR* represents one exemplary case (among many other ones) of how post-Soviet memory is interactively constructed on the Internet through sharing images, texts and public commentaries. While debating about the late 1980s, the users do not agree on one particular version, yet their comments still constitute a homogeneous representation of the Soviet past. Viewing photographs of Moscow in 1986 helps them to refresh their memories and add their personal recollections of the time to the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

general discussion. Resulting from this is a fluid, participatory and contested form of collective memory, which is forged through the dynamic structures of the World Wide Web.

### **3.3. The Power of Images**

Despite all the extensive discussions that take place in the visual archives, a crucial feature of these sites is their image-based character. The visual factor plays a key role here. Looking at visual archives, one immediately notices that images are always central, whereas text is supplementary or is of somewhat secondary importance. My basic assumption, in this regard, is that visual archives are truly *visual* because they reconstruct memory of Soviet times predominantly through images, not words (even though text or comments do complement Soviet depictions in most cases). Photographs taken during Communist times, representations of Soviet household items, scans from Soviet-era magazines and books constitute the main and the most significant part of these sites. Thus, upon introducing my specific term ‘visual archive’, I highlight the importance of images at these particular sites, as well as the power of images in general: their power to render personal recollections, their power to transmit cultural memory, and, not the least, their predominance on the Internet.

Although the fact that images are powerful vehicles of memory is self-evident, it is not particularly clear how exactly they work to construct public recall. What makes them efficient in aiding our recollections? Why in many cases of social memory production is it more practical to rely on images instead of text? Paradoxically, the immense capacity of images to transmit collective knowledge about the past has not been thoroughly explored and, as Barbie Zelizer correctly notes, “for as long as collective memory has been an area of scholarly concern, the precise role of images as its vehicle has been asserted rather than explicated.”<sup>22</sup> Zelizer herself is among the few scholars who do not take the mnemonic capacity of images

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<sup>22</sup> B. Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory”. *Framing Public Memory*. ed. Kendall R. Phillips. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2004. Retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/58](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/58). p. 157.

for granted, but insists on studying their role in public recall. Thus, two of her published works, an article “The Voice of the Visual in Memory” and a monograph *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye*, scrutinize the intrinsic power of visual representation, as they demonstrate how various images (paintings, photographs, films) assist in remembering our past. It is the *visual* aspect that, according to Zelizer, “helps stabilise and anchor collective memory’s transient and fluctuating nature in art, cinema, television, and photography, aiding recall to the extent that images often become an event’s primary markers.”<sup>23</sup> Both in “The Voice of the Visual in Memory” and *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye* she privileges the visual over other media formats (e.g. texts or sounds). On the whole, Zelizer provides a detailed explanation of why images work for collective memory better than words, and hence reference to her works is essential while studying any image-based instance of recall. In this section I will apply a few of Zelizer’s theoretical developments to analysis of my empirical material. Although I will cite theories of a few other scholars as well, I consider Zelizer’s study to be fundamental to my research of visual archives.

In addition to Zelizer, Roland Barthes’ semiology could be usefully applied when exploring images at large. Like Zelizer, Barthes examines the powers of representation, which, according to the philosopher, can be anything from an artwork and theatrical play to advertisement, newspaper article, literary text and even consumer or luxury item. As Barthes perceives the image in such a broad sense, he likewise indicates a broad range of its capacities, including the capacity to deceive and to tell the truth, to transmit cultural values and to misrepresent certain norms, and likewise, the capacity of the image to impose ideas and to subvert the established worldview. Particularly, in his “Rhetoric of the Image” Barthes exposes a full potential of a graphic representation. The latter, according to the scholar, is not

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<sup>23</sup> B. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.6.

a mere ‘imitation’ of natural things, but it is an intricate system of signs and codes, which ‘bombards’ the onlooker with messages.<sup>24</sup> Using the example of an advertising photograph, Barthes detects a spectrum of meanings that a simple commercial illustration covers. Obviously, for Barthes any image is a complex multidimensional phenomenon, each level of which requires careful examination.<sup>25</sup>

Barthes’ semiotics is a universal method of cultural analysis. It enables approaching any kind of visual material from across spheres of art, literature, cinema, journalism and advertising. Thus, for instance, in line with the semiotic theory, both a piece of high art and a consumer commercial can be ‘read’ as cultural signs, each carrying, in turn, multiple meanings. Similarly, semiotics is applicable to all Internet-based phenomena, as the Internet is yet another ‘place’ packed with signs. As a known fact, the hypermedia environment of the Web contains, besides graphic depictions, many other visual components such as hyperlinks, browser interface features and page layout. All of them contribute to the complex process of signification. The very concept of virtual reality implies interaction through a system of symbols and indexes, the meaning of which is not literal, but ‘intended.’<sup>26</sup> It is via the global network that people communicate through signs, so that the latter appear all around the virtual space, including personal webpages and blogs, commercial and corporate sites, social networking and game platforms.

Applying Barthesian methodology to my study of Internet imagery will help to uncover the subtle, covert meanings that Soviet representations carry in the new media domain. When placed in online visual archives, a Soviet image acquires a different signification. Although its original meaning is not lost completely, it becomes to a certain degree distorted and squeezed out by new connotations. This is why some of the most prominent images turn into ‘icons,’

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<sup>24</sup> R. Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image” in *Image-Music – Text*, Sel. and Trans. Stephen Heath, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, “Rhetoric”, p. 34.

symbolising general concepts and values of Soviet life. Later in this chapter, I will consider particular instances of the appropriation of Soviet imagery on the Web. Upon addressing Barthes' theory, I will consider what stands behind each illustration and how it functions within the context of a website.

Both Barthes and Zelizer accentuate the immanent powers of the visual, as each of the scholars tackles the image from his or her theoretical perspective. Although not overtly, the theories of these two cultural critics do intersect in many surprising ways. For instance, whilst Barthes examines how images project different ideologies, Zelizer studies how representations transmit public recall, which is always ideologically charged and hence it constitutes a part of collective worldview. Social memory and ideology are inseparable, so that they can be understood as symbolic extensions of each other. In this context, both Barthes and Zelizer warn about possible subversive effects of an image. According to the scholars, some images manipulate reality or, simply put, distort truth while serving particular ideological needs. In what follows, I will proceed from Zelizer's theory to that of Barthes. Their theoretical implications will be employed further in this chapter.

One particular feature that Zelizer emphasises in her works is the ability of images to "freeze a representation of the past at a powerful moment already known to us."<sup>27</sup> Thus, in Zelizer's view, "visual work often involves catching the sequencing of events or issues midstream, strategically freezing it at its potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation."<sup>28</sup> In other words, an image (be it a picture, a photograph or a film still) 'captures' the brightest glimpse of the past, which is well known to the onlooker. This quality of images implies a work of imagination. Since a beholder has already been familiar with the depicted matter (he or she either had a first-hand experience of it or learned about it from other media), he or she can add background knowledge to whatever is represented. In this

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<sup>27</sup> Zelizer, "The Voice of the Visual", p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

regard, an image, unlike textual narrative, ‘leaves more room’ for a spectator to ponder, to reflect on the past and to contribute to collective recall with personal recollections, ideas and information received from other sources.

The quality of images to freeze the “particularly memorable moments” that Zelizer describes manifests itself distinctly in the visual archives.<sup>29</sup> Thus, browsing pages of these sites one encounters a few brightest ‘glimpses’ of the Soviet past: photographs of events and matters that are well known to those who lived in the USSR and those who were born after the fall of Communism. Even further, some of these photographs are iconic, for they reflect and cover particularly significant episodes of Soviet history. For instance, the topic “1989 in Colour” on *Back in the USSR* features an assemblage of vivid, intense imagery attributed to that year.<sup>30</sup> It is now a known fact that 1989 was a time of a great change – it was the heyday of Gorbachev’s Perestroika, when transformation of the Soviet system went almost its full way, so that the forthcoming 1990 – 1991 fall of Communism would be unavoidable. Pictures on *Back in the USSR* reveal events that shook the Soviet Union during that year. Among them are such milestones as the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, formation of the democratic opposition led by future Russian president Boris Yeltsin, the first Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union, as well as the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in the Transcaucasia region and the growing demand of the Baltics for independence.

Images in the topic of “1989 in Colour” on *Back in the USSR* convey the turbulent spirit of late Socialist time. As these photographs capture the ‘potentially strongest moments’ of the Soviet past, they communicate events that unfolded throughout the last years of the USSR’s existence, in particular, during 1989.<sup>31</sup> They ‘tell the story’ of the crumbling Soviet regime in the late 1980s better than words, reporting the transformation of the Soviet society as a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> <http://back-in-ussr.com/2014/12/1989-god-v-cvete.html> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>31</sup> Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual”, p. 158.

consequence of Gorbachev's reformation. For those who are acquainted with Soviet history such images serve as 'signposts' that indicate and bring back memories related to that particular period.<sup>32</sup> Provided a person has at least surface knowledge of Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost, (not to mention if one personally experienced life under Gorbachev) he or she would immediately grasp the meaning of images uploaded on [www.back-in-ussr.com](http://www.back-in-ussr.com).

Other important qualities of images that Zelizer brings forward in her research and that I find especially relevant to my study of visual archives are *conventionalism* and *simplification*. Thus, citing the scholars James Fentress and Chris Wickham, Zelizer states that visual representations of collective memory are "conventionalized, because the image has to be meaningful for an entire group; simplified, because in order to be generally meaningful and capable of transmission, the complexity of the image must be reduced as far as possible."<sup>33</sup> Putting it simply, if an image is easy to recognise and remember, the chances are high that such an image will persist in collective recall for a long time and not only over decades, but over centuries. On the contrary, if a depiction is specific and sophisticated, then it may not suit for communicating public memory at all. In the latter case, redundancy of details and ambiguity in representation subvert the mnemonic capacity of an illustration. Eventually, as Zelizer explains, "we come to remember whole events through condensed images that reduce complex and multidimensional phenomena into memorable scenes."<sup>34</sup> Simplification, conventionalism and even schematism are exactly the qualities that enable images of a collective past to transgress national, geographic and temporal borders.

As for visual archives, they are packed with conventionalised, simplified images extracted from the Soviet epoch. Most of them symbolise basic concepts of Soviet life that

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<sup>32</sup> J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, p. 7; Fentress and Wickham, op. cit. pp. 47-48.

<sup>34</sup> Zelizer, 'The Voice of the Visual', p. 164.

can be well known even to someone who does not originate from the former USSR. As a rule, these images demonstrate a ‘formula’ of happy Soviet life: young pioneers on a summer vacation, smiling children in Soviet schools and kindergartens, Soviet youth studying in universities and socialising in disco clubs and, not the least, Soviet workers enjoying both busy weekdays and deserved breaks from work. They are mere sketches of Soviet society, snapshots, which are easy to ‘read’ and to comprehend, and which are perfect prompts for a positively-charged memory of the USSR. *Museum of the USSR '20 Century'*, for instance, accommodates a multitude of such photographs, so that they are found in each heading of the site. Whether one looks through the heading of “Our lifestyle” or “How it was” one discovers them straight away.<sup>35</sup> A few particular depictions that can be mentioned in this regard include images of New Year and wedding celebrations, people going to Soviet-era shops and markets, teen and adult fashion. Simple and ordinary, these representations of the Soviet mode of life lack any visual complexity and therefore, according to Zelizer, they are ‘markers of collective memory’ that “symbolize socially shared concepts or belief rather than present new or unfamiliar information.”<sup>36</sup> It is exactly due to their simplicity that, as Zelizer asserts, such images can transmit recollections.

Yet, images in visual archives do not come independently. They are almost always accompanied by words. Be it the title of a topic, a short description or a long explanatory note, the text permanently complements images of the USSR on these sites. Although, as I indicated above, the *verbal* aspect is secondary to the *visual* in visual archives, it does, nonetheless, play a certain part. Referring to Zelizer’s works again, I propose that the text featured in visual archives helps to stabilise and clarify the meaning of posted representations.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://20th.su/category/nash-byt/>, <http://20th.su/category/kak-eto-bylo/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>36</sup> B. Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 5.

Since images ‘offer only fragments of understanding,’ these are the words that enable us to grasp the full meaning of what is shown.<sup>37</sup>

Zelizer, of course, is not the only cultural critic to note a close interaction of *visual* and *verbal* elements in contemporary culture. It was Roland Barthes who was the first to theorise the linkage of images and words. Particularly, in his “Rhetoric of the Image” Barthes states that text always supplements representations, as, according to the scholar, “today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon.”<sup>38</sup> As Barthes maintains, each modern illustration contains a ‘textual matter’ and it is the very presence of text “that counts, for neither its position nor its length seem to be pertinent.”<sup>39</sup> All imagery that surrounds us involves text, be it glossy magazines, art installations or the Internet.

However, the omnipresence of the verbal in contemporary media is not accidental. Words permeate visual material with a particular cause. Thus, in Barthes’ view, they serve a special function of *anchorage*, which is ‘fixing’ the meaning of the depicted matter.<sup>40</sup> As Barthes points out, “all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain of signifieds’ and it is precisely the text (the linguistic message) that ‘fixes this floating chain of signifieds.’”<sup>41</sup> Even a small textual fragment can be such an anchor: a title, a slogan or a tag stabilises the meaning of a representation. In other words, it is due to the text that the onlooker immediately understands what is in the picture and why it is there. On the contrary, when there is no textual explanation, the spectator may only guess about myriads of possible significations of a given illustration. As Barthes notes, “the text directs

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, “Rhetoric”, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others.”<sup>42</sup>

Speaking about the role of words in visual archives, I by no means aim to diminish the absolute power of the visual and my purpose in this regard is the opposite. I suggest that text on these sites is *at the service* of images. It enhances the meaning of each Soviet representation which otherwise would be difficult to comprehend. While some images are more or less obvious to us, text can provide additional explanation, as well as change our understanding of the depicted matter to a certain degree. If images “only arbitrarily connect with the object or event being remembered,” then words make this connection more concrete.<sup>43</sup>

The auxiliary role of words in visual archives needs more thorough examination. It is not merely words but their linkage with images that is crucial to understanding how public memory works. Why do creators of visual archives supply images that they post with short texts? Are not Soviet photographs, graphic illustrations and prints themselves sufficient enough to communicate memory of the USSR? The answer is apparently ‘no’, they are not, for, as Zelizer assumes, “images, particularly photographs, do not make obvious how they construct what we see and remember.”<sup>44</sup> According to Zelizer, pictures “offer … implicative relays, suggestive slices of action that people need to complete by interpreting and imagining what unfolds beyond the camera’s frame” and words, in the meantime, “are valued for their evidentiary qualities.”<sup>45</sup>

The unequal relationship between images and words is best seen on [www.back-in-ussr.com](http://www.back-in-ussr.com). Although at first glance it seems that the space of the site is distributed evenly between the *visual* and *verbal* aspects (as some of the site’s topics do include a substantial

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Zelizer, *About to Die*, p. 6.

portion of text), words here fulfil a secondary role to images. Thus, the newsfeed of the site is centred on pictures, and not text. Texts (including titles of articles, notes and summaries), in turn, perform an interpretive function: they simply explain what images show. Nonetheless, without text the meaning of certain images would be unclear and hence the presence of textual fragments on the site is essential. A poignant example, in this regard, is the topic “What the first-class cabin in Soviet airplanes looked like”, highlighting the best sides of the Soviet civil aviation.<sup>46</sup> The topic is principally image-based, as it incorporates about fifteen inside-the-cabin-views, which are colour and black and white photographs taken presumably during the Soviet 1970-80s. Simple and ordinary, these images, however, do not themselves make clear what exactly they represent, and thus the full explanation is provided through text. Supplementary notes and comments tell us about who flew first class, why and when, as well as which airline company operated such planes. As this example shows, images and words together create a necessary effect. They render memory of the late Socialist period, while recalling a particular aspect of Soviet life – travel by air.

### **3.4. Idealisation, Mythologisation and Nostalgia for ‘All Things Soviet’**

Opening the home page of *the Museum of the USSR '20 Century'*, one suddenly finds oneself in a dream world. Photographs of joyful Soviets marching either in the streets or at celebratory ceremonies overwhelm the onlooker. Browsing this site further, one encounters many other pictures that glorify prominent achievements of the USSR, such as the first man in space, Soviet sportsmen, television and cinema. Likewise, there are images praising Soviet industry, workers, healthcare and education. On the whole, the website itself looks appealing, as its visually comforting design lulls the viewer with bright representations of hammer and

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<sup>46</sup> <http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/03/kak-vyglyadel-salon-pervogo-klassa-v-sovetskih-samoletah.html> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

sickle, the emblem of the 1980 Summer Olympics (held in Moscow), vinyl records and, of course, a young pioneer blowing a trumpet under the slogan ‘Be Prepared.’<sup>47</sup>

In visual archives, like *Museum of the USSR* or *Back in the USSR*, nostalgia for ‘all things Soviet’ reaches its climax. Thus, idealistic depictions of the Soviet past prevail on these sites, while accompanying text tell colourful stories about a secure and carefree life under Communism. For instance, submitting a set of random images on the topic “We Soviet, then and now,” user LubovS ponders the social changes that occurred with the breakup of the USSR. In particular, she resents the degradation of moral values and thus notes: “we became more mercantile, [so that] money [today] is a measure of everything.”<sup>48</sup> Comparing the current situation with the Soviet period she observes that “whilst money was important [in the USSR], there was still a space for true friendship, selfless mutual aid and finally love!”<sup>49</sup> Other advantages that LubovS recalls about her living in the Soviet Union are personal safety and the fact that people ‘were not acerbated,’ as they followed the socialist motto ‘a human is to a human a friend, comrade and brother!’ The Soviets, according to LubovS, were friendly because of an overall social security and their ‘belief in a bright future.’<sup>50</sup> This exemplifies the revival of post-Soviet nostalgia.

Obviously, the contributors of visual archives do not represent life as ‘it actually was’ in the USSR, but they do portray life as ‘it was supposed to be’ according to the Communist ideals. In other words, they depict a mythic society, projecting its qualities onto the image of the collapsed USSR. Is it the society that the users of these sites are currently dreaming of? What if the Soviet utopia with its promise of equality, collective happiness and social justice still appeals to them?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> [www.20th.su](http://www.20th.su) retrieved 21.07.2016.

<sup>48</sup> <http://20th.su/2011/04/07/my-sovetskie-togda-i-teper/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> M. Balina and Dobrenko, E. *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*. London, NY: Anthem Press, 2009. pp. xv-xvi.

One possible explanation for why users create USSR nostalgia sites is their dissatisfaction with current Russian reality. Reasons for such dissatisfaction are many, including objective grounds (that is, real problems that Russia experiences today) and subjective impressions that have no actual cause, but that, nonetheless, make people feel disappointment with their lives. Thus, both the poor situation in the country and the subjective feeling of citizens about the poor performance of the current regime can cause a sense of nostalgia, since, as Elena Morenkova claims, “nostalgia appears, when certain elements of the present are perceived as defective.”<sup>52</sup> In this context, nostalgia acts as a “therapeutic mechanism called upon to alleviate the material, moral, and physical despair that became so characteristic in the lives of many people in post-socialist Russia.”<sup>53</sup> Put somewhat differently, “a misremembered past appeals” to contemporary Russians, “because the present doesn’t work and the future looks bleak.”<sup>54</sup> Not surprisingly, in their attempt to escape from what reality offers, users construct alternative, virtual worlds, where the USSR turns into a ‘perfect Utopia,’ imbued with all the qualities of an ideal land.<sup>55</sup> Even further, the more time passes since the fall of Communism, the easier it is to idealize all things Soviet. Over the years, negative memories tend to vanish, leaving room for positive, embellished images of the past.

Yet, there is another explanation for the currently resurgent nostalgia for the USSR. The Soviet experiment lasted for almost three quarters of a century and hence upon its closure it left a huge symbolic legacy. This legacy is still significant for those who grew up in the USSR. Soviet collectivist values, cultural production and a certain worldview still matter to

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<sup>52</sup> E. Morenkova, “(Re)creating the Soviet Past in Russian Digital Communities. Between Memory and Mythmaking”. *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 7, 2012, p. 47.

<sup>53</sup> S. Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia”. *The Russian Review* 66, 2007, p. 452.

<sup>54</sup> J-M. Chauvier, “Russia: Nostalgic for the Soviet Era”. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2004, retrieved at <http://mondediplo.com> on 05.04.2015.

<sup>55</sup> E. Morenkova, op. cit., p. 48.

many adults in today's Russia.<sup>56</sup> As Neil Munro notes, "for 70 years, the rituals, films, books, plays, and even music of the Soviet era constructed what amounted to a quasi-religion with its own pantheon of revolutionary gods, its own moral code ('the end justifies the means'), and its own taboos and shibboleths."<sup>57</sup> Communism meant more than a mere regime. It offered a system of values that many Russians long for today, as they cannot find an adequate substitute.

Swept by a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past, the users of visual archives collect only the best products of Soviet culture – even if, in reality, the latter were not particularly outstanding, these are the items or notions that modern Russians are still much proud of. Thus, a sympathetic attitude towards Soviet production is obvious on these sites, where in almost each topic users state that Soviet goods (also norms, traditions, holidays etc.) outmatched the Western. The topic "Soviet refrigerators" on [back-in-ussr.com](http://back-in-ussr.com) can be cited in this regard, as it demonstrates a currently favourable, if not tender, treatment of the Soviet appliances.<sup>58</sup> The topic features images of up to twenty different refrigerators released in the USSR over the period between the 1950s and 1980s. The images, in turn, are supplemented by descriptions that tell us about the place and year of production, as well as the basic characteristics of each brand. In general, it looks like a short 'history' of the Soviet refrigerator from its very first model up to the latest release in the USSR. More interesting, however, are personal observations by the topic's creator Sergei, who seems to be a fan of Soviet material culture. As Sergei assembles his virtual collection of refrigerators, he comments on how this particular industry developed in the USSR. Thus, he notes: "in the 60s the Soviet Union increased the scale of its production,...[so that] almost each family had a

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<sup>56</sup> N. Munro, "Russia's Persistent Communist Legacy: Nostalgia, Reaction, and Reactionary Expectations". *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22 (4), 2006, p. 294.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 295.

<sup>58</sup> <http://back-in-ussr.com/2015/03/sovetskie-holodilniki.html> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

bright, bourgeois-like beautiful household helper” (meaning a Soviet refrigerator).<sup>59</sup> At that time, as Sergei maintains, “there was no need to dream about the Finnish refrigerator *Rosenlew* anymore,” as “the USSR had everything its own and *the very best* (italics mine).”<sup>60</sup> Closing the topic, he concludes: “Having outlived a few generations of their foreign brothers, the strong and durable Soviet refrigerators serve in modern country houses to this day.”<sup>61</sup>

Were Soviet refrigerators in effect as good as Sergei describes them? Did they really supersede their Western counterparts? And did not the Soviets hunt for the import, when the latter occasionally reached the USSR? Certainly, they did. As a matter of fact, every second Soviet citizen dreamt about Western products – Western clothes, makeup, furniture, let alone that demand for imported appliances was always sky-high in the USSR. Everyone wanted to own anything ‘produced in the West,’ though maybe he or she did not admit it overtly. Furthermore, to have anything Western in the USSR meant to have a rarity, a luxury, a dream, and prestige in the eyes of fellow citizens. As for Soviet refrigerators, they were average in all respects: with all their virtues and drawbacks, they were, in any case, better than nothing. What is at stake in the topic “Soviet refrigerators” on [back-in-ussr.com](#), however, are not the *actual* qualities of these appliances, but the currently boasting *charm* of all things born in the USSR.

Stored in online visual archives images of Soviet refrigerators, record players or washing machines come to signify more than just old household items. They become true ‘signs’ of Soviet time.<sup>62</sup> Rather than carrying their literal meaning, these images illustrate a set of symbolic ideas that are now superimposed on the former USSR. For instance, one can contemplate a depiction of a Soviet fridge on back-in-ussr.com and actually see a simple kitchen device. However, what hides behind this image are abstract terms, like *Goodness*,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 113.

*Solidity* and *Wholeness*. The latter are the most popular concepts with which Russians now ‘label’ almost all goods produced in the USSR.<sup>63</sup> Listing these concepts further, one can also name *Kindness*, *Happiness* and *Friendliness*, but the list is far from complete, as there are many other positively-charged notions that one currently employs for description of Soviet culture, lifestyle and society. Inherently, all these concepts are fictional and exaggerated; they have little in common with the reality of the Communist time.

Continuing in the same vein, I suggest that pictures of Soviet refrigerators, as well as other similar illustrations on [back-in-ussr.com](http://back-in-ussr.com), render, alongside public recollections, a portion of myths about the USSR. Digital representations in visual archives work simultaneously for two contradicting processes: *memorialisation* of everything Soviet, on the one hand, and *mythologisation*, on the other. Thus memory and mythology, generally, the two antipodes, co-exist in a single virtual space. Memory and myth become inseparable on the Web, so that it is hard to discern which of these two symbolic constructs is more powerful. Resulting from that is a volatile, unstable representation of the Soviet past that balances somewhere on the verge of truth and fiction.

Considering the positive nature of visual archives, it should be noted, however, that, despite the overall positivity, these websites occasionally give realistic portrayal of Soviet life with all its challenges and hardships. Although this observation conflicts with my previous statement about mythologisation of ‘all things Soviet’ in visual archives, I have to admit that the latter sometimes shift towards exposing the drawbacks of Communist regime. For instance, some featured materials show *besprizorniki*, meaning in Russian the homeless children who lost their parents due to the wars, hunger or terror in the USSR.<sup>64</sup> Other pictures demonstrate the lack of consumer goods during the period of late Socialism: empty shelves in

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<sup>63</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 119.

<sup>64</sup> <http://back-in-ussr.com/2016/10/besprizorniki-1920-h-godov.html> retrieved on 14.01.2017.

stores and long lines that an average citizen had to stand in order to get the most basic items.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, there are photographs of what today we call ‘life hacks’, that is homemade solutions to the basic problems that were not answered by the Soviet consumer market. While such images appear in visual archives at random, they are still few comparing to images that exalt different merits of the former USSR. The negative undertone of these few candid depictions tarnishes against the background of hundreds images glorifying not only the Soviet production, but also immaterial values of the Soviet lifestyle. Visual archives stay generally positive, even when realistic ‘sobering’ depictions slip in.

To conclude the current section, there is yet one more thing to note regarding the idealistic mood of the visual archives. I contend that what these archives promote is not merely individual or collective nostalgia for the USSR, but it is a new ‘mediated nostalgia,’ as described by Ryan Lizardi in a book of the same title.<sup>66</sup> The logic of ‘mediated nostalgia’ is rather simple. It brings a hyper-idealisation of past, while stripping us of the ability to reflect upon history critically. Thus, rather than “seeking to create representations of the past...that are critical and discussion provoking,” the contributors to visual archives construct comforting, ‘narcissistic’ images that may distort understanding of the Soviet epoch.<sup>67</sup> As discussed above, users selectively pick up only the ‘best’ pieces of Soviet culture and then make these pieces look even more appealing by placing them in digital space. It is exactly in visual archives that Soviet past “has- been updated and made better, scrubbed of its contextual reality and conflated with the values and technology of today.”<sup>68</sup> The currently positive, idealised vision of the Soviet epoch is ubiquitous, as it spreads to different aspects of former

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<sup>65</sup> <http://20th.su/2015/04/30/deficit-po-sovetski/> retrieved on 14.01.2017.

<sup>66</sup> R. Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*. London, NY: Lexington Books, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

Soviet life, including big issues, like the entire Brezhnev rule, and minor instances, like Soviet refrigerators.

### 3.5. Archiving Post-Soviet Memory Online

Contrary to the general understanding of archives as neutral or objective repositories of public memory, online visual archives cannot be, by any means, described as unbiased. As was explicated in the previous section, they add idealistic tone to the Soviet past, enforcing this idealisation through digitally mediated images. The virtual collection of visual archives is thus selective and fragmentary, for whatever is in it reflects the Soviet epoch from one single-sided perspective, which is precisely nostalgia, romanticism or even hyper-idealisation. Yet, despite this bias, visual archives play an important role in shaping collective memory, and although they do not look like conventional, physical storage of public records, the term ‘archive’ is well applicable to these sites. They do have intrinsic archival functions to preserve, select and access knowledge of the past and they do likewise help to approach controversies of the Soviet history.<sup>69</sup> Below I will specify a few vital qualities that allow me to define web sites under investigation as ‘archives.’ In what sense can they be called so? Besides, I will consider a concomitant question of whether it is generally possible to save residues of the Soviet period online.

Contemporary media theorists observe that the nature of an archive today has substantially changed.<sup>70</sup> For instance, Amit Pinchevski asserts that “the technological

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<sup>69</sup> R. Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives”. *The American Archivist* 69 (1), 2006, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> See works by Ernst W. and J. Parikka *Digital Memory and the Archive*; Parikka J. *What is Media Archaeology?*, Theimer, K. *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*; Pinchevski A. “Archive, Media, Trauma” in *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger et al.; Uricchio W. “Moving Beyond the Artefact: Lessons from Participatory Culture” in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*. ed. by Marianne van den Boomen et al.

apparatus of the archive... has seen significant technological transformations during the last three decades" and "these transformations have given rise to new archival formations that in turn feed into the social practice of memory."<sup>71</sup> Wolfgang Ernst expresses a similar opinion, as he introduces his comprehensive theory of a new 'dynamic' multimedia archive. Thus, according to Ernst, "new archives are successively generated according to current needs," and hence it is not surprising that they are fundamentally different from their old, traditional counterparts.<sup>72</sup> As a true incarnation of a new digital archive, Ernst draws the example of the Internet, which, in his view, "constitutes a new type of transarchive": its "essence... is permanent updating, and one that can translate moving images and gramophone records from the classical realm of the alphabet to archive, real-time itself (webcam culture)."<sup>73</sup> In a similar vein, a third scholar, William Uricchio suggests an even more radical idea that in the new digital environment the archive has turned from a cultural *form* into a social *practice*. As Uricchio explices, instead of a mere repository, the Internet offers a range of 'archival practices,' which include, but are not limited to "blogs, wikis, chat spaces, games, etc."<sup>74</sup>

With reference to particular features that discern a new digital archive from its physical predecessor, one can note several differences. Although some of them are more or less obvious, it is important to pinpoint a few crucial ones, as it will help to understand what a modern archive looks like and what logic it follows. In this connection, the most accurate description of a digital archive is provided by Pinchevski in his article "Archive, Media, Trauma." I will cite this description due to its concision, even though other scholars (and a few are mentioned above) offer equally valuable observations on the phenomenon. So, how

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<sup>71</sup> A. Pinchevski, "Archive, Media, Trauma". *On Media Memory*. ed. M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 253.

<sup>72</sup> W. Ernst and J. Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. p. 81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>74</sup> W. Uricchio, "Moving Beyond the Artefact: Lessons from Participatory Culture". *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*. ed. by Marianne van den Boomen et al. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p. 144.

does a new digital archive work? And what are its principal distinctions? First and foremost, as Pinchevski notes, with the advent of modern information technologies, the *location* of an archive changed. If previously an archive involved physical storage, today it is often no longer attached to one geographical place. Instead, it presents an immaterial network, which is accessible and sharable from anywhere.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, the archival *authority* has likewise shifted. In the past, according to Pinchevski, archiving was the sole prerogative of ruling elites – only rulers (or a privileged group of people, as an alternative) could decide what should be archived and how. Today by contrast, any person without exception, is authorized to archive. Thus, modern archivists are common users who store and share with others any sort of memories that, in their opinion, are worth preserving.<sup>76</sup> Finally, the *content* of an archive has changed its quality too. Unlike in the past, in the contemporary digital age the archived items are no longer authentic. They have lost their originality and become mere digital copies, which are endlessly reproduced and transferred from one digital storage to another in a matter of seconds.<sup>77</sup> Overall, as Pinchevski emphasises in his article, both the archival form and content underwent a profound transformation, so that now we have an archive of a new type. No longer is it static storage, but a dynamic, constantly growing system that comprises numerous electronic replicas instead of originals.<sup>78</sup>

Referring to the latter definition of archive, one can answer the question that I posed in the beginning of this section positively. Yes, memory of the Soviet times can be stored and archived on the Internet, even if the preservation of the Communist past as such is not the final purpose. As soon as users bring at least one image of the USSR online, they become archivists of the Soviet past, for, according to Wolfgang Ernst, “we are [all] miniarchivists in

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<sup>75</sup> Pinchevski, op. cit., p. 255.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

this information society.”<sup>79</sup> This is exactly what the contributors of visual archives do – they archive random recollections about the Soviet period, while striving to preserve those pieces of Soviet culture that are disregarded by official institutions of memory, like state museums, libraries or historical departments in universities. For instance, on the site of the virtual *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> century* users submit collections of Soviet postcards and calendars, labels of beverages, cigarettes and meals that were common in the Soviet Union. The same site includes a special heading “Remember the USSR,” which hosts photographs of Soviet household appliances, toys, consumer goods and even food packaging.<sup>80</sup> People bring to the Internet only those traces of the Soviet past that, in their opinion, are worth memorialising. In this sense, visual archives are true repositories of public memory, since here users who are ordinary citizens of Russia (as well as Russian-speaking citizens of other former Soviet republics) choose what to remember about the Soviet epoch. Neither current Russian authorities, nor state or commercial institutions can control public recall on the sites, which are maintained by the general public.

The Internet, as the most democratic medium, admits everyone to the archiving process and hence in the digital space everyone, regardless of age, profession or even geographic location, can be an archivist endowed with a power to create records of the past. Who exactly crafts these records and why does not particularly matter, but what does matter is the fact that common users take the production of history ‘in their own hands,’ thereby becoming custodians of historical knowledge.<sup>81</sup> They select which themes, artefacts or evidence to include in archives, while simultaneously deciding which subjects or events to leave aside. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts, “the making of archives involves a number of selective operations: selection of producers, selection of evidence, selection of themes, selection of

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<sup>79</sup> Ernst, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> <http://20th.su/gallery/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>81</sup> Trouillot, quoted in Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives”, p. 24.

producers – which means, at best a differential ranking and, at worst, the exclusion of some producers, some evidence, some themes, some producers.”<sup>82</sup> Not surprisingly, in a situation where the general public (and not a selected group of professionals) fulfils archival practices, the archives themselves are inconstant; they tend to be skewed towards one subject or, maybe even, towards one sentiment. This is well in evidence in digital visual archives, which cast an idealistic imprint on Soviet past.

After the structure of a digital archive is scrutinized and explicated, another important task is to define the meaning of its *archivalia*. Here I use the term *archivalia* intentionally, for it signifies any materials that are preserved in archives. In the meantime, it is much harder to find a more specific notion for description of entries created in visual archives. Are they *digital objects*, *artefacts* or mere *electronic images*? The answer is not simple, as users furnish these sites with different heterogeneous materials related to the Soviet era. Everything from a picture of a radio to a portrait of smiling Yuri Gagarin can be included in visual archives. There are no restrictions on posted contents and the only requirement in this regard is a thematic link with the former USSR. In this context, I suggest that entries in visual archives can be attributed to all three aforementioned categories: they are digital images, digital objects and digital artefacts at the same time. Furthermore, in the new media environment the distinctions between these notions become increasingly blurred, so that it is hard to tell which term is the most appropriate. What happens if a real material object – let’s say a Soviet record player – is digitized and placed in the virtual ground of the Web? How should one treat the digital immaterial copy? However, in introducing the concepts of *digital image*, *object* and *artefact* in my discussion, I do not search for an absolute answer. Rather, my assumption is that looking from these three different and yet closely interconnected perspectives might help

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

to uncover additional qualities of visual archives. Simply put, these are three different ways to examine the contents of visual archives.

From the practical point of view, all *archivalia* in the visual archives are *digital images* accompanied by text (as discussed in the section “Power of Images”). Although these sites do not prevent users from sending other types of data (like audio or video), the still images constitute most of all user-submitted materials. Thus, sounds in visual archives are rare, whereas images are ubiquitous and they come in vast numbers almost in each topic of the site. A good example in this regard, is *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century’*, which accommodates dozens of pictures and, by contrast, just *one* mp3-sound, the Soviet national anthem. Such profusion of images in visual archives is not accidental. Either consciously or subconsciously people choose digital pictures as the easiest way to archive their knowledge about the USSR. Richard Coyne notes, in this connection, that “digital imagery emphasises the human propensity to collect and hoard, to order things in time, to date stamp and in a sense to arrest time.”<sup>83</sup> As he also observes, “digital photographs serve as a means of documentation, of keeping and sharing records,” thereby suiting perfectly to archiving practice.

If the notion of a *digital image* seems to be clear and obvious, then the notion of a *digital object* requires a more detailed explanation, for the latter is a technical term, used widely in archival, curatorial and museum spheres. Thus, archivists, librarians and art professionals employ the concept of a digital object to denote any item that has electronic form and that is either involved in a digitally-based collection, or represents a separate independent piece. Due to its electronic structure a digital object can include any graphic, audio, video or textual format and hence “it may contain an image, representing a photograph, a drawing, a manuscript, a postcard,... or a sound recording, representing a piece of music, a

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<sup>83</sup> R. Coyne, “Mosaics and Multiples: Online Digital Photography and the Framing of Heritage”. *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*. ed. E. Giaccardi, London and NY: Routledge, 2012, p. 174.

speech, a story telling,” or it may even have “moving picture content, such as video or animation.”<sup>84</sup> A digital object can either be made as a copy of a material thing or it can be truly ‘digitally born’ (that is have no physical equivalent). However, in any case, its cultural value should never be underestimated, since “digital historical objects, like physical ones, are culture-encoded …and are made up of familiar cultural forms of meaning, significance, elements of perception, language, and reception.”<sup>85</sup>

To create a digital object is not a difficult task, as for that end one can use already existing non-digital material. For instance, one can take a digital picture of a real thing or scan an analogue photo to a digital format. Similarly, digitisation is done to texts, sounds and videos, since today virtually all types of data are rendered in digital form. While discussing digital objects from the perspective of a museum curator, Fiona Cameron admits that in the modern information age digitisation means far more than a technical procedure: “Deciding what to digitise and render in 3D – and what not to – involves an active process of value and meaning-making equivalent to that of the physical objects.”<sup>86</sup> She maintains that digitisation “enacts the curatorial process of selecting of what is significant, what should be remembered and forgotten, and what categories of meaning such as classification, cultural values, or aesthetic attributes are given pre-eminence.”<sup>87</sup> As Cameron concludes, “by virtue of its selection, the digital surrogate illustrates, reiterates, and passes on a set of social relations constructed for the ‘real’.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> A. Zhang and D. Gourley. *Creating Digital Collections: a Practical Guide*. Oxford, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> F. Cameron, “Beyond the Cult of the Replicant – Museums and Historical Digital Objects: Traditional Concerns, New Discourses”. *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: a Critical Discourse*. ed. F. Cameron and S. Kenderline. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2007, p. 65.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Visual archives encompass multitudes of *digital objects* that are reproduced from real Soviet objects or images. Contemporary Russians seem to be rather enthusiastic about ‘transferring’ pieces of Soviet material culture into the new immaterial domain, as if hoping that such transfer can extend the life of their favourite Soviet things. Thus, these sites are replete with digital Soviet cars and cameras, musical instruments and record players, TV sets and watches and many other goods that once enjoyed popularity among the Soviet population. Particularly, a vast collection of Soviet items is displayed at *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century*, where under the heading “Made in USSR” one can find almost ‘everything Soviet,’ starting from stationery and up to refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and calculating machines.<sup>89</sup> As users digitise and post their objects online, they provide a nostalgic descriptions of what is posted, thus showing their personal attitude towards life in the USSR. For instance, creating the topic “Tape recorder Vesna 202” at *Museum of the USSR ‘20<sup>th</sup> Century*, the user Scroll exclaims: “Do you remember how joyful it was to have this rarity at home?!” He maintains that this tape recorder was an indispensable thing and it was taken anywhere – ‘to discos’ and ‘just walks.’<sup>90</sup> The other users not only agree with Scroll but also contribute to this positive, nostalgic account of the Soviet tape recorder with their personal recollections. User LubovS, for instance, recalls that she “bought this kind of recorder with her first pay cheque,” which made her then ultimately happy.<sup>91</sup> User Vvgsfx continues in the same vein, as he states that he received exactly this item as a gift in 1985: “When I saw it, I cried for joy the first and the last time in my life.”<sup>92</sup> Obviously, in this context, *digital objects* act also as memorial objects that not only convey a general memory of the late Soviet period, but also prompt the telling of personal stories and render individual experiences of people lived at that time.

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<sup>89</sup> <http://20th.su/category/elektronika/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>90</sup> <http://20th.su/2009/09/18/kassetnyj-magnitofon-vesna-202/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Finally, the question of whether entries of visual archives can be regarded as *digital artefacts* is the most complicated, as it is difficult to tell what the notion of a digital artefact implies and if such a notion generally exists. Although contemporary media theorists use this term widely, they do not give a clear explanation of it. What one knows is the fact that a digital artefact differs radically from a material cultural artefact, which has an established meaning. What one does *not* know is whether preservation of heritage through digital artefacts is possible. As Hamid Ekbia observes, “digital artefacts have a ‘dubious ontology’ – they do not easily lend themselves to the kinds of criteria that we normally apply to perceive and identify physical objects.”<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, today scholars incorporate the notion of a digital artefact in academic discourse more and more often. Ekbia, for instance, asserts that a digital artefact can be any sort of “entry that current computing practices generate” and hence it can be a Facebook profile, a Wiki-article, a webpage or a web-blog discussion.<sup>94</sup> Robert Gehl employs the same term while studying YouTube as an archive and a *Wunderkammer*, which, in his view, is “a place where many of the artefacts of digital empire sit on shelves, waiting either to overwhelm a visitor or to be utilised by savvy new entrepreneurs.”<sup>95</sup> Peter Lyman and Brewster Kahle in their exploration of a digital cultural heritage and the problem of its preservation conclude that the Internet itself is “a born digital cultural artefact intrinsic to the digital/electronic environment.”<sup>96</sup> Along with the World Wide Web the researchers cite other digital artefacts, like “simulation software..., visualization and scenario software, Jurassic Park dinosaur animations, or collaboratories and virtual communities.” However,

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<sup>93</sup> H. Ekbia, “Digital Artifacts as Quasi-Objects: Qualification, Mediation, and Materiality”. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60 (12), 2009, p. 2554.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 2555.

<sup>95</sup> R. Gehl, “YouTube as Archive: Who will Curate this Digital *Wunderkammer*?”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12 (1), 2009, p. 45.

<sup>96</sup> P. Lyman and B. Kahle, “Archiving Digital Cultural Artifacts: Organizing an Agenda for Action”. *D-Lib Magazine* July/August 1998, retrieved at [www.dlib.org](http://www.dlib.org) on 05.04.2015.

they stress that among all these artefacts the Web is the most essential, as it is intrinsically ubiquitous and all-inclusive.<sup>97</sup>

Preserving the collective memory of Soviet times through digital artefacts can be a beneficial and, at the same time, risky business. On the one hand, apparent benefits from it are easy access and constant availability of knowledge about the Soviet past online. As Lyman and Khale note, digital artefacts are universal tools for ‘archiving the record of culture,’ because, firstly, they can be cheaply and compactly saved; secondly, they can be distributed to millions of people; and thirdly, they can be quickly searched and reordered in digital storage.<sup>98</sup> However, on the other hand, the intangible nature of digital artefacts makes them ephemeral and vulnerable. To destroy them is as easy as a click of computer mouse, and once destroyed, they leave no trace after themselves. In this connection, Ekbia characterises a digital artefact as an “unstable, loosely bounded entity that meaningfully constitutes, and is constituted by its environment.”<sup>99</sup>

In online visual archives of Soviet past, digital artefacts are (like the archives themselves), indeed, volatile and transient. Not only their cultural meaning, but their very existence as such is dependent on many likewise loose factors, including the formal criteria, like, for instance, position on the website, and more subtle influences, like heading of the topic, comments of users and linkage with other web-components, or interferences such as advertisements. Like their material counterparts, digital artefacts are imbued with symbolic value, however this value is rather arbitrary, as it is determined by someone, who might have a subjective, biased attitude towards the Soviet past. A digital collection of Soviet postcards on [www.20th.su](http://www.20th.su), for instance, matters only as long as user Rakita considers them valuable.<sup>100</sup> She sees them as true relics of Soviet culture, even if in reality they are not. For her, these

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ekbia, op. cit., p. 2555.

<sup>100</sup> <http://20th.su/2011/08/07/komplekty-sovetskix-otkrytok/> retrieved on 21.07.2016.

colourful printed items associate with childhood, recreation and travelling and this is why she decides to preserve them in the virtual space. Although there are other users who, like Rakita, collect Soviet postcards online, it is obvious that the value of these digital artefacts is quite random.

## **Chapter Four| The Virtual Museum of the Gulag**

### **4.1. Introduction**

Contrary to visual archives that idealise the Soviet epoch, the current case study deals with the flipside of Communism, namely, the Gulag, once the central institution of Soviet terror. Thus, unlike previous parts of my thesis, this section focuses on the traumatic aspect of the Soviet past, which is antithetical to the nostalgic, romanticising recollections promoted through visual archives. As I have already mentioned, the landscape of digital Soviet memory is diverse and heterogeneous. Images of Soviet glory blend with images of Soviet atrocities in one all-encompassing virtual domain, so it is essential to locate both Soviet *nostalgia* and Soviet *trauma* online.

Upon studying how memory of the Soviet traumatic past is articulated on the Web, I will address one particular example: the Virtual Museum of the Gulag, a website that was created by Saint Petersburg Memorial Society with a view to commemorate all those who suffered from the unjust brutality of the Soviet regime.<sup>1</sup> Today the Memorial Society is the only, although vast, organisation that fights for the rights of victims of Stalinism and strives to preserve public memory of the Soviet terror. Using different means and strategies to fulfil its mission, this NGO now actively goes online, thus creating websites and portals devoted to Gulag history. The Internet is crucial for Memorial's educational activity, as the open, democratic nature of this medium allows reaching different groups of people in Russia and abroad. Thus, some of Memorial's virtual projects are The System of Corrective Labour Camps in the USSR, Necropolis of Terror and Gulag, Museum of Gulag Art and Life, and, of course, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag, which will be examined below.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag”, <http://www.gulagmuseum.org> retrieved 22.07.2016.

<sup>2</sup> See “The System of Corrective Labour Camps in the USSR” at <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/GULAG/>, “Necropolis of Terror and Gulag” at <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/GULAG/>

However, before examining Memorial's online activities, it is important to consider some general aspects of the Gulag tragedy. What does the term 'Gulag' imply? How did the suffering of the Soviet people differ from other state-afflicted collective pains for instance, from the Holocaust? Why is memorialisation of Stalin's victims complicated? Knowing the specifics of Soviet trauma is key to understanding why projects like the Virtual Museum of the Gulag are urgent for the Russian society, which is yet coming to terms with its unsettled past. Since material, real-time commemoration of the Gulag requires a reasonable effort from the government – and is thus problematic – the general public employs vernacular, 'nonofficial' commemorative means, such as the World Wide Web. Going online seems to be the fastest, cheapest and the most accessible way to handle that grim page of the Soviet history. Thus, while offline memorialising practices of the Gulag are still rather scant in Russia, the Internet provides an alternative space for reconstruction of this memory and re-evaluation of the horrific Stalinist legacy as such.

Considering the Gulag as a national disaster that claimed the lives of millions of innocent people, it is vital to compare it with another tremendous catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Holocaust, which now holds the status of a 'limit event,' standing for "unspeakable human suffering."<sup>3</sup> The grounds for comparison of these two tragedies are obvious. Both happened at almost same time by the fault of the two most ruthless dictators; both featured repressions and concentration camps that caused mass killings. In a way, Stalin and Hitler can be seen as infamous doubles for all the misery that each of them produced in his own land. Stalin's growing fear of internal 'enemies,' on the one hand, and Hitler's anti-Semitism, on the other, led to shocking destruction, the repercussions of which would persist for decades. As Slavoj Žižek observes, "the two great traumatic events of the Holocaust and

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<http://www.mapofmemory.org/>, "Museum of Gulag Art and Life" at <http://www.memo.ru/museum/>, retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>3</sup> N. Miller and J. Tougaw, *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002, p. 3.

the Gulag are...exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century.”<sup>4</sup> The scholar maintains that “the shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as ‘living dead’ until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, despite the above stated resemblance of the Gulag and the Holocaust, it is a mistake to envision them as being entirely similar. In fact, there is more difference than similitude between the tragedies, as these “two contexts were created by, organised through, and employed in and for vastly different purposes, with nearly wholly different regulative ideologies.”<sup>6</sup> Simply put, Stalinist repressions and Nazi genocide were not alike. They presented dissimilar modes of oppression and terror. According to Steven Katz, “in their design, empirical facticity, intentionality and teleology [the Gulag and the Holocaust] were radically alternative forms of manipulation, violence, and death.”<sup>7</sup> Continuing in the same vein, scholar Nikolaus Wachsmann states that the most crucial distinction between these two camp systems lied in the number of produced killings. As he explicates, “although the Soviet camps were initially more deadly [...], the KL [an abbreviation from the German *Konzentrationslager*] later took a more radical turn and developed along far more lethal lines, culminating in the Auschwitz extermination complex, which had no equal in the USSR or anywhere else.”<sup>8</sup> Wachsmann stresses the fact that the inmates in the wartime SS concentration camps had far less chances for survival, than did the NKVD inmates (NKVD – from Russian *Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, meaning ‘People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs’), ninety per cent of which were released at the end of repressions.<sup>9</sup> Since

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<sup>4</sup> S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> S. Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought and History*. NY and London: New York University Press, 1992, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. NYC: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Nazis established their camps specifically for the annihilation of Jewish population (obviously, apart from the Jews, they also eliminated other ethnic groups and minorities), they did everything in order to deprive the prisoners of life. Gas chambers and crematoria were inseparable attributes of the Nazi genocide and, by contrast, none of these deadly weapons ever existed in the USSR. Thus, while the Holocaust was about uncompromising human destruction, the Gulag, instead, was about the exploitation of slaves, who worked days and nights to fulfil the ambitious production quotas.

However, not only the nature of terror was different in the Holocaust and the Gulag cases, but the manner of coping with the aftermath of these tragedies was different too. Thus, after the fall of the Third Reich in 1945 and Stalin's death in 1953, Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively, faced the dark legacy of their recent past, and the actions of the two countries, in this regard, were quite dissimilar. If the former reacted quickly, acknowledging all Nazi crimes and prosecuting the most virulent perpetrators immediately after WWII, the latter took much longer for recognition of atrocities that were committed by the Soviet leader and his henchmen. Ambiguity regarding the Gulag persisted for decades after Stalin's rule. The scale of the catastrophe remained unrecognised and the victims were silenced until the late 1980s. As Jehanne Gheith admits, "the Gulag lasted for a very long time and there were no public trials (cf. Nuremberg) and no public accountability," let alone that "the Communist government that incarcerated people in labour camps continued in power" until the very dissolution of the USSR in 1991.<sup>10</sup>

Another poignant difference between the Holocaust and the Gulag concerns the memorialisation of these catastrophes. As decades passed after the brutal rules of the Nazis and Stalin, different strategies have been used to remember each of these tragedies. The Holocaust memory, for instance, established itself quite early, over the period from the late

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<sup>10</sup>J. Gheith, "'I Never Talked': Enforced Silence, Non-narrative Memory, and the Gulag". *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* 12 (2), 2007, p. 160.

1970s to 1990s, when museums, monuments, films and books on the genocide of European Jews pervaded Western culture.<sup>11</sup> During that time, as Zelizer notes, “press articles ran routinely about remembering and forgetting the atrocities of WWII”; attention surged to the victims of Nazi brutalities; “and by 1995, a review of Elie Wiesel’s book was tellingly titled ‘Remembering as a Duty to Those Who Survived’.”<sup>12</sup> Over the same years, sites of remembrance of the traumatic past proliferated in Germany, thus changing the architectural image of the country, which turned into a huge reminder of the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> According to Adrian Parr, at the start of the new millennium “the topography of the German landscape has been shaped by the following didactic indictment: ‘You will not forget!’”<sup>14</sup> In this way, memorials to the murdered Jews sprang up in a few German cities, while exhibitions, talks and educational programmes on that subject took place regularly overall. Germany, as well as the whole of Europe, was actively remembering and re-conceptualising the atrocious experience of the Nazi past. Resulting from this memory work, the Holocaust became the core of contemporary thinking and a new subject field with a vast body of texts, documents and cultural representations.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the Holocaust, the Gulag has not produced a sufficient dialogue in the international community and is still largely absent from any serious discussion on collective trauma.<sup>16</sup> Although there was a massive wake of literature on the Soviet camps during the period of Cold War, the interest in history of Stalinist terror gradually faded after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, only few works mention the Gulag as a great catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but even they do not acknowledge fully the traumatic effect of

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<sup>11</sup>Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup>A. Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Miller and Tougaw, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Gheith, op.cit., p. 160.

those atrocities.<sup>17</sup> Who were the victims of the Soviet terror? What was the reaction of the society towards former prisoners upon their return from gulags? How do survivors of Stalin's repressions cope with their trauma today? Contemporary foreign reader may still wonder about these and some other questions, which are not as widely disputed as is the Holocaust subject. Whilst the latter has been for a few decades at the forefront of Western European and Anglo-American thought, the Gulag, by contrast, is still somewhat underrepresented on the international arena.

Not even in Russia has memory of the Gulag been truly shaped. Russian society still struggles with the tragic legacy of Stalinism and "this job of facing the past is far from complete," if not to say that it has begun just recently.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is only now, more than sixty years after the Great Terror, that the country accepts that trauma, while taking steps towards its commemoration. Russia is finally ready to exorcise demons of the Stalinist past. In August 2015, for instance, the Russian government approved the so-called "policy for memorialization of victims of political repressions," which was essential and long-awaited move.<sup>19</sup> Practically, this was the first time that the state took reasonable effort towards remembering of the Gulag, as all preceding efforts (of the late Soviet or post-Soviet authorities) were inefficient – they did not do justice to the formerly repressed. Contrariwise, the new programme pledges the final, nationwide memorialisation of victims of the Soviet terror; it proposes to do this unfinished work of memory by 2020. This implies construction of new public memorials and exhibitions, development of educational schemes, as well as creation of databases, books, media and television projects about the history of repressions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Contrary to my statement, there are a few books that thoroughly examine traumatic impact of the Soviet camps, precisely: Nancy Adler, *the Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*, 2004 (psychological perspective) and Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, 2013 (cultural perspective).

<sup>18</sup> A. Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin*. NY: Viking, 1994, p. XX.

<sup>19</sup> *Kontsepciaia gosudarstvennoi politiki po uvekovecheniiu pamiatii zhertv politicheskikh repressii* at <http://president-sovet.ru/documents/read/393/>, retrieved on 17.01.2016.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Likewise, as part of this programme, workshops, seminars and lectures will take place to boost public awareness of the Soviet traumatic past. Overall, the programme looks promising, as it has elaborate strategies and clearly defined goals. Yet, only time will show how this new governmental initiative will contribute to commemoration of the Gulag tragedy: the task that still requires considerable work.

#### **4.2. The Soviet Tragedy**

As a term and acronym, ‘Gulag’ has several interconnected meanings. In its original sense, the word denoted the ‘Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps’ (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Ispravitel’no- trudovykh Lagerei* and, *Gulag* for short in Russian), established under Stalin’s initiative in 1930 and officially existing until his death in 1953. The mission of this governmental body was managing prisons, forced labour camps and special settlements that spread all across vast territory of the former USSR, including its major cities (for instance, Moscow and Leningrad) and extremely remote areas, such as the Far East, north-eastern Siberia and steppes of now independent Kazakhstan. However, as Anne Applebaum notes, ‘over time’ the term ‘Gulag’ acquired a broader meaning, as it “came to signify not only the administration of the concentration camps but also the system of Soviet labour itself, in all its forms and varieties: labour camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women’s camps, children’s camps, transit camps.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, ‘Gulag’ transformed into a common noun, applicable to all sides of notorious Soviet *katorga*.<sup>22</sup> Yet, today the notion ‘Gulag’ can be interpreted even more widely. It is now a metonym, an umbrella concept symbolising a whole range of virulent and unlawful acts that the Soviet state committed against its own citizens. The latter involved mass arrests and subsequent interrogations,

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<sup>21</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag: a History*. NY: Doubleday, 2003, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> In Tsarist Russia “*katorga*” denoted a penal colony or a place of exile, where prisoners performed hard labour.

deportations of entire families to places hardly suitable for life, imprisonment and physical liquidation of so-called ‘enemies of the people.’ As time passed, Gulag became a pivotal symbol of Soviet oppression at large.

In his original study of ideology, Žižek characterises the Gulag, alongside Nazi concentration camps, as the “‘perverse’ obverse of twentieth century civilization.”<sup>23</sup> For him, these two systems were equally evil. Both led to dramatic consequences and left relatively equal catastrophic aftermath after themselves. In a sense, Žižek is right, since Stalinism, like Nazism, was a campaign of mass murder, which led to a tremendously high rate of violent deaths. For instance, Adam Hochschild claims that over the period of just six years from 1935 to 1941 Stalin commanded arrests of more than nineteen million Soviets, where seven million were executed and the rest perished in different places of incarceration.<sup>24</sup> Another scholar, Anne Applebaum cites the figure of 2,749,163, as she estimates the number of those who died in camps and exiles.<sup>25</sup> Drawing this example, Applebaum, nonetheless, admits that the number is incomplete because it does not cover such cases as deaths during transportation to camps, or those who passed away shortly after release from prison.<sup>26</sup> In fact, while counting the victims of Stalinism, historians agree on the complexity of performing this task. Even though archives with information on Stalin’s crimes have been open ever since Gorbachev’s Glasnost, the accounts of the dictator’s brutalities vary from three to twenty million repressed, depending on who does the calculation. The diversity of Stalinist terror makes any assessment difficult. No statistical data can reflect the true scope of damage to peoples’ lives during Stalin’s rule. As Kathleen Smith observes, “in the Soviet case estimates are complicated not

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<sup>23</sup> S. Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London; NY: Verso, 1989, p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> A. Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin*. NY: Viking, 1994, p. xi.

<sup>25</sup> Applebaum, op. cit., p. 583.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

only by the scale of the purges and the time elapsed since they ended, but by the tremendous diversity of lethal and nonlethal forms they took.”<sup>27</sup>

My task here is neither to establish the exact number of Stalin’s victims or accurately represent Stalin’s misdeeds. My purpose in this section is more moderate: to stress the fact that Gulag was a pervasive catastrophe. It was a tragedy of the Soviet people, a national tragedy, which could be compared in its dimension only with the Holocaust. As Hochschild admits, what happened during Stalin’s epoch “was not only evil but, in the original sense of the word, tragic.”<sup>28</sup> Multiple waves of repressions initiated by the dictator touched upon different social groups, classes and nations living in the USSR. Be it a peasant or intellectual, a Party official or a rank-and-file Soviet, everyone without exception could fall victim to the vicious Stalinist machine.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, repressions affected a few generations of people, involving, apart from the dead, also the survivors, their relatives and children, who, after the end of Stalinism, had to cope with this collective trauma completely on their own (that is without any material or moral aid from the Soviet state). In her *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*, Nancy Adler describes the hardships that a Gulag survivor faced upon return from the camps. According to Adler, besides suffering from a personal psychological trauma, a returnee likewise experienced a problem with social re-adaptation.<sup>30</sup> Even after official (and partial) rehabilitation of Stalin’s victims in 1956, the Soviet society was not ready to accept former Gulag prisoners, so the latter were largely marginalised.

However, the Gulag tragedy is unique not only because of its huge scale. What distinguishes this catastrophe from other national disasters is the fact that it has never been properly recognised. Neither in the late Soviet Union, nor in post-Soviet Russia were the

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<sup>27</sup> K. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Hochschild, op. cit., p. xviii.

<sup>29</sup> A. Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> N. Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*. New Brunswick; London: Transaction Publishers, 2004, p. 12.

ruling elites willing to deal with the fact of state-sponsored terror. Had the late Soviet authorities acknowledged the full scale of Stalin's crimes, this could have still affected the reputation of the regime. Thus, for almost three decades after Stalin's death, collective memory of Gulag was officially muted and excluded from public discourse.<sup>31</sup> Any reminiscence of this vast tragedy was suppressed, and nobody could speak about it openly. In the article “‘I never talked’: enforced silence, non-narrative memory and the Gulag,” Gheith discusses the long, totalising silence that surrounded the question of Stalinist repressions in the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> She stresses that silence was imposed on anyone who dared to talk about this subject. Gulag survivors, for instance, could not discuss their former lives in camps publicly until the end of the USSR and it was only during Gorbachev's Glasnost that the silence was finally over.<sup>33</sup> For the succeeding Soviet governments the concealment of truth about Stalin's ominous epoch was crucial for retaining their grip on power. That is why, if anyone indeed knew the truth, they had to pretend otherwise.

While proposing a theory on social trauma, scholar Jeffrey Alexander states that memory of a traumatic event is not ‘natural’ or ‘pre-given’ in a society. The awareness of a shared suffering does not arise spontaneously. Rather, a group of people, who once experienced collective pain, recreates memory of the tragedy intentionally and through a set of carefully selected means. In this regard, Alexander defines social trauma as a construct: “a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there.”<sup>34</sup> Such construction, according to the researcher, is not a minute task but a long-term process, requiring substantial “cultural and political work.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, social trauma demands public effort, finance, suitable media, commemorative ceremonies and, not the least,

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<sup>31</sup> Hochschild, op. cit., p. xxii.

<sup>32</sup> J. Gheith, op. cit., p 159.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>34</sup> J. Alexander, *Trauma: a Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

it demands agents facilitating its development.<sup>36</sup> The latter can be any groups of people, including, for instance, ruling elites and their opponents, official organisations and underground networks, state and commercial institutions.

Not all social catastrophes necessarily turn into collective traumas. As Alexander assumes, “hundreds and thousands of individuals may have lost their lives, and many more might experience grievous pain, [and] still, the construction of a shared cultural trauma is not automatically guaranteed.”<sup>37</sup> The reason why some catastrophic events become a collective trauma and others not, lies in their interpretation. Thus, (and this is the central argument of Alexander’s work), it is not the actual scope of a tragedy that defines its social trauma, but a *cultural representation* that sets limits for a post-traumatic collective mourning.<sup>38</sup> Put somewhat differently, someone has to narrate a tragedy and to make sure that this narration reaches a wider audience. The society and its agents decide what they want or what they need to represent as a collectively traumatic experience. Thus, social trauma “is not the result of a group experiencing pain,” but it is a result of a careful selection, representation, and meaning production.<sup>39</sup>

Alexander’s theory can be helpful in understanding difficulties related to Soviet and post-Soviet memorialisation of Gulag. The constructivist nature of social trauma, proposed by the scholar, explains why public memory of some horrific events can yet be undeveloped. If the society (and its particular groups) chooses which griefs to portray as collectively traumatic, then it can likewise choose which griefs to forget. The latter is exactly what happened in the late Soviet period. Right after Stalin’s death and up until the late 1980s, the Soviet government hindered articulation of Gulag trauma. As mentioned above, Soviet leaders were overcautious with the image of the regime, so that they could not let the general public

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

know about atrocities once perpetrated by the state itself. Thus, any representation of Stalinist terror was banned, whereas rituals, monuments or museums commemorating the victims were virtually unthinkable. A most notable example, in this regard, was the suppression of the dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn under Brezhnev's rule. While being a survivor of Stalinist camps himself, in the late 1960s–1970s Solzhenitsyn was persecuted by the Soviet state largely for his gripping work *The Gulag Archipelago*. First published abroad, in *Tamizdat* in 1973, and then circulating in *samizdat* in the USSR, the book revealed all the viciousness of the Gulag system. The author advocated for truthful portrayal of Stalin's crimes – conviction for which he paid a high price. Because of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn faced arrests, imprisonments, so-called psychiatric 'treatment' and even deportation, when in 1974 Brezhnev stripped him of his Soviet citizenship and sent him out of the country.<sup>40</sup> It was only after the collapse of the USSR that the writer was finally eligible to return to his homeland.

Yet, collective memory of Gulag took a radically new turn in the mid-1980s, when the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced Glasnost: a dashing reform that exposed 'the whole truth' about the Soviet past. As Gorbachev commented on this policy himself, "it is agreed that there should not be any more white spots [blank pages] in... our history," since "otherwise it would not be ... history, but an artificial, conjunctural construct."<sup>41</sup> And, thus, the revision of Soviet history began, including, in the first place, the reassessment of the Stalinist period. Unlike the previous selective de-Stalinization that was initiated by Khrushchev in the 1960s, Gorbachev's Glasnost was totalizing: it subjected all aspects of Stalinism to a rigorous criticism. Unlawful arrests, deportations, purges, labour camps, collectivisation and the Great Famine of 1930s, finally, all sides of the dictator's terror were

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<sup>40</sup> W. Bennett, *America: the Last Best Hope Volumes I and II Box Set*. Nashville: Tomas Nelson, 2007, p. 450.

<sup>41</sup> Gorbachev quoted in Banerji, A. *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2008, p. 97.

scrutinized and revealed to the public. At that time, the Soviet society found itself in the process of active remembering.

As archives with information about Stalin's atrocities were open in the late 1980s, not only professional historians, but also journalists, literary critics, writers, artists and filmmakers were pondering the atrocious experience of the Soviet past. In their novels, films and artworks, they probed the previously forbidden themes of Stalinism, while not fearing censorship any more. For instance, as Hara Kouki assumes, "Anatolii Rybakov's [novel] *Detii Arbata* (Children of Arbat), published in 1987, portrayed the reality of the purges during the 30s," while "*Novoe naznachenie* (New Appointment) by Aleksandr Beck penetrated the personality cult through the eyes of an industrial bureaucrat [italics mine]."<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, "the Tengiz Abuladze film, *Pokayanie* (Repentance), unmasked the burden of guilt, silence, and memory borne from the Stalinist years..., and the Mikhail Shatov play, *Dalshe...Dalshe...Dalshe* (Onward) examined the entire history of the Soviet regime [italics mine]."<sup>43</sup> The so-called 'second de-Stalinisation' initiated by Gorbachev led to an outburst of traumatic memory. Literary, artistic and cinematic recollections flooded the media, and so the latter overwhelmed the Soviet public with shocking disclosures of Stalinist crimes. It was the breakthrough or, even more precisely, the 'outpouring' of memories that streamed through periodic press, through the 'thick' journals, as well as through previously banned, but now released texts, films and television programmes.

Under Gorbachev's command, the country faced its infamous past, however, no one (not even the General Secretary himself) at that stage knew how to deal with that tragic legacy. The new horrifying revelations about the fate of Stalin's victims raised public grievance for the regime, which, as it turned out, killed millions of Soviet citizens. According to Nick Baron, "glasnost had touched a nerve of popular discontent, until then quiescent

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<sup>42</sup> H. Kouki, "The Politics of History and the History of Politics: the Rewriting of the Past During Perestroika (1985-1990)". *Historein* 4, 2003-4, p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

because of inertia and fear, and had triggered a popular reflex so powerful that it could no longer be controlled or channelled.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, despite the excess of information about Stalin’s crimes in the public sphere, memory of Gulag remained ‘unprocessed’ at that time. It was only ‘raw material,’ which required proper work: commemorative ceremonies, museums and national monuments to the repressed. None of them appeared during Gorbachev’s epoch. Furthermore, with the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and subsequent rise of Boris Yeltsin to the Russian power, the issue of what to do with the victims of Stalinism moved to the background. New independent Russia was already looking forward to its democratic future, rather than trying to comprehend its controversial past. As Etkind notes, “the so-called second de-Stalinization, which began in Russia in 1985, was smothered during the second Stagnation period, which stabilized and coagulated in 2000.”<sup>45</sup>

As for contemporary Russia, collective memory of Gulag remains in rudimentary stage. While current Russian authorities are just developing state strategy for the memorialisation of victims of repressions, other institutions are not particularly interested in dealing with the long-lasting Soviet trauma. There can be many possible reasons for this reluctance, however, the first and the most obvious among them is the indifference of the Russian public to issues of the Soviet past and to history in general. As Etkind notes, “the increasingly consumerist and also sociable Russian society has become less interested in the Soviet guilt than it was fifty, or even twenty, years ago.”<sup>46</sup> While contemporary Russians live better in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are busy with present needs, rather than controversies of the past. For many of them forgetting and leaving the tragedy of Gulag in the previous century seems to be a logical matter. Moreover, people have no actual awareness of Gulag, so some doubt the very fact of Stalin’s repressions.

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<sup>44</sup> N. Baron, “*Perestroika*, Politicians and Pandora’s Box. The Collective Memory of Stalinism during Soviet Reform”. *European Review of History – Revue Europeene d’Histoire* 4 (1), 1997, p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Etkind, op. cit., p. 42.

After more than sixty years since Stalin's death, Russia fails to remember the sinister pages of its history. Many historians observe the inevitable loss of collective memory among contemporary Russians, which is, perhaps, not accidental. Wrong perception of Gulag among the general public stems from a lack of adequate knowledge about this tragedy in the public sphere. Thus, for instance, upon introducing his concept of 'warped mourning,' Etkind observes that, paradoxically, in today's Russia, "the only certainty about the Soviet catastrophe, apart from its massive scale, is its very uncertainty."<sup>47</sup> As he maintains, "we do not have anything like a full list of victims; we do not have anything like a full list of executioners; and we do not have adequate memorials, museums, and monuments, which could stabilise the understanding of these events for generations to come."<sup>48</sup> According to Etkind, collective remembering of Gulag has not improved during the recent decade but only got worse compared to the late 1980s-1990s. As the number of actual witnesses of Stalin's epoch declines, the absence of so-called 'hard memory' (by which Etkind means museums, memorials and monuments) makes memorialisation of this vast tragedy more and more problematic.<sup>49</sup> Sadly, if this trend persists, in the future, memory of Gulag can completely vanish.

The Memorial Society, however, is currently making a great effort to prevent loss of knowledge about the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime. Different national and international branches of this large organisation approach the problem in their own ways, and some of these initiatives are more or less successful. Regardless of their geographic location, all of Memorial's branches have the same purpose: to compensate for the insufficiency of post-Soviet traumatic memory, to tell the truth about Stalin's crimes and to educate the Russian population about this unresolved issue of the past. This is also the main reason why

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> A. Etkind, "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany". *Grey Room* 16, Memory/History/ Democracy, 2004, p. 39.

St. Petersburg Memorial created its Virtual Museum of the Gulag. While a *physical* national Museum of Gulag is still absent in Russia, its fully-fledged *virtual* substitute now exists on the Web.

#### **4.3. The Museum's Functions**

The Virtual Museum of the Gulag is a mega-museum. It reproduces items from all small local museums of Gulag that reside on post-Soviet territory. It is also unique, as it only exists in virtual space and has no physical counterpart. Thus, in the absence of a national museum of Soviet repressions which has never existed in Russia, the creators of this digital project came up with the idea of an all-encompassing Virtual Museum of the Gulag on the Web. As the ‘about’ page of the website states, the ultimate goal of this project is to combine all inconsistent, local memories of Gulag into ‘a single semantic whole’ and to provide one large ‘historical panorama’ of Soviet terror.<sup>50</sup>

The Virtual Museum of the Gulag has two vital functions. On the one hand, it serves a practical purpose to collect all existing testimonies of Soviet terror in digital space. In this connection, it presents a huge database, where digitised evidence of Gulag is available to a wider public. When submitted online, traces of that gloomy historical experience become ‘popularised’ in the sense that they become more visible, accessible and comprehensible to common people. As Judith Keilbach points out, “while [in the past] testimonies were long only accessible in the libraries and institutional archives responsible for their collection, digitalisation and the internet have significantly changed the conditions of access to these documents, as media technology now offers access that is no longer tied to any one particular location.”<sup>51</sup> Whereas material, physical museums of Soviet repression enjoy rather low

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<sup>50</sup> “about” page of the Virtual Museum Virtual Museum at <http://www.gulagmuseum.org> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>51</sup> A. Bangert, R. Gordon and L. Saxton, *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*. London: Legenda, 2013, p. 47.

attendance due to their disunity and remoteness, the online museum, obviously, has the potential to attract larger audiences.

On the other hand, the Virtual Museum also fulfils a symbolic mission. It acts as a web memorial that memorialises the victims and pays tribute to survivors and their living relatives. Virtual commemoration, generally, is typical for our age. Over the last two decades, web sites dedicated to collective traumas have pervaded cyberspace, so that now there are memorials of different kinds and designations – some commemorate natural disasters, others mourn victims of war or of terroristic attacks. As digital media infiltrated our lives, online memorialisation of tragic events became a prominent matter and a common means of coming to terms with the troublesome past. Even more so, in some particular cases, virtual commemoration is seen as more beneficial than the kind based on material objects, since, according to Sabine Marschall, web memorials “are easily accessible anytime, provide space for emotional expression, personalisation, the sharing of stories, and the establishment of a community of mourners beyond those generated by physical forms of commemoration.”<sup>52</sup> Where else, if not on the Web, can one rapidly, freely and cheaply ‘erect a monument’ to a tragic loss?

As an online memorial, the Virtual Museum commemorates the Gulag – a tragedy that, despite its enormous scale, remains largely underestimated, underrepresented and untold in contemporary public discourses. The website is meant to form an adequate perception of the Soviet terror among contemporary publics, thus, helping to comprehend that hardly comprehensible issue of the past. According to activists of Memorial, “memory of the Communist terror has failed to become an integral part of national memory,” as no consensus on Stalin’s infamous legacy has been reached to date.<sup>53</sup> They maintain that “[physical] Museum [of Soviet repression] is absent [in Russia] not just as a material object,” but “it is

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<sup>52</sup> S. Marschall, “The Virtual Memory Landscape: The Impact of Information Technology on Collective Memory and Commemoration in Southern Africa”. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39 (1), 2013, p.198.

<sup>53</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” “about” page, English version of the website, <http://www.gulagmuseum.org> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

absent in Russian culture as the indispensable link between knowledge and understanding, fact and event, experience and memory.”<sup>54</sup> In this connection, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag can be, as its creators suggest, at least a partial solution of the problem. It can compensate for the lack of awareness about the Gulag in the public sphere. It can contribute, in a similar vein, to a reconciliation with the Soviet past – precisely the task that modern Russia has failed to accomplish.

Considering the above described aims of the Virtual Museum of the Gulag, one can classify this newly emerged digital outlet as a so-called ‘memorial museum,’ a category that was recently coined by scholars. Although in the academic literature the term ‘memorial museum,’ is generally applicable only to physical institutions, I suggest that it can likewise describe digital museums, provided the latter have similar functions. Thus, according to Paul Williams, a *memorial museum* is “a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind.”<sup>55</sup> Such museums, as a rule, focus on deeply tragic pages of a nation’s history and hence they may represent everything from “genocide and terrorism” to “state repression and nuclear calamities.”<sup>56</sup> As Williams indicates, all memorial museums – however diverse they may be – memorialise atrocities of one particular type: “the victims were mostly civilians, meaning that women and children were not spared; they were killed in circumstances that range from the morally problematic to the utterly inhumane; those who died did so ‘unnaturally,’ meaning that their deaths cannot easily be interpreted and represented as heroic, sacrificial, or somehow benefiting the greater good of society or the nation; in each event, the motive of the killers and the mode of killing loom large in the public consciousness; hence, the histories have a dramatic quality that lends itself to evocative reconstruction and storytelling for memorial museums and visitors alike.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> P. Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Oxford, NY: Berg, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

The notion of the memorial museum, better than other terms, reflects the essence of the Virtual Museum. To call the latter, for instance, a historical museum is imprecise, since the website does not quite fit in the conventions of history. According to Irina Flige, a member of St Petersburg Memorial, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag is “not only historical museum, but it is a museum of memory.”<sup>58</sup> “Presenting the history of memory,” that is, showing how memory of the Soviet traumatic past developed, transformed and survived to date, was the main reason behind this project. This is why the collection of the Museum is not limited only to virtual objects, but also features images of sites, buildings and places which recall the Soviet terror. Among them, one can find, for instance, depictions of the former Gulag camps, prisons, monuments to the repressed and even representations of Gulag cemeteries. As Flige explains, in the Virtual Museum “we [the Memorial Society] provide materials... on the state of memory, on how memory of the tragic past is preserved and reconstructed today and this is the most important thing.”<sup>59</sup>

#### **4.4. The Museum’s Collections**

Essentially, not real objects, but their digital images constitute collections of the Virtual Museum. These images, in one way or another, represent, memorialise, and attest to Soviet atrocities. Thus, the Museum hosts images of different kinds, such as photographs of the repressed and their belongings, scanned documents of the Soviet epoch, illustrations of things used in Gulag imprisonment and items created by inmates themselves. The Museum’s collections are truly diverse as they include images of letters, manuscripts, diaries and albums; depictions of utensils and hand-made goods; as well as photocopies of official protocols, acts and memos. Everything that survived from the period of Soviet repressions has been digitised and placed in this virtual space, thanks to the diligent work of St. Petersburg Memorial.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Irina Flige, published at <http://blog.i.ua/user/1887606/494485/> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

However, not only museum objects make up collections of the Virtual Gulag, as the latter has a much wider capacity. Due to its virtual format, this museum also covers places and buildings of the Soviet traumatic past. Creators of the Virtual Gulag call it a ‘non-museum’ memory, which depends on real, ‘non-museum’ sites scattered all across former Soviet republics.<sup>60</sup> In this regard, the most notable examples of such ‘non-museum’ memory are burial places of victims of Stalinism, that is, actual spots where one-time Gulag prisoners were buried or killed. Gulag cemeteries, common graves and execution sites are direct and indisputable evidence of Soviet terror. Although geographically dispersed, they remind us about the past horrors and attest to the former leader’s guilt. Thus, in the Virtual Museum one encounters photographs of “hundreds of preserved, semi-preserved and almost-vanished burial sites,” which are hosted under the heading “Necropolis.”<sup>61</sup> To post these pictures was a conscious decision of Memorial. This kind of visual material, as members of the group suggest, pinpoints the brutal acts committed by the Soviet dictator. Overall, representations of burial sites, along with the depictions of museum objects, compose a bigger picture of the Gulag suffering. Thus, confronted with multiple images of mass graves, the onlooker, eventually realises the true scale of the catastrophe.

Like any physical museum collection, collections of the Virtual Museum are carefully arranged, classified and contextualised. In this connection, the Museum should not be perceived as a mere storage of images. Rather, this intricate and elaborate online project provides a ‘space’ for re-evaluation of the Soviet tragedy and it is in this virtual space that collective memory of Stalin’s terror acquires a distinct, carefully structured shape. Images in the Virtual Museum do not simply ‘pile’ on one another; they form certain groups, each of which highlights a particular aspect of Gulag. Thus, on the website one can browse through several different, and yet interrelated, categories of representations: “Museums,” “Museum

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<sup>60</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag”, “about” page, English version of the website, <http://www.gulagmuseum.org>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Exhibit,” “Necropolis,” “Monuments,” “Traces of Terror,” “Life Stories” and “Images.” Such headings are descriptive and self-explanatory and therefore they enable a quick access to the data. What these headings also illustrate, is a basic conception of the digital project; they indicate that the Virtual Museum is a museum of memory (a ‘memorial museum,’ as was explained before). It relates to the Soviet past “through the framework of memory” and employs the appropriate modes of representation.<sup>62</sup> Memory, and not history, is a dominant paradigm here, which defines how materials are assembled and structured.<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising, in this regard, to see among Virtual Museum’s imagery such categories as “Monuments,” “Necropolis” or “Traces of Terror,” as exactly these sub-genres pinpoint the so-called *lieux de memoire* – objects and sites where Soviet trauma left its imprint.<sup>64</sup>

The concept of memory binds manifold divisions of the Virtual Museum into a single semantic whole. Although the content in each museum section is different, it matches the general purpose of structuring collective recall. Thus, all sections follow the same logic. They reproduce either objects and documents or buildings and sites of the Soviet traumatic past. For instance, the section “Museums” features representations of physical, geographically dispersed exhibitions devoted to the theme of Gulag, including the state, regional, public and even school-based museums. It can be a huge museum complex (like “Perm’- 36”) or a small, private initiative established by local citizens, both of which highlight the subject of Soviet political repressions. All in all, the section contains photographs of 127 museums, however, this number can grow, since collections of the Virtual Museum are constantly expanding. Other rubrics of this digital project are organised similarly. The section “Necropolis” represents (as was mentioned above) burial places of the former Gulag detainees, whereas “Monuments” assembles images of all memorials devoted to the victims of Stalinism. In this

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<sup>62</sup> S. Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Arnold-de Simine, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”. *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989, p. 7.

context, the website's design is crucial, as it determines whether a virtual visitor will be interested in learning about the Soviet tragedy or not. The more comprehensible the navigation is, the more likely it is that the user continues researching the notorious Soviet past.

Studying the Virtual Museum of the Gulag, another vital point to mark about its collections is documentation. Although this may sound like a technical notion, I suggest that mentioning it in the current discussion is important for further exploration of digital images and their capacity to communicate memory of past atrocities. I likewise propose that documentation is a factor determining whether a museum collection is comprehensive and whether items in it have any particular value. Generally, only properly documented objects make up museum collections, regardless of whether the latter have material or digital form.

Used widely in museum studies, the term 'documentation' signifies provision of items with all necessary information about their authors (previous owners), date and place of creation and about their current material state. Depending on the object, some additional data can be supplemented and some extra characteristics specified. In this connection, museum specialist Ellis Burcaw assumes: "museum curator is not ready to collect until it is known how to make the records that preserve information about the museum objects in the collections."<sup>65</sup> The scholar insists that without records "collections are worth little."<sup>66</sup> When items are accompanied by relevant entries, only in that case can they transmit "knowledge, meaning, and understanding."<sup>67</sup> I will extend this latter statement a little further by saying that only documented objects (either material or digital) can render traumatic memory, as only they can narrate 'truthfully' a mournful past.

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<sup>65</sup> G. E Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*. Walnut Creek, NY, Oxford: AltaMira Press, 1997, p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> S. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 7.

The Virtual Museum of the Gulag presents an example of thorough documentation.

Each image in its collection is a fully-fledged digital exponent, and it can be considered so, precisely because, like any typical museum object, it contains a full record of provenance, location and today's condition. Furthermore, most of the images are accompanied by annotations that describe depicted items at length, while telling sad stories about their former owners. For instance, opening the section "Museum Exhibit" at [www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org), I can browse through thousands of personal things that belonged to Gulag inmates. My pick, however, is just one object, which is the first to attract my attention: a handmade photo album.<sup>68</sup> As I click on its image, I get full information about it, including its size, date of creation, material, current location and more. In addition, I also learn that this album was made by Regina Majoraitė, a Lithuanian prisoner of conscience, who spent almost ten years in the corrective labour camps of Kolyma.

Accurate documentation of items in the Virtual Museum is, again, a particular merit of people working at St. Petersburg Memorial. Upon establishing this digital initiative, members of the group paid careful attention to the manner in which objects, buildings and sites of the Soviet terror are represented in virtual space. They structured all images into different categories, as well as substantiated those collections of visual material with maximum data. Overall, Memorial has made a considerable contribution to the preservation of the Soviet traumatic past online.

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<sup>68</sup> "The Virtual Museum of the Gulag", Russian version of the website, section "Exhibits," <http://www.gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=24880205&language=1> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

#### **4.5. Images of Trauma**

Studying the Virtual Museum of the Gulag as a ‘place’ for reconstructing Soviet trauma, I assume that all images in it are, essentially, *traumatic*. The digital format of these pictures allows them to render collective memory of the Soviet terror in their own peculiar ways. Yet, the traumatic image as such is a rather volatile concept. Although contemporary scholars do theorise it in their works, images of trauma are still confused with other similar categories, such as representations of violence or death. However, my question is: are *all* images of trauma violent by nature? And do *all* of them necessarily feature horrific scenes? Or are there any other, more subtle strategies through which images can transmit traumatic recall, without displaying atrocities overtly? Below, I will elaborate on different meanings and implications of traumatic representation. I will argue that, contrary to what modern theories suggest, the notion of the traumatic image is not limited *only* to explicit manifestations of horror. Rather, an image of trauma should be interpreted in a broader sense. Potentially, it can be any image that relates to a mournful past and that “embodies a disturbance,” even though not always “representing traumatic experience” in a direct way.<sup>69</sup>

The most common approach in contemporary trauma studies is to consider images of trauma as “showing us something physically or psychically traumatic: someone is being, or has been, threatened, attacked, abused, starved, imprisoned, enslaved, tortured, murdered or executed, or is shown responding to the reality or consequences of some catastrophe.”<sup>70</sup> Traumatic representation, thus, depicts a ‘traumatised’ subject – a person or a group of people who was mistreated, and who consequently, either survived or died from a violent act. Images of war, genocide, terrorism or execution, all fall under this category, as they show how a human has suffered from an abusive act. The most remarkable, if not to say ‘iconic’, examples of traumatic imagery are photographs of the Nazi camps’ liberation, depictions of

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<sup>69</sup> A. Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*. NY; London: Routledge, 2010, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.31.

the 9/11 attack, footage of the Gulf War, as well as many other currently well-known still and moving images. Although disturbing for the onlooker, such pictures pervade our media, whilst they constantly reappear on TV, on the Internet and in the printed press. Today we are ‘bombarded’ with traumatic images and some scholars argue we have become accustomed to them, so that we become numb – we stop empathizing with the ‘pain of others.’<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the very prevalence of traumatic representations in contemporary media allows defining today’s culture as a ‘trauma culture,’ precisely because multitudes of traumatic depictions ‘haunt’ us in our daily lives.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, as I mentioned in the beginning of this section, not all traumatic images are necessarily violent, and not all of them explicitly expose cruelties of the past. Thus, there is a second category of representations, which, unlike the first ‘violent’ type, conveys trauma as an intermediary or by association. As Allen Meek notes, this kind of imagery is “associated with a traumatic experience,” however *not* “showing directly anything physically or psychologically traumatic.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, scholar Oren Baruch Stier calls such images ‘metonymic,’ since, in his view, they “refer metonymically to the events of which they somehow once took...part.”<sup>74</sup> According to Stier, ‘metonymic’ representations operate on a symbolic, rather than literal level and hence they can bring us to a deeper understanding of trauma.<sup>75</sup> What exactly do these pictures feature? Obviously, it can be anything that symbolises horror, but does not display it openly: memorial objects, buildings and sites of traumatic past and any other ‘remnants’ that survived after catastrophe. For instance, a personal thing of a victim or the place of his or her former imprisonment can act as metonym

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<sup>71</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> A. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Meek, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>74</sup> O. Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*. Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

of trauma. Generally, in the case of metonymic representation these are inanimate objects and spaces that stand for and, often, speak for their traumatised owners.

The two above-described categories of traumatic imagery – one *explicitly violent* and the other *implicit and metonymic* – are equally important for memorialisation of trauma. Both types do their ‘memory work,’ as they present two different vehicles taking us to one-time collective tragedies. Whilst the former confronts us with atrocious pasts, thus making evident how exactly those atrocities happened, the latter uses more complex, symbolic ways for delivering traumatic history.

However, when dealing with the visual legacy of Gulag, it is the second category of representations that becomes especially prominent. Implicit, indirect and even allusive imagery is what the Soviet terror left after itself, and it is what now post-Soviet memory has at its disposal. This is not to say that such images lack evidentiary value, as in fact, they are indisputable and the only existing evidence of Communist crimes, but this means that they need a bit more time and effort for their interpretation. In other words, they require a proper examination. To draw some concrete examples, I will address the Virtual Museum of the Gulag, which is, perhaps, the main, albeit digital, source of these pictures.

The Virtual Museum hosts hundreds of so-called ‘visual metonyms’ of Soviet trauma (using Stier’s terminology), including, for example, representations of personal things and utensils used in Gulag imprisonment. The most common among them are images of spoons and mugs, suitcases and caskets, handmade purses and blankets, as well as of many other objects that once inhabited the life of Gulag inmates. Although back in Soviet time these were just ordinary items, today they fulfil a symbolic mission. They embody traumatic experience of Gulag, thus acting as mediators between an atrocious past and people’s awareness of it.<sup>76</sup> While the real person (victim of Soviet repression) may long be deceased, his or her personal belonging – a handkerchief, a mirror or a cigarette case, for instance, – may have survived to

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<sup>76</sup> Stier, op. cit., p. 33.

the present. Such things can be the only link connecting the viewer with the tragedy. As Stier notes, metonyms provide ‘main access points,’ through which the onlooker engages with tragic events and through which public memory is reconstructed.<sup>77</sup> As secondary witnesses of trauma, we trust metonymic representations, and we do need them “in order to carry out the project of remembrance.”<sup>78</sup>

All other images of the Virtual Museum are likewise metonymic. This refers particularly, to depictions of buildings and sites associated with the Soviet traumatic past, but even more so, to representations of Gulag cemeteries and graves. The latter are an especially interesting case of metonymy. Unlike memorial objects, burial places of Gulag victims do not ‘speak for’ those who died. Rather, they stand as silent reminders of the disaster and undeniable proof of the Soviet leaders’ guilt. These burials epitomise the destruction and loss caused by Stalin’s regime, and in this context, they act as ‘symbolic pointers’ indicating the dramatic consequences of the dictator’s brutality.<sup>79</sup> What else, if not a necropolis with dozens, hundreds or even thousands of unjustly killed people, testifies to the monstrosity of the ruling authority? Looking through the Virtual Museum’s collections, one observes over five hundred burial places of the former Gulag prisoners. This impressive number exposes the scale of the Soviet catastrophe, but more importantly, it reveals the fact that Stalin’s power knew absolutely no limits.

It is logical then to ask why, when researching the Gulag tragedy, one has to rely on ‘indirect clues’ (which are implicit metonymic images), and why one cannot operate with immediate photographic evidence, such as depictions of real murders? Or why, when browsing the Virtual Museum, one cannot see images showing *directly* how Gulag inmates were interrogated, tortured or killed? The answer is simple: such images do not exist, or if they do, they are extremely rare. Communist perpetrators consciously masked the horrific

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

truth, as they did not want their crimes to be openly manifested in public. NKVD officers, for instance, never photographed actual violence committed against prisoners, so that no visual proof of those misdeeds has survived to date. Although starvation, violent deaths, tortures, beatings and executions prevailed in Soviet camps, any *direct* representation of horror is absent from Gulag pictures. According to Appelbaum, “what is really missing from this collection [of gulag images], is the kinds of photographs that British and American photographers took when their armies liberated the concentration camps run by the Nazis: photographs of atrocities, of mass executions, of punishment cells, of starving prisoners.”<sup>80</sup> She maintains that, whilst “Wehrmacht soldiers and SS officers had no qualms about taking gruesome photographs of Jews they had murdered,” the Soviet police largely avoided documenting its perpetrations in gulags.<sup>81</sup> Thus, no pictures of explicit violence remained from the epoch of Stalinist repressions. What is left though, are only implicit, associative images, like those hosted in the Virtual Museum.

Yet, despite their ‘non-violent’ look, metonymic images perform two important functions for the Soviet trauma. First, these representations save evidence of the Communist terror, as they reproduce that evidence online. Second, they reconstruct a narrative of Gulag, thereby telling us stories of life and death in the Soviet labour camps. In what follows, I will consider these two effects of traumatic imagery at length.

#### **4.6. Preserving Evidence of the Soviet Terror**

Collecting, preserving and displaying evidence of the Soviet terror is, as was indicated above, the basic function of the Virtual Museum. This was also the main reason for the creation of such digital enterprise: to gather traces of Gulag in virtual space and thus to make them available for a wider audience. However, obviously, material residues do not come on

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<sup>80</sup> A. Applebaum, “Album from Hell”. The New York Review of Books, 24 March 2005, retrieved at <http://www.anneapplebaum.com> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

the Web in original form, but are reproduced through their digital images. In this regard, The Virtual Museum would be impossible without pictures of real objects and places associated with Soviet trauma. The purpose of this section is to learn if digitisation of Gulag artefacts, buildings and sites contributes to their preservation. How can cyberspace complement and extend physical markers of that catastrophe? Will digital replicas save the originals from obliteration?

The network of Gulag prisons and camps, dubbed after the famous Solzhenitsyn's literary experiment 'archipelago,' embraced the whole Soviet Union.<sup>82</sup> While being originally vast and extensive, this system of Soviet forced labour left a substantial trail upon its liquidation, so that material remnants of those horrors today persist in different parts of Russia and abroad. Thus, almost each Russian region contains evidence of the one-time Soviet repressions, such as a Gulag cemetery, a wreck of a camp barrack, or an improvised memorial sign. However, the problem of all physical objects and sites of the Soviet traumatic past is not that they do not exist, but that they are dispersed and hardly accessible. Many Gulag artefacts (including those from local museums and exhibitions) are found in remote places of Russia, where only a narrow circle of people (a local community) can witness them. The same relates to Gulag burials, monuments, old prison buildings and other material attestation, most of which lies in far corners of the former USSR. Consider, in this regard, any local memorial of Gulag, located somewhere in Western Siberia: this tiny reminder of Stalin's repressions is hidden from the general view, as it is virtually lost in the vastness of the region, which is itself huge and sparsely populated. Thus, although material traces of Soviet terror have survived to date, many of them stay unnoticed due to their remoteness, hard accessibility and overall scatterness.

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<sup>82</sup> A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. London: The Harvill Press, 2003.

In fact, it is the very ‘invisibility’ of Gulag evidence in contemporary culture that impedes memorialisation of this collective trauma. People tend to forget Soviet atrocities precisely because there are no prompts reminding of what happened back in the past, and the absence of visible clues always leads to social amnesia. In this connection, Daniel Schowalter notes that the lack (or ‘invisibility’) of the visual testimony (and that is all sort of visual materials, including architectural, photographic, cinematic, graphic, digital and other images) is ‘a primary obstacle’ to the establishment of a social trauma.<sup>83</sup> According to the scholar, “with the void of imagery, with this erasure, comes a corresponding void in [collective] awareness,” which inevitably brings to the forgetting of a traumatic event.<sup>84</sup> In other words, one cannot acknowledge Gulag as a national, socially meaningful catastrophe, until one sees a sufficient proof of it in the public sphere.

Yet, the Virtual Museum now makes Soviet tragedy more salient. If material reminders of Communist crimes are dispersed and hardly visible, then it is the Web that pulls them all together to the fore. Paradoxically, new media – the Internet in general, and online images, in particular – fulfil the task that no traditional media could do: assemble all otherwise scattered pieces of Soviet trauma into one big, substantial semantic picture. In this regard, the Virtual Museum not only collects residues of Soviet terror, but it also makes them relevant to the present and approachable for anyone, who either forgot or never knew about the Gulag suffering. It is on the Web that the Soviet tragedy becomes more ‘visible,’ comprehensible and familiar to the common public. Generally, cyberspace provides considerable benefits for traumatic memorialisation. Given that offline, material commemorative practices of Gulag have never been particularly sound (or even more so, they were simply absent during the Soviet time) in Russia, web-based commemoration can alternatively keep social memory of this catastrophe alive.

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<sup>83</sup> D. Schowalter, *Images of Traumatic History: The Visual Rhetorics of Holocaust*. Indiana University, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

The Internet restores material trails of Soviet terror through their media representations. Obviously, these are not the originals, but digital replicas of objects, places and sites of the Soviet traumatic past that proliferate in the Virtual Museum. Despite their non-authenticity, the role of such replicas is pivotal, as they ‘update’ and ‘renew’ their physical referents by reproducing them in the virtual space. Thus, if in reality many Gulag artefacts remain unnoticed, unattended and simply forgotten, then their online versions help bring them back into the spotlight. As Will Straw points out, digital reproduction revitalises “early forms of material culture,” while “pulling them into a present marked by their simultaneous availability.”<sup>85</sup> In this manner, the Web rescues Gulag evidence from obliteration. A half-destroyed confinement cell or an abandoned cemetery can continue to exist as digital copies, even when their material counterparts completely deteriorate.

Consequently, digital images re-activate social memory of Gulag, while they introduce markers of that catastrophe in the new virtual reality. Not only do these images preserve evidence of Soviet terror, but they also ‘revive’ it, dragging it back “into the limelight of cultural recognition and understanding.”<sup>86</sup> Such an effect is possible due to the immediacy and constant accessibility of online representations that confront users with the atrocious past whenever they go online. Digital representations, in this regard, can be even more powerful triggers of collective memory than their physical doubles. Thus, whilst tangible evidence of the Gulag stays out of public view due to its remoteness, digital images, on the contrary, bring all that evidence before the onlooker, on their computer screen. One no longer needs to travel to the outskirts of Russia to see the surviving pieces of Soviet trauma, but can now retrieve them online at any time and from any geographical location.

Considering how digital images preserve, accentuate and transmit the Soviet traumatic past, I will refer to the section “Necropolis” of the Virtual Museum. I specifically will focus

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<sup>85</sup> W. Straw, “Embedded Memories” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Accland. Minneapolis; London, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

on one article: “Burial in Ulyanovsk city next to Strizhov ravine,” which represents one of the numerous mass graves attributed to the Great Purge of the 1930s, the time of the most ferocious Stalinist terror (fig. 4.1).<sup>87</sup> According to some official accounts, during just the two years of 1937 and 1938, the NKVD arrested over one and half million people, “of whom 681,692 were [immediately] shot.”<sup>88</sup> As Vadim Rogovin observes, “the number of people shot in 1937–1938 exceeds by more than seven times the number shot in the remaining twenty-two years of Stalin’s reign.”<sup>89</sup> Not surprisingly, traces of those mass executions are still to be found all around Russia, with many graves discovered only after the collapse of the USSR and some just recently in the 2000s.<sup>90</sup> The number of these burial sites is striking, as to date they have been detected in all major Russian regions, including, but not limited to Moscow, St Petersburg, Altai, Magadan, Archangelsk, Karelia, Tomsk and many others. The size of each mass grave likewise horrifies, for it can accommodate from dozens to hundreds of thousands of corpses. However, regardless of their location, scope or current state, all these burials can now be revisited online, through collections of the Virtual Museum.

The entry “Burial in Ulyanovsk city next to Strizhov ravine” reproduces a site that attests, along with other material evidence, to mass killings committed by Stalin’s forces (fig. 4.2).<sup>91</sup> In particular, this article features Strizhov ravine – a small spot, allegedly, holding a mass grave of the victims of the Great Terror. According to surviving NKVD reports, one fourth out of the total 1500 people shot in Ulyanovsk during 1937 and 1938, were buried in the Strizhov grave, where “bodies of the dead were first dumped in pits and thereafter

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<sup>87</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website, section “Necropolis”, <http://gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=565776659&language=1> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>88</sup> V. Rogovin, *Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*. MI: Mehring Books, 2009, p. 447.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> “Stalin-Era Grave Yields Tons of Bones”. *The Moscow Times*, 11 Jul 2010, retrieved from <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>

<sup>91</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website, section “Necropolis”, <http://gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=565776659&language=1> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

carefully masked.”<sup>92</sup> Local eyewitnesses also prove that the place, indeed, was once a Gulag mass burial. However, since in 1993 the official excavation of the ravine did not reveal human remains (they probably vanished because of time or underground waters), today this site has unofficial status. It has not been formally recognised as an object of former Soviet terror, and therefore it remains unmarked, unfenced and, generally unprotected. On arrival at this place, one will not see any memorial or plate telling about atrocities that happened here during Stalin’s epoch. In its current state Strizhov ravine is an ordinary landform, which is easy to overlook, as it has no visible indication of past horrors.

Yet, the situation changes when one beholds the digital image of the Strizhov mass burial. Whereas the real geographical site does not show any sign of past murders, the digital representation of this ravine provides a full, detailed record of crimes committed there by the NKVD. Thus, three photographs of the Strizhov grave that are located in the Virtual Museum acquaint us with the infamous history of this place.<sup>93</sup> Namely, they tell about those who and why disposed of the corpses of convicts in the ravine, as well as about who was shot and buried in this brutal way. Viewing these images one learns, for instance, that after executing detainees in the basement of a local prison, their bodies were transported to the burial site secretly, late at night. “Concealing place, time and method of fulfilment of each death penalty” was a direct order of then NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov.<sup>94</sup> What images of the Strizhov grave also tell, is names of prisoners resting in that mass grave: Sergei Burov, Alexander Greushev, Elena Lukianova, Filip Chashin, and Vasilii and Iakov Kadishevi, to name but a few. Identifying victims of Stalin’s terror contributes to their memorialisation.

Since online representations involve, besides graphic depictions, also text and hyperlinks (potentially, they can also involve sound and animation), they open new ways for memorialisation of Soviet tragedy. Thus, digital images not only pinpoint and map actual

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<sup>92</sup> ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

evidence of Gulag, but they also ‘improve’ and ‘enhance’ it, through adding extra notes, descriptions and explanations and this is how Soviet legacy becomes more comprehensible to the general public. As Straw assumes, “the Internet has strengthened the cultural weight of the past, increasing its intelligibility and accessibility.”<sup>95</sup> According to the scholar, on the Web “the past is produced as a field of ever greater coherence, through the gathering together of disparate artefacts into sets or collections, and through the commentary and annotation that cluster around such agglomerations.”<sup>96</sup>

#### **4.7. Reconstructing Narratives of the Gulag**

Apart from preserving evidence of the Soviet terror, traumatic images of the Virtual Museum fulfil another equally important function. They reconstruct the narrative of Soviet tragedy online. Simply put, they communicate the story of the Gulag, while telling us about life and death inside Soviet camps. Thus, it is from these digital representations that one learns details of Gulag imprisonment: how arrests, interrogations and charges were made; where executions were carried out; how prisons differed from special settlements; which industries inmates worked in and what happened after release from prison. Similarly, many of those images tell personal stories of either perpetrators or victims, thus indicating which parties committed the Soviet horror and who directly suffered from it.

Generally, all recent memorial museums (including the Virtual Museum) appropriate the so-called narrative approach, as they arrange their collections along a selected story.<sup>97</sup> They do so to exert emotional impact upon the viewer, who, while being immersed into museum narration, becomes a ‘second witness’ of collective trauma.<sup>98</sup> A narrative, as Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli suggest, “affects visitors not only intellectually but also

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<sup>95</sup> Straw, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> J. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge, UK; NY; Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 156.

<sup>98</sup> Arnold-de Simine, op. cit., p. 36.

emotionally; it arouses process of identification.”<sup>99</sup> According to the scholars, “visitors project themselves into the story and thus they experience it like insiders while at the same time remaining at a distance, with the intellectual perspective of outsiders.”<sup>100</sup> Narrating about tragedy, the museum organises its exhibits according to a chosen plot, which guides visitors from the beginning to the end of exhibition. This is why any memorial museum, “like a film, has to be viewed in a particular sequence and at a particular speed,” without deviation from a specified pathway.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, since the Virtual Museum resides in cyberspace, it reconstructs collective trauma in a way that is distinct from a physical museum display or linear storytelling. Thus, this digital project provides new interactive experiences of the Soviet traumatic past, where users no longer follow a predefined route, but they choose from a multiplicity of tracks, images, memories and stories. Through the Virtual Museum one can, for instance, ‘revisit’ uranium mines at which prisoners of the Kolyma region once served their sentence, or alternatively, ‘attend’ a former camp barrack located in Vorkuta; one can browse personal things of Gulag inmates, or examine false protocols that condemned innocent people to death. The digital space allows ‘rambling’ around the Soviet traumatic past, so that one can ‘go back and forth’ from a place to an artefact, and then, to a document or to an eyewitness account. As Giorgia Dona points out, “virtual reality engages the viewer with changeable temporal perspectives where preserved sites, newly built museums, and survivors’ testimonies interact in ways that are not possible in reality.”<sup>102</sup> Consequently, online visitors have multiple options: they choose among varied aspects of trauma, what makes their journey to the collective past ever more absorbing. Overall, the Virtual Museum creates a non-linear, multi-dimensional

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<sup>99</sup> J. Weinberg and R. Elieli cited in Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 157.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Edkins, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>102</sup> G. Dona, “Collective Suffering and Cyber-memorialisation in Post-genocide Rwanda”. *Trauma, Media, Art: New Perspectives*, ed. by M. Broderick and A. Traverso. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, p. 24.

narrative, in which “temporal and spatial dimensions [of Gulag catastrophe] are re-positioned to be simultaneously accessible through interactivity.”<sup>103</sup>

To navigate the Virtual Museum, its creators invented features enabling the search through the Soviet traumatic past. One of them is a set of indexes located on the left side of the website’s interface. The indexes assort all featured materials according to five different criteria, such as “Themes,” “Persons,” “Addresses,” “Institutions of terror” and “Bibliography.” These are the basic ‘entry points,’ through which users access the narrative of Gulag in order to start touring around collective trauma. The route of such an excursion depends on the users’ preferences and their willingness to explore the history of the Soviet repressions. In cases when a viewer is confused or is no longer interested in a particular subject, the thematic, geographic and alphabetical indexes allow switching from one part of the Virtual Museum to another. In this way, at the click of a computer mouse it is possible to shift between topics, people, objects and places of Gulag memory.

Another feature that aids browsing the Virtual Museum is an inbuilt search engine. Like indexes, it enables user interaction with the website. Thus, upon typing key words in the search line, one can find materials on selected aspects of Gulag. This can be, for instance, a particular prison or a person, a geographical region or a division of camp administration. Regardless of what is searched, the result is a full list of images related to the inquiry. Upon providing direct access to requested data, the search engine opens the fastest route to the traumatic past. It is a shortcut to Soviet trauma, as it gives an instant snapshot of life in the Soviet imprisonment. Together with indexes, the search engine helps ‘reading’ and ‘interpreting’ the multilayer story of Gulag, which otherwise is quite hard to grasp.

The Virtual Museum creates an immersive environment, where one can experience Gulag ‘non-stop,’ thus constantly learning about new sites, new artefacts and people who lived during the epoch of Soviet terror. It is in this digital, interactive space that a user

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

‘wanders’ across multiple levels of Soviet trauma, including its various times and locations.

In this regard, Anna Reading notes that “the interactive and nonlinear narrative possibilities offered by digital formats using hypertext links allows for the history [...] to be articulated in ways that are distinct from other visual forms.”<sup>104</sup> The Internet, in her opinion, “allows for interactive and detailed timelines, interactive maps, and interactive graphics”; “it allows the reader to stop and start film footage and audio excerpts, to zoom in on photographs” and ‘to shift’ around atrocious past in a nonlinear manner.<sup>105</sup>

As a user and researcher of the Virtual Museum, I have an unlimited choice of materials at my disposal that range from separate items to thematic rubrics, and from single depictions to collections of images. However, in what follows, I will focus on just one group of representations, which will help to define precisely how images reconstruct traumatic memory. Constricting visual matter is essential when looking at how images narrate the past in the virtual realm, where abundance of narratives overwhelms and, sometimes, even confuses the onlooker. Thus, from all materials hosted in the Virtual Museum, I choose images related to one particular Soviet camp: Solovetsky, also known as ‘Solovki’ or ‘SLON,’ which was the “the first camp of the Gulag” and a cradle of Soviet forced labour.<sup>106</sup> I will, first, retrieve all pictures associated with this camp and, then, inquire about their ‘communicative’ function. In this regard, my goal is to identify how images (in most cases, supported by text) present the story of the Solovetsky prison: do they report about harsh conditions of *Severnye Lageria Osobogo Naznacheniia*?<sup>107</sup> What can representations tell about inmates, guards and general performance of that correctional facility? Finally, can visual fragments form a complex understanding of former life in gulags?

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<sup>104</sup> A. Reading, “Clicking on Hitler: The Virtual Holocaust @ Home” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. by B. Zelizer. London: The Athlone Press, 2001, p. 336.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Applebaum, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>107</sup> *Severnye Lageria Osobogo Naznacheniia* in Russian means “Northern Camps of Special Significance,” and shortly “SLON.”

The search query for the Solovetsky camp in the Virtual Museum results in about ninety images attributing to several sub-themes, so that there are twenty-three images in the category “Exhibits,” nine depictions in “Monuments,” seven in “Traces of Terror,” three in “Necropolis,” two in “Museums,” etc. (fig. 4.3). All these categories come as hyperlinked lists that allow quick switching from one representation to another. More importantly, such lists re-combine spatial and temporal dimensions of the former Solovki while they re-order and re-assemble vestiges of that prison online. Resulting from this, viewers can choose their own way for exploration of traumatic history; they decide whether to start their itinerary from memorials to Solovetsky prisoners or, from half-vanished debris of the Golgotha punishment cells that once witnessed the suffering of thousands. In any case, virtual visitors create their own route, thereby avoiding a given, predefined perspective that is usually imposed in physical museums. Even if one is ‘lost’ in the middle of such journey, it is always possible to come back and to try another path.

For someone who has never heard about Solovki, the first thing to learn about this camp is its geographical location. What did the camp look like and where exactly in the USSR was it located? Why did it become a ‘model’ of the entire Gulag system?<sup>108</sup> For answering these initial, and in the meantime, vital questions, one should start virtual exploration from the section “Traces of terror,” featuring pictures of the former camp’s site (fig. 4.4). What particularly the section displays is the Solovetsky archipelago, a chain of islands in the White Sea that became the first place of the Soviet incarceration. Located in the far north of the former USSR, the region was famous for its stark arctic climate and inhospitable (though beautiful) terrain, and hence, it presented, according to the Soviet authorities, an “ideal place for a work camp.”<sup>109</sup> As the Solovki Special Purpose Camp expanded in the 1920s, it took

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<sup>108</sup> Applebaum, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

over not only the natural surroundings, but also the buildings and churches of the oldest Russian monastery that existed there ever since the fifteenth century.

Images marked as “Traces of Terror” in the Virtual Museum acquaint the onlooker with the harsh environment of the Solovetsky islands. Thus, browsing these depictions, one can see patches of forested, uninhabitable ground that seem to resist any human intrusion. Some of those pictures likewise feature decaying constructions, like a wreck of a railroad or a damaged shed, as though testifying that, despite all natural hostility, the place was indeed once put into use. The fragments of northern lands together with a few ruined buildings compose a broken landscape. Observing it, one realises that many of the former camp’s sites today are “not merely inaccessible but also virtually forgotten” – they remain intact since the very closure of the camp.<sup>110</sup> Abandoned scenery stands for abandoned history and for the past, which, like a ghost, haunts the present. In this regard, these are digital images that help locating the forsaken places of Solovki. Specifically, representations ‘map’ the terrain of that camp, as they pinpoint its currently neglected ‘landmarks’: woods, where some of the inmates not only worked, but also lived, trenches that prisoners “dug, sometimes with bare hands,” railroads and bridges that were built at the cost of thousands of human lives.<sup>111</sup>

One image that deserves special attention, in this context, is a picture of the dock in Kem, the transit point on the way to Solovetsky archipelago (fig. 4.5).<sup>112</sup> (Ttoday Kem remains one of the main entry points to Solovki, which now feature a monastery and a museum on the place of the former prison). This depiction is notable for its ‘metonymic’ qualities, since, like many other images of the Virtual Museum, it renders traumatic experience indirectly, or by association with the atrocious past. Trauma does not manifest

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<sup>110</sup> U. Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2005, p. 63.

<sup>111</sup> Applebaum, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>112</sup> “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website, image of “the dock in Kem” <http://www.gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=48746799&language=1> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

here overtly, but it ‘lurks’ somewhere within representation. Thus, the photograph itself does not present any horrors: just a degraded pier that once hosted ships in the White Sea. The construction is half-destroyed, with only its foundation preserved, which reminds one of a pile of old logs drifting in water. It is a mere residue of a dock, rather than the dock as such. Overall, the scenery looks tranquil, if not to say charming, as there is definitely certain charm in the vastness of the deep blue sea and the spotless sky stretching above it.

Yet, paradoxically, the same view evokes anxiety or even discomfort; it creates a sense of hopelessness that seems to have reasonable ground (fig. 4.6). Watching it, one cannot shake off an intrusive feeling of alienation, of something missing or rather, of someone who has disappeared, vanished long ago. In this connection, a closer look at the picture allows seeing details that are not visible at first glance. For instance, wrecks of the pier shape an improvised path; this path ends rather abruptly in the sea, thus leading virtually to ‘nowhere.’ This is a symbolic pointer, and it reminds us that back in the Soviet times the dock of Kem was an entry to Solovetsky Gulag. Taking a ship from that dock meant going to one of the most notorious Soviet prisons. Thus, the so-called ‘Kemperpunkt’ (shortened from ‘Kem transit point’) was a ‘gateway to hell,’ from where the convicts embarked on a direct trip to Solovetsky inferno. In this connection, Gulag survivors remember Kem as a ‘purgatory,’ or the ‘first circles of Dante’s hell,’ as from that point the suffering of Solovetsky inmates was only a beginning.<sup>113</sup> Featuring one trace of the Soviet terror (a destroyed pier), the picture embodies desolation and loss inflicted by Stalin’s regime. Furthermore, drawing indirect parallel with the Holocaust imagery, one also observes that the structure of the depicted pier is eerily reminiscent of one of the main visual metonyms of the Nazi genocide: a train track.

The gruesome past ‘dwells’ in the ruined dock, whilst its digital image pins down the social trauma. A click on the image leads to detailed annotation, telling the infamous history

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<sup>113</sup> M. Rozanov, *Solovetski kontslager’ v monastyre. 1922-1939: fakty – domysy – “parashi”:* obzor vospominaniï Solovchan Solovchanami. Kn.1. USA, 1979.

of this place – it reveals the dark secret of Kemperpunkt. As the description states, although the official purpose of staying in this transit point was short quarantine, prisoners had to spend several months there when the shipping season was over. Consequently, many of them died because of poor living conditions. The transit camp was overcrowded, had no washing facilities and lacked drinking water.

Other images in the Virtual Museum tell further horrific stories about Solovetsky gulag. Particularly, the section “Exhibits” with its depictions of artefacts, handmade items and tools continues narrating the mournful past (fig. 4.7). Pictures in this category display what is called *objects of trauma* that stand for events and people who cannot talk for themselves. As Williams remarks, “in a sense, it is the story that is the object, insofar as it is not the item itself that is distinctive, but the associated history to which it is attached.”<sup>114</sup> This is, again, the work of visual metonymy, where an image – usually, an image of an inanimate thing – epitomises an important occurrence, a fact or life of a victim or of a perpetrator.

While “Traces of terror” shows the ruined landscapes of Solovki, the section “Exhibits” represents personal things that embody the tragic fates of Solovetsky prisoners. This group of images provides a chance to familiarise oneself with inmates, to study their uneasy lots and to know details about their incarceration. A personal belonging can tell volumes about someone who served time in prison. Furthermore, objects contribute to what can be called a literal ‘objectification’ of memory, as they overcome the subjectivity of a written testimony and thus assume an ‘objective’ record. Simply put, in some cases, objects are more reliable in the mediation of trauma because of their unbiased, impersonal nature.

Items in the section “Exhibits” range from small metal tokens and walking sticks to letters and improvised postcards. However, the largest part of such handmade objects is constituted by drawings and sketches that demonstrate the ample skills of their creators. Obviously, these were professional artists who made these works and who perished in

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<sup>114</sup> Williams, op. cit., p. 33.

Solovetsky prison together with many other talented and intelligent people. As Tomasz Kizny observes, “the flower of Russian society was deported to Solovki: intellectuals, philosophers, writers, artists, scientists, political and social workers, aristocrats, Czarist officers, entrepreneurs and clergymen.”<sup>115</sup> Most of them died due to “inhuman conditions of existence” in the northern gulag, while the rest were murdered directly by NKVD.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, despite all the hardships of camp life, those intellectuals left a trail after themselves – a legacy of paintings, diaries, decorative albums, embroidery and other handiwork that now act as memorial objects, helping to sustain memory of the dead. Today one memorialises victims of Stalinism through items that they once created or possessed, as such items ‘speak’ in the absence of their deceased owners.

Among the “Exhibits” of the Virtual Museum there are several drawings made by Ivan Dembskii, who was condemned to ‘SLON’ in 1935, after being falsely convicted of counter-revolutionary activity (fig. 4.8). His sketches are remarkable, first, because of their quantity (six in the Museum in total) and secondly, because of the depicted matter. Some represent buildings and sites of the camp while others portray the artist himself. None of these pictures features atrocious scenes, but they show ordinary daily subjects, like the interior of a camp barrack, a view of the White Sea or a belfry of Solovetsky monastery. Essentially, the artist was careful with what he pictured. Had he depicted actual cruelties of the camp, his works would be instantly censored by guards, who meticulously examined the belongings of all inmates. While not displaying horrors directly, the drawings of Dembskii are metonymically traumatic, as they attribute to the artist and thus symbolise his tragic fate. For instance, browsing these drawings, one learns that Dembskii worked as a decorator for the Solovetsky prison theatre, where, starting from 1935, he served his five-year-sentence. In the meantime, the artist made sketches of camp life that he passed to his wife during her visits and this is

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<sup>115</sup> T. Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps 1917-1990*. NY: Firefly Books, 2004, p. 37.

<sup>116</sup> N. Kuziakina, *Theatre in The Solovki Prison Camp*. NY: Routledge, 2013, p. 14.

how they survived to date. However, a real tragedy happened in 1937, when the NKVD changed Dembskii's imprisonment to a death warrant, thereby executing him along with thousands of other prisoners in a Karelian forest. While the life of the artist tragically ended at that point, his drawings were kept safe at his wife's place. Today they continue to exist as digital copies – as “those spectral, melancholy objects mediating, and signifying an absence” of their author.<sup>117</sup>

Apart from representations of things that belonged to Solovetsky inmates, the section “Exhibits” demonstrates another remarkable finding: a bullet extracted from the former shooting site at Sekirnaia hill (fig. 4.9. and 4.10).<sup>118</sup> Obviously, this kind of artefact ‘speaks’ for the perpetrators of terror, rather than its victims. Regarding the Gulag, a bullet (alongside the gun) can be considered a notorious ‘icon’ of atrocity that emblematises the violence committed by Stalin’s forces.<sup>119</sup> It presents the deadly apparatus through which the NKVD performed its brutalities, in this way killing not merely hundreds, but hundreds of thousands of innocent people.<sup>120</sup> Thus, whilst the Holocaust saw gas chambers and crematoria as instruments of mass extermination, the NKVD used guns to destroy its prisoners as shooting was the prevalent form of murder in Soviet camps. A typical execution at that time looked as follows. Detainees were taken to a deserted place, where they were, first forced to kneel, and then shot at the back of the head by an executioner. After each killing, officials carefully masked all traces, which included fast burial of bodies and removal of visible clues from an execution site. As Williams observes, “the clandestine nature of much political violence means that perpetrators aim to purposefully destroy evidence of their destruction.”<sup>121</sup> In this connection, he maintains that “records and bodies are buried,” and all other material trails are

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<sup>117</sup> M. Gibson, “Melancholy Objects”. *Mortality* 9 (4), 2004, p. 285.

<sup>118</sup> Williams, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>119</sup> Arnold-de Simine, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>120</sup> Williams, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

disposed of, whereupon only few rare objects can be discovered from a place of past crime.<sup>122</sup>

In other words, if something remains, these are usually small, hardly noticeable items like bullets, shells, buttons, jewellery or glasses.

#### 4.8. Conclusion

The Virtual Museum is a complex project with a clearly defined mission: to shape the understanding of Soviet repressions among the modern public at large. This outlet opens a new perspective on the infamous Stalinist legacy, which today has been partly forgotten and lost, but which, nevertheless, continues ‘haunting’ contemporary Russian culture as an unquiet spectre.<sup>123</sup> In this regard, the Virtual Museum helps to cope with the troublesome past, as it memorialises unjust victims of Stalinism. In addition, it helps to make sense of Gulag history, a complicated task in itself.

Existing in cyberspace, the Virtual Museum reconstructs collective memory in ways that are different from those offered by traditional media. Unlike, for instance, physical museums, it does not impose a predefined view upon the visitor, but instead, it offers a variety of perspectives, routes, and pictures for examination. Here users choose their own journey around the traumatic past, so that from passive onlookers they become active explorers, someone who *searches*, and not simply *observes*. In this context, the Virtual Museum allows for a ‘scientific’ experience of Soviet history, where a user, like an independent researcher, can look for the relevant materials. Thus, asking the right questions on this website can yield necessary answers. What did a camp barrack look like? Which industries did inmates work at? Where were the most unfortunate prisoners executed and buried? The Virtual Museum furnishes Soviet catastrophe an open framework, meaning that it provides all data, without

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, p. 18.

restricting a user's choice.<sup>124</sup> Resulting from that, anyone can create a 'customised' itinerary around the virtual Gulag, thus studying various artefacts, 'visiting' different places and learning numerous stories associated with the tragedy.

The Virtual Museum is a visual medium, in which visual component prevails over textual, even though text there still plays an important part. Obviously, the existence of this online platform would be impossible without digital pictures – without photographs taken from the material traces of Soviet terror. As the creators of the project assert, they "collected those dispersed and rather heterogeneous images" to "reconstruct a general scene" of the Soviet traumatic past.<sup>125</sup>

Yet, the images of the Virtual Museum are rather specific, in the sense that they do not resemble conventional representations of trauma, like, for instance, the now iconic photographs of the Nazi's concentration camps. In this regard, comparing visual iconography of the Holocaust to that of Gulag reveals a dramatic difference. Whilst the former possesses a set of explicitly violent and thus highly recognisable pictures, the latter operates only with representations of things, places and sites which, in turn, can be unknown to the viewer. Looking through Gulag photo albums, one can hardly find any explicit manifestation of horror, like the piles of corpses that were photographed upon the release of the Nazi camps. In this connection, the Soviet tragedy may lack recognisability, since, unlike Nazi genocide, it does not have "images that instantly and transparently read ['the Gulag'] the way an image of prisoners in a bunk, or the gated entrance to a camp, or the tumbling stacks of cadavers reads 'Shoah' or 'Holocaust'."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> S. Hornstein and F. Jacobowitz, *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>125</sup> "The Virtual Museum of the Gulag," "about" page, English version of the website at <http://www.gulagmuseum.org> retrieved on 22.07.2016.

<sup>126</sup> D. Schowalter, *Images of Traumatic History: The Visual Rhetorics of Holocaust*. Indiana University, 2001, p. 7.

The photo albums that remained from the Gulag are “like nothing more than old family albums kept too long in the attic,” for, in fact, they closely resembled imagery of the broader USSR.<sup>127</sup> As Steven Barnes observes, the forced labour camps were a ‘microcosm’ of the Soviet Union in a sense that Communist “authorities went to tremendous length both before and during the war [WWII] to recreate Soviet society within the Gulag.”<sup>128</sup> In other words, NKVD moulded the camp structure on the general pattern of economic and political life of the Stalinist epoch. Whilst socialist competition and ‘Stakhanovite’ movement took place at the free construction sites, the same labour methods were employed in the Gulag imprisonment.<sup>129</sup> Like ordinary workers, the inmates were “required to understand the significance and maintain the appropriate political attitude toward” their job, for they were active ‘builders of socialism’ alongside other Soviet citizens.<sup>130</sup> Everything was done to make a semblance of ‘normality’ in the camps, which, according to the state ideology, transformed a criminal into a radically new Soviet man. Whenever the local commanders took pictures of camps, they did so for the purpose of internal propaganda, in order to show the high-ranking officials “how well things were going.”<sup>131</sup> Consequently, the remained photographs feature nothing but ordinary scenes of camp life: prisoners at work or leisure, sometimes celebrating major public holidays or even performing on stage.

Unlike the Holocaust, the Soviet terror did not leave any direct trace of the perpetrated crimes. The NKVD did not visually document its misdeeds in gulags, and neither were any pictures taken upon the closure of Soviet camps, which unofficially existed up until the 1980s. This poses a certain challenge in terms of memorialisation: the absence of primary

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<sup>127</sup> A. Applebaum, “Album from Hell”. *The New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2005, retrieved at <http://www.anneapplebaum.com> on 22.07.2016.

<sup>128</sup> S Barnes, “All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two”. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 58 (Wartime Economies and the Mobilization of Labor), 2000, p. 246.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> A. Applebaum, op. cit.

photographic evidence (like photographs of killings and dead bodies) makes the work of memory problematic, simply because there is no visual proof of what happened in the past. As David Bathrick observes, “media visualizations serve for some as virtual access to knowledge of the horror,” and “in a few cases, they even provide pre-eminent verification that it actually happened.”<sup>132</sup> If the Holocaust imprinted itself in public memory, above all, through the photographs of liberation of Nazi camps, the same could not happen to the Gulag, as it lacked this kind of imagery. The materials, through which one studies these two tragedies, are thus very different. In the first case, one has ‘ready-made’ icons, like a gas chamber or a starving inmate, ‘to invoke the trauma’ immediately. In the second, one relies on implicit, metonymic clues, which relate to calamitous past only *indirectly*.<sup>133</sup> The above does not mean that images of the Soviet trauma are less powerful than the ones of the Holocaust. Although not displaying atrocities overtly, the Gulag representations memorialise and reconstruct knowledge about Stalinist repressions in their own peculiar ways.

Generally, the Virtual Museum creates a visual history of Gulag, where images claim central position and tell us about atrocities of the past. It is at the same time an archive, accommodating an impressive range of materials devoted to Stalinist horrors. Whether the project is successful or not is a tricky question, as at this point, there is no objective way to assess its success. However, one thing is clear. Upon assembling images of the Soviet terror in digital space, the Virtual Museum “plays increasingly crucial role in the mediation of memories and the construction of an accessible” traumatic past “for the public at large.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> D. Bathrick, B. Prager and M. Richardson. *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> Schowalter, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>134</sup> Stier, op.cit., p. 112.

## **Chapter Five | Creative Transformations of Soviet Memory**

### **5.1. Introduction**

As the previous two chapters of this thesis demonstrated, digital Soviet memory is a manifold phenomenon, which manifests itself differently in each particular case. Be they nostalgic or tragic in tone, images of the USSR vary from one website to another, thus representing different attitudes towards the Soviet period – everything from longing for late Socialism to mourning Stalin's victims, and from positive reassessment of Soviet rule to fierce critique of Communism. The two examples that I examined in the previous chapter set clear targets of either praising the collapsed Soviet Union (visual archives) or condemning it for committed crimes (The Virtual Museum). In pursuit of this, both projects promote collective recall in either of two ways: from the point of view of nostalgia and trauma respectively. Both, the visual archives and The Virtual Museum can be considered as aids for post-Soviet memory, as they help us to preserve knowledge about the USSR.

Not all digital images, however, facilitate the reconstruction of memory but some might have the opposite effect. They create ambiguity around the Soviet past. Thus, due to their digital transformation, so-called 'hybrid' representations obscure public vision of the Soviet period, instead of helping to remember history of that time.<sup>1</sup> 'Soviet anime', 'red demotivators', personal blogs stylised under the former USSR, these are but a few instances of creative appropriation of Soviet aesthetics on the Web. And, yet, there are many more similar cases that proliferate throughout the Internet, as they appear on forums and web search engines, social networks and media-sharing platforms, commercial and gaming servers. Russian prank websites, for example, host numerous digitally transformed images of Vladimir

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<sup>1</sup> "Hybrid" is my term for description of digitally modified images.

Lenin, in which the latter is pictured as a zombie, punk rocker or even special agent 007 (fig. 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3). Accompanied by the prominent motto “Lenin lives!”, these pictures poke fun at the founder of the USSR, while comparing him to famous Western characters.<sup>2</sup> Similar transformations happen to the image of Stalin, who in this virtual reality can be a hero of an online game, the main figure in a comic strip or, simply, the ‘Stalinator.’<sup>3</sup> The routes of the Soviet past in new media space are unpredictable; thus one may only wonder how an image ‘evolves’ in each digital context.

Vague, controversial and even bizarre, creative adaptations of Soviet imagery on the Web perplex the onlooker, thus making one ponder their intended meaning and function. The main question, in this regard, is what all these ‘remakes’ symbolise. Are they a mere play with the signs of the Soviet epoch, or do they hide deeper meaning under the surface of visible travesty? Likewise, if Russian users are prone to ‘rework’ the visual legacy of Soviet times, then, what urges them to post yet another remake of Stalin’s portrait on Facebook or to upload a remix of Soviet films on YouTube? Given their ambiguity, digitally altered images of the Soviet period merit special attention within the framework of this study. Of particular interest is, of course, their memorialising capacity – the ability to convey knowledge about the past. Do all these digitally transformed representations inform Soviet memory or do they, conversely, destabilise it? Can they open a new, alternative view on the collapsed USSR, provided “different vehicles of memory offer different ways of making sense of the past?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The prominent line “Lenin lives, Lenin lived, Lenin will live forever!” was composed by the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovski straight after Lenin’s death. It appeared as a slogan in a Communist propaganda poster representing the leader himself.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, online game “Stalin vs Martians” at <http://www.stalinvsmartians.com/en/index.html>, the comic strip *Stalin vs. Hitler* at <http://www.comicsnews.org/comics/stalin-protiv-gitlera/page3>, or “Stalinator” posters via google search.

<sup>4</sup> Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory”. *Framing Public Memory*. ed. Kendall R. Phillips. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2004. p. 157, retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/58..](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/58..)

Unlike the previous two chapters of my thesis, this chapter does not consider entire websites, but focuses on separate images that circulate on the Web and that change their meaning depending on the context of appropriation. As I indicated above, the Internet is packed with remakes of Soviet icons that travel chaotically across digital space. While the scope of such visual material is obviously immense, my purpose is more modest. I will trace the ‘digital routes’ and creative transformations of just two categories of depictions appearing on the Internet. The first example in this regard is Soviet propaganda posters. Precisely in new media environments, these former tools of Communist agitation have been put to a fascinating variety of uses. Taking the shape of digital replicas, they have become subject to constant change and inevitable, sometimes even absurd transformations. Today’s users appropriate them as Internet memes, elements of web-design, and illustrations for articles and personal blogs. Distributed all around the Web, these posters are not carriers of their original message and function; they turn into mere ‘templates’ open to any kind of creative filling and imaginative investment. It is nonetheless, a form of reference to Soviet history, where the Soviet past is still ‘present,’ though the actual extent of this ‘presence’ yet needs to be defined.

Another case study included in this chapter examines the so-called *Stalin is like* images. This category is even more controversial than the propaganda posters. These images play with the figure of the most brutal Soviet dictator, as they compare him with contemporary media brands such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Although *Stalin is like* posters were originally designed for an anti-Stalinist campaign, they created adverse effect when spread around the Internet: unexpectedly, the audience perceived them as Stalinist hype. My purpose regarding these images is to define their impact on post-Soviet memory. Again, the question is whether they support or undermine public vision of that period.

When employed in new digital contexts, old Soviet icons acquire a range of brand new connotations, which squeezes out the original historical meaning to a greater or lesser degree.

Such representations are polysemic; they come to symbolise multiple, often, contradictory views regarding the present and past alike. These modified, ‘hybrid’ illustrations still contribute to post-Soviet memory and yet, paradoxically, they represent something else. Using the two examples, I aim to discover how Soviet images are transformed in online environment and why these transformations matter to the Soviet past.

## 5.2. Transforming the Soviet Past on the Web

Browsing Russian web sites, one finds bits of Soviet imagery almost everywhere at random: in news blogs, popular encyclopaedias, fandom networks, meme generators. This can be a still from a Soviet cartoon posted on the Russian social network [www.vk.com](http://www.vk.com), a depiction of the hammer and sickle embellishing an RPG (‘Role-Playing Game) community, or a portrait of Stalin uploaded to Pinterest. ‘Red’ aesthetics seems to be omnipresent online. Importantly, such imagery does not stay intact on the Web but is modified for different purposes. Russians borrow former Soviet icons for creative use in digital space, which today is a trend, rather than a single instance. With the advent of new information technologies, and particularly of Web 2.0, repurposing the Soviet past in the virtual realm has become prominent and even unavoidable. In the age of digital reproduction, where one has all possible tools for editing and sharing media content, what can be easier than copying, altering and posting a replica of, for instance, a Soviet propaganda poster online?

Upon studying various re-appropriations of Soviet images on the Web, the first question to consider is why this happens. What stands behind the urge to recycle Soviet iconography in new media space? Why do these “old [visual] forms borrowed from the recent past” still appeal to the modern public, who ‘juggle’ them, as if they were vital components of present?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> S. Oushakine, “New Lives of Old Forms: on Returns and Repetitions in Russia”. *GENRE* 43, 2010, p. 414.

The answer to these questions is more complex than it may seem, as to address them one has to consider several factors, such as the role of the Communist legacy in contemporary Russian culture, the impact of the digital environment on Soviet signs and each context of appropriation. In this connection, I argue that all modified, ‘hybrid’ images that proliferate online are generated by two reciprocal drives: the drive of post-Soviet memory, which is ambiguous and yet unsettled, and, hence, provoking monstrous, grotesque transformations of the original graphic form. The other impulse is that of digital culture, which is volatile and fluid as it stimulates the remaking of all items that got onto the Web. I will examine how these two drives ‘work’ in what follows.

### ***5.2.1. The Drive of post-Soviet Memory***

Characterising the condition of current post-Soviet memory previously in this thesis (see chapter 2 “Soviet Memory”), I indicated that the relationship between Russia and its Communist past is ambivalent, as no consensus regarding the Soviet epoch has been reached so far in Russian society. While state authorities still struggle for a univocal version of history, the public is split into two opposing poles: those who nostalgize for former Soviet greatness and those who, conversely, criticize the collapsed superpower. In fact, in the extreme neither pole enables the requisite representation of the contested past, as neither excessive nostalgia nor fierce criticism contribute to a balanced vision of Communism. Swept by a mix of different contradictory feelings, Russians are unable to see clearly the epoch that lasted for almost three quarters of the previous century, whereupon controversies related to history of the USSR continue to arise.

Ambiguity, fuzziness and a lack of agreement about the Soviet past in the contemporary public sphere explain why users transform symbolic heritage of that period on the Web. As post-Soviet collective memory is uncertain and fragmented, so are its reflections in digital space. They take the form of perverted, distorted images, which confuse the onlooker instead

of shaping an adequate picture. What, for instance, does a famous online game “Stalin versus Martians” represent?<sup>6</sup> Can it in any sense stand for, at least, a half-faithful portrayal of historical reality? Obviously not, for as is already clear from its title, it is a fiction that has little if anything to do with history.<sup>7</sup> Rather than dealing with real facts, the plot of the game is based on a hyperbolised fantasy, suggesting that “in the course of the Second World War, Martians invade Siberia,” and so the player has to “defend Mother Russia against these extra-terrestrial invaders,” thus replacing Stalin, who is busy with fighting Nazi Germany.<sup>8</sup> Absurd as it is, this digital representation transforms the Soviet past into “an exotic and unexplored land gravid with unborn alternatives and mandatory wonders.”<sup>9</sup> It is a visual hybrid of public memory or in other words, its deviation.

Yet, to get a deeper understanding of the distorted representations of the USSR in contemporary Russian culture, one needs to approach them from the position of trauma: trauma in a broad sense. In this connection, it should be noted that not only Stalinist repressions were catastrophic for the Russian population, but the entire Communist epoch: the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Civil war, Stalin’s drives for industrialisation and collectivisation, the Great Patriotic War and the post-war recovery of the country, as well as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent post-Communist transition posed a series of traumas for Russian society. As Alexander Etkind indicates, “the post-Soviet period is undoubtedly, a time of melancholy,” when “the subject [yet] cannot free himself from the loss.” He adds that this loss should be understood widely, as “for some it is the unburied millions of Soviet victims; and for others, by contrast, it is the grandeur of the Soviet empire,”

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stalinvsMartians.com/en/index.html>, retrieved on 18.04.2016.

<sup>7</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies*. NY: the Noonday Press, 1991, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> G. Howanitz, “Repeating History? The Computer Game as Historiographic Device” in *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in post-Socialist States*, ed. by E. Rutten, J. Fedor and V. Zvereva, London and NY: Routledge, 201, p.186.

<sup>9</sup> M. Lipovetsky and A. Etkind, “The Salamander’s Return”. *Russian Studies in Literature* 46 (4), 2010, p. 9.

and although “these two sorrows [seem to be] incompatible,” they present two sides of the same traumatising experience.<sup>10</sup> In his seminal work *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, Etkind assumes that bizarre, odd and even ghastly imagery is inherent to post-Soviet memory precisely because the latter is traumatic. It bears an imprint of trauma, which has been repressed for a long time and which now returns as the uncanny, in its “distorted and monstrous forms.”<sup>11</sup> According to the scholar, such memory often takes unusual shapes, as it “carries within itself elements of the grisly – the familiar and the forgotten, the restored and the unrecognised, the never-experienced and the well masticated.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Etkind, the return of the Soviet uncanny in contemporary culture “is accompanied by a defamiliarization of the past,” which results in grotesque and monstrous imagery.<sup>13</sup> As he indicates, “post-traumatic culture works in repetitive, vacillating movements that simultaneously reconstruct the shock of the past, as it supposedly happened, and defamiliarize it in such a way that the new returns of this past take different, and therefore engaging forms.”<sup>14</sup> To illustrate this process, he draws examples from modern Russian literature, and namely those authors who work within ‘magical historicism’ - a creative genre that blends history with fantasy, or myth.<sup>15</sup> While the themes of such novels differ, they yet have one thing in common. They all depict monsters, such as vampires, werewolves, zombies and other mutated beasts.<sup>16</sup> In Etkind’s view, this is how the uncanniness of post-Soviet memory appears in today’s culture: through images of unearthly creatures that are fantastic and obviously allegoric. Although these monstrous representations lay no claim to a truthful

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lipovetsky, Etkind, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> A. Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction”. *Slavic Review* 68 (3), 2009, p. 644.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 648.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

portrayal of the past, they do have their ‘critical potential,’ as they help us to comprehend “history that is not comprehensible by other means.”<sup>17</sup>

Following Etkind’s thought, I suggest that the digital realm contains the same ‘monsters’ as those inhabiting contemporary Russian literature.<sup>18</sup> Thus, like pages from the novels of magical historicism, the Internet is infested with warped depictions of the USSR. However, if literary representations of the Soviet uncanny are produced by professional writers, who consciously employ the grotesque in their works, online ‘hybrids’ are imagined by common users, who by contrast, are not always aware of what they create and why. This means that digital images can be even more tangled, bizarre and absurd. They result from unconscious experimenting with the Soviet past that teeters on the edge of melancholic reflection and creative play, and that may or may not have any serious implication. An exemplary illustration, in this regard, is representation of the Soviet era chocolate Alenka which has been re-appropriated widely online (fig. 5.4). As the image entered the Web, the one-year old girl on the cover underwent uncanny transformations. She ‘turned’ into modern politicians and singers, animals and fictional characters, fantastic creatures and evil beasts (fig.5.5). Thus, some digital remakes of Alenka chocolate look totally nonsensical, as they depict suspicious men, mad dogs, or even aliens and zombies instead of the small child. Although being an Internet joke, these modified images do not seem that funny, if one considers their unintended meaning. Involuntarily, they symbolise loss: inevitable rupture with the Soviet values of purity and naivety that the original cover of this chocolate wrapper initially represented. Unmotivated distortions of the Alenka image expose the inconsistency of contemporary Russian culture, which simultaneously upholds and rejects Soviet heritage.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 657.

<sup>18</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

<sup>19</sup> E. Dobrenko and A. Shcherbenok, “Between History and the Past: The Soviet Legacy as a Traumatic Object of Contemporary Russian Culture”. *Slavonica* 17 (2), 2011, p. 77.

Post-Soviet memory is a generative force. It produces multitudes of representations that are far from genuine history. They neither truly reflect the Communist past, nor completely deny it. As Etkind notes regarding depictions of monsters in post-Soviet literature, “however unrecognizable, these allegorical images retain their dependency upon the past; but this relationship cannot be described in those terms that Russian cultural criticism is accustomed to.”<sup>20</sup> The same relates to online depictions. Some of them are just by-products of memory, rather than memory as such.

### ***5.2.2. The Drive of Digital Culture***

Yet, studying creative transformations of the Soviet past on the Web, one has to consider another significant drive that provokes them: digital culture. The impact of new media is crucial for the circulation of Soviet images and it should be taken into account alongside other powerful forces, such as above described uncanny memory. Once digitised and placed on the Web, Soviet representations do not stay intact. They become modified, distorted and changed – simply because the online environment changes too.

Digital technologies, and the Internet, in the first instance, produce a new visual environment, which subjects old cultural forms, for example, old Soviet icons, to new rules of functioning. What the digital space entails is mass reproduction and altering of all artefacts, regardless of their origin, historical attribution or value. Thus, for example, both a stock image and a documentary photograph can be modified online: the digital space makes no difference, as it tends to recycle everything that comes to hand. As Andrew Darley remarks in this connection, “the new [digital] techniques become tied to the preoccupations of variation and accentuation inherent within ways of remaking, repeating, imitations, recombining and such-like; providing (at least for the time being) highly impressive and sophisticated ways of

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<sup>20</sup> Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction”, p. 632.

combining and recombining, of animating, copying and manipulating.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, copying and altering are inseparable from the digitisation process, and hence, when placed online, any historical or artistic image is at risk of change.

Although even a material image is generally changeable and open to transformation, digital reproduction drives this principle of changeability to the utmost degree. Never before has it been so simple to alter representations as with the advent of new media. According to Darley, “image manipulation assumes a new importance with the arrival of the computer [and the World Wide Web].”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he adds that “the new technique of digitization enables the distortion and modification of images in ways which foreground such interference, yet it is just as easy to produce undetectable changes and alterations in existing photographic, video and film images.”<sup>23</sup> Another media scholar, Jos de Mul, continues in the same vein, while stating that “in the age of digital recombination, the value of an object depends on the extent of its openness for manipulation.”<sup>24</sup> Put somewhat differently, today, remaking images is a norm and common practice for anyone who has a computer connected to the Internet.

The principle of digital variability is obvious on meme generator sites, where users transform thousands of depictions, while often producing numerous derivatives from the same picture. For instance, a popular Russian website “Risovach” offers over a hundred Soviet-related images as templates for memes.<sup>25</sup> This involves Communist propaganda posters, stills from the Soviet cartoons, official portraits of Lenin and Stalin. A user can choose any of them

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<sup>21</sup>A. Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. London and NY: Routledge, 2001, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p.133.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>J. Mul, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination” in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, ed. by Marianne van den Boomen, Sybille Lammes, Ann-Sophie Lehmann at. all., Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup>[www.risovach.ru](http://www.risovach.ru), retrieved on 18.04.2016.

for creative experimentation. What he or she needs to do is only write a caption, and a new ‘hybrid’ image will be ready within seconds. However, it is also possible to change the graphic component itself. To that end, one can download the template, modify it through a photo editor, and then re-upload the final version on the website. Overall, any meme generator signals the mutability of contemporary digital culture, which not only reproduces copies, but also “produces mutations with significant qualitative effects.”<sup>26</sup> As “one symptom of this” process, we can watch “new and increasingly convoluted kinds and levels of repetition” of the Soviet past on the Web.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from modification, digital space exerts yet another effect upon Soviet representations. It blends them with images and notions of other epochs, civilizations and cultures. Generally, remixing of different and often dissimilar elements is inherent to the online environment. The Internet itself presents an ultimate remix of artefacts, ideas and codes that originate from around the world. It purposely ‘absorbs’ all objects in order to first deconstruct them, and then recombine their parts in new unexpected ways. Luke Tredinnick states that ‘remixability’ of the Web results in “a kind of cultural bricolage, in which new cultural forms are constructed out of the detritus of the old.”<sup>28</sup> This is the power of digital recycling. Online, all “cultural objects become either composites and collages or are playfully [constituted] out of allusions to the wider cultural field.”<sup>29</sup> Simply put, the Web recycles everything from artworks to video games and from films to mobile ringtones. It incorporates parts of a masterpiece into a second-rate commercial; it merges elements that clash with each other in real life; it blends not only separate items, but also entire cultures and epochs.

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<sup>26</sup> Darley, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> L. Tredinnick, *Digital Information Culture: the Individual and Society in the Digital Age*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2008, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

It is common to find both Soviet and Western aesthetics combined in one digital piece, which at first glance, may seem like a ‘weird mixture’. Yet, looking closer, one discovers that the two antipodes, paradoxically, can go well together. Such are, for instance, images of “Stalinator,” a furious fighter with evil, who tirelessly ‘patrols’ the Web (fig. 5.6). He looks resolute and calm, wears a leather jacket and rides a sparkling new motorbike. Gazing straight into the camera, he claims, “I’ll be back.” Obviously, this character is part of Internet fiction. Merging the image of the brutal Soviet dictator with a famous Hollywood hero has nothing to do with genuine history, but nevertheless, this visual mash-up is remarkable. Although lacking any serious historical meaning, “Stalinator” poses some important questions about the Soviet past. For instance, one wonders if depictions like this rebrand the image of Stalin, in this way promoting his personality in contemporary public culture, or if they conversely, criticise him, condemning his brutality and committed crimes. Since digital “Stalinator” represents an ironic interplay of signs, allusions and cultural clichés, it is rather hard to identify its intended meaning. So, what does it actually stand for? A saviour, who will eventually ‘resurrect’ to save the earth from the doomsday? Or is he, on the contrary, a senseless machine, who will come back to exterminate humans?

Considering all creative transformations of Soviet images on the Web from the position of semiotics, one assumes that the impact of digital culture is crucial. The online environment alters the meaning of Soviet icons, as it alters the meaning of all signs in principle. What the Web represents is a ‘random play of signifiers’ – a postmodern condition, where the signifier has been detached from its signified almost completely, so “it has no connection to it or dependence upon it.”<sup>30</sup> As Alexander Laski contends, “the free play of signifiers means that

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<sup>30</sup> F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 96; D. Hoeveler, *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 1996, p. 176.

signs no longer have any connection to their referents.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the digital space, “signs refer only to other signs, meaning can only be understood on the surface level of sign interchange which creates a web of intertextual superficial meaning.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, “because of the signs’ lack of basis in referent, there cannot be said to be any fixed meanings in signs,” whereupon “the meanings can and do constantly change, they are in a constant state of flux.”<sup>33</sup>

When put on the Web, Soviet images (as signs of the Communist epoch) become detached from their original denotation and “more integrated into the contexts of their [new digital] use.”<sup>34</sup> Their meaning constantly shifts, depending on where they are re-appropriated, and hence, if used on different websites, the same image can signify completely different things. Thus, for instance, the same Soviet propaganda poster (whether modified or not) can illustrate a sceptical attitude towards the modern Russian government in a news blog; it can stand for an avatar in a fandom community; or it can be a sign that warns users about the website’s disturbing content. In any of these cases, it is only the ‘signifier,’ the visual *form* of the poster, that is utilized in the digital space, whilst the original ‘signified’ is deliberately neglected. In this way, drawing images of the past is not meant to represent history, but the Soviet iconography is evoked for other purposes: to comment on Russia’s present, to establish one’s (virtual) identity, or just for ironic, postmodern play of signifiers, as in the case with “Stalinator”.

Overall, the Soviet past on the Web presents a source for creative experimentation. It is like an endless source of creativity from where “visual signs, forms, meanings, even textures”

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<sup>31</sup> A. Laski, “The Politics of Dancing – Gay Disco Music and Postmodernism” in *The Last Post: Music after Modernism*, ed. by S. Miller. Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Tredinnick, op. cit., p. 88.

can be “borrowed, reworked and adapted” from one website to another.<sup>35</sup> Soviet images here become ‘signifier material’ which is “imported into a new context” and which is “used to make a new meaning.”<sup>36</sup>

### **5.3. Soviet Propaganda Posters as a Subject Creatively Used on the Web**

#### ***5.3.1. Propaganda Posters Go ‘Viral’***

As vital components of the former USSR, propaganda posters entered the Internet alongside other elements of Soviet culture. Bold and colourful, these former carriers of Communist ideology today changed not only their original function, but also ‘habitat.’ They moved from the walls of physical buildings to the digital space of websites, social networks and online games. Thus, on the Web, Soviet posters have been re-appropriated for a variety of uses, including anything from commenting on a current agenda in a news blog to creating digital art in online communities. Furthermore, some of these propaganda images reached increasingly high popularity on the Web, so that they became ‘viral’. Now, like ‘viruses,’ they spread around the virtual space.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the same poster can travel across different media platforms; likewise, it can “get transformed, repurposed, or distorted” as it “passes from hand to hand,” or from one web site to another.<sup>38</sup> Deliberately or not, Soviet posters ‘mutated’ in the new media environment as they were reworked by different users,

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<sup>35</sup> A. Burn, “Reworking the Text: Online Fandom” in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*, ed. by D. Carr, D. Buckingham, A. Burn and G. Schott, Cambridge: Polity, 2006, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> L. Shifman, *MIT Press Essential Knowledge: Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> H. Jenkins, ‘If it Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes’, February 11, 2009, retrieved from [http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html) 18.04.2016.

communities and virtual groups. As a result, not only there multiple copies of these posters, but also their numerous derivatives.

Detached from their historical context and placed on the Web, propaganda posters present empty frameworks, open to any kind of creative investment. Whilst their original meaning (signified) is irrevocably lost, they turn into ‘visual templates’ that can fit any new purpose.<sup>39</sup> Thus, for instance, they can represent a current political situation, or they can help to express someone’s cultural identity; they can communicate a serious message or, conversely, they can poke fun at grave subjects. In other words, these posters are evoked on the Web because of their *form*, which is vivid and socially recognisable and which thus becomes suitable for transmission of new ideas.<sup>40</sup> It is only form that counts in the new media environment, and it is only the ‘formal,’ ‘surface’ qualities that matter when re-appropriating Soviet icons online.

Explaining why old Soviet signs prevail in Russian culture, Serguei Oushakine assumes that “the logic of these reincarnations has more in common with the act of mechanical retrofitting (facilitated by the digital age) rather than with the process of political restoration.”<sup>41</sup> As the scholar points out, “it is familiarity of the old form that becomes crucial,” as “it is a search for a recognizable ‘image at which... the mind can stare itself out’ that often lies at the core” of these symbolic re-appropriations.<sup>42</sup> Obviously, in his theory, Oushakine privileges the role of the form in case of cultural borrowing. Thus, when Soviet signs (such as, for instance, graphic images, TV programmes, or commercials) are readapted in contemporary Russian culture, it is mainly their ‘formal,’ or ‘pictorial’ side that participates in this process. That is why, according to Oushakine, such “borrowings are attractive first and

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<sup>39</sup> S. Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia”, *The Russian Review* 66, 2007, p. 456.

<sup>40</sup> Oushakine, “New Lives of Old Forms”, p. 414.

<sup>41</sup> Oushakine, “We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy”, p. 453.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

foremost for the framing effect that they could successfully deliver.”<sup>43</sup> Functioning as ‘visual templates,’ old shapes of the past “offer a recognisable outline without suggesting an obvious ideological strategy of its interpretation.”<sup>44</sup>

The ‘form-driven’ approach of Oushakine sheds light on the creative re-appropriation of Soviet posters.<sup>45</sup> If the latter represent mere frameworks on the Web, then potentially, they can ‘frame’ any content related to the present and past alike. This also means that in digital space propaganda images become more volatile, mutable and open to manipulation. Not only does their signified (content) constantly transform, but so does the signifier (form), as will be seen further in this chapter.

As ‘old forms’ of the Soviet past, propaganda posters receive their ‘new lives’ on the Web.<sup>46</sup> They become recycled as part of the online environment, which is vivid and heterogeneous, and which thus spawns a plethora of new cultural phenomena. In this context, propaganda images get ‘readapted’ to new media genres, such as online games, fandom folklore, virtual discussions or YouTube mashups. The old Soviet icons ‘blend’ with new digital formats easily, however diverse and unusual these formats are. One particularly interesting case of such blending are Internet memes. I will consider this example thoroughly in what follows.

Although an Internet meme looks like a relatively recent phenomenon, it is already an established concept in the digital sphere. Thus, media scholars recognise this category upon studying it from different angles, let alone that there is ‘memetics’ – the theoretical study of memes. In this regard, an Internet meme is commonly defined as a ‘catchy idea’ that

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 456.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Oushakine, “New Lives of Old Forms”, p.415.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 409.

propagates online through images, texts, videos or even tunes.<sup>47</sup> As a ‘contagious’ unit of information, a meme spreads rapidly among users, and in this way, it “generates and shapes mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group.”<sup>48</sup> Surprisingly, this description shows some similarity to that of propaganda posters. Back in Soviet time, the latter likewise were ‘contagious’ patterns, meant for promoting particular opinions, attitudes and views. Like memes, propaganda posters circulated widely among the population, with the key difference that they were imposed by the state. Memes, conversely, spread ‘voluntarily’ by the public, that is by anyone who feels enthusiastic about them.

Limor Shifman provides a comprehensive definition of Internet memes. She characterises them as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.”<sup>49</sup> This detailed description highlights the basic qualities of digital memes. First, these elements of popular culture gain significance through distribution on the Web. Thus, for instance, an image can become a meme only if it has numerous digital copies. Secondly and related to the first, a meme is a series of interconnected units that have common features, which can be common text, icon, stance or idea. Without at least one of these qualities, the existence of a meme is impossible. Thirdly, memes replicate through imitation and remixing. The two techniques prevalent in online environments.<sup>50</sup> As Shifman indicates, “user-driven imitation and remix have become highly valued pillars of contemporary participatory culture, to the extent that one may argue that we live in an era driven by a *hyper-memetic* logic.”<sup>51</sup> These three qualities

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<sup>47</sup> M. Knobel and C. Lankshear, “Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production”. *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. M. Knobel and C. Lankshear, NY, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 201.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p 199.

<sup>49</sup> Shifman, op. cit. p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> L. Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker”. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, 2013, p. 365.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

all suggest that memes are highly mutable phenomena. They are always in a state of flux, and hence both their content and form constantly change.

The fact that Soviet propaganda posters turn into digital memes is surprising and, paradoxically, predictable. On the one hand, it is rather unusual to see these old Soviet signs reworked as Internet jokes. Thus, when browsing such remakes on the Web, one might feel perplexed, entangled or even irritated. A combination of former propaganda with today's media aesthetics can cause a sense of imbalance – a visual dissonance, especially for those who might be sensitive about the Communist past. However, on the other hand, Soviet posters proved to be ideal media for memes. There is a certain power within these images that turns them into a target of meme-making.

What makes propaganda posters ‘memetic’ is, firstly, their simple and highly recognisable graphic form. I would argue that the power of these images lies in their visual clarity, simplicity and boldness. Since the original purpose of these posters was to send an ideological message to the entire Soviet population, they had to be simple, so they could be understandable by anyone. The design of such a poster is rather concise. As a rule, it contains one big icon accompanied by a short catchy caption or text. No other complicated or unnecessary elements obstruct the composition, so that a viewer gets a message directly, without thinking too much. An example is the famous wartime poster *Do not Gossip!* (1941) which now spawns numerous digital memes (fig. 5.7). The structure of this poster is straightforward. It centres on the figure of a woman who holds her finger close to her lips (a gesture of silence). Apart from that, there is a sharp caption “Do not gossip!” and explanatory text, “Keep your eyes open. These days even the walls have ears. Chatter and gossip go hand in hand with treason.” During Communist times, no one would misinterpret this poster because of its clarity. It warned Soviet citizens against accidental leakage of national information in the period of World War II. Today, this poster is widely appropriated as an

Internet meme, which is precisely due to the qualities of visual boldness, simplicity and concision.

Simplicity, and as a consequence memorability, are the properties that enable a meme “to be readily copied and passed from mind to mind relatively intact.”<sup>52</sup> In this regard, a simple and highly recognisable image stands a much better chance of becoming a meme than do complex, visually sophisticated pictures.<sup>53</sup> This explains the ‘memetic’ popularity of Soviet propaganda posters. Because of their catchy graphic form, they are imitated and reproduced in an online environment. As bright icons of the Communist epoch, these posters now ‘make intuitive sense’ even to those individuals who have never lived in the former Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from simplicity, another factor that prompts the distribution of Internet memes is emotional charge. In order to become a meme, an image or idea should be emotionally valuable to people sharing it. As recent studies show, users are more likely to spread the kind of Internet content that triggers effective response.<sup>55</sup> Simply put, if someone experiences strong positive or negative emotions (e.g. joy, anger, repulsion) about a sharable item, he or she most probably, will share it too. Due to its emotional impact, a meme can go ‘viral’ on the Web, thus replicating in thousands or even millions of digital copies.

Considering the proliferation of Soviet propaganda posters on the Web, I assume that the ‘virality’ of these images stems from contemporary public sentiment. Previously in this thesis (chapter 2 “Soviet Memory”, part 5 “Creating a Usable Past in Russia”), I indicated that the Soviet past is an ‘emotionally charged’ past which leaves no one indifferent. While

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<sup>52</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> R. Guadagno, D. Rempala, S. Murphy, B. Okdie, “What Makes a Video Go Viral? An Analysis of Emotional Contagion and Internet Memes”. *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, 2013, p. 2312.

Russian citizens are yet undecided about the meaning of their recent history, they express a range of strong contradictory feelings towards everything Soviet, be it Soviet lifestyle, politics or culture. Russians simply cannot stay neutral when remembering life in the former USSR, even if they lived under Communism for only a short time (or further, if they did not live at that time at all, but were born after the Soviet collapse). Thus, nostalgia, scepticism, or even hatred prevail in any discussion of the Soviet legacy, which is always a hot topic of public debate. Similarly, most of the Soviet-related content on the Web is emotionally coloured. It evokes the emotions of users, who comment on it in their web blogs, share it in social networks or upload it on YouTube.

Propaganda posters present an ‘affective’ content in the Runet. They ‘hook’ Russian users emotionally. The latter, in their turn, seem to be receptive to these digitised elements of the Soviet past. According to Michele Knobel and Kolin Lankshear, it is this ‘susceptibility’ that allows a meme to reach a certain degree of ‘virality’ on the Web.<sup>56</sup> As scholars explicate, “‘susceptibility’ refers to the ‘timing’ or ‘location’ of a meme with respect to people’s openness to the meme and their propensity to be infected by it.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, “susceptibility is enhanced by the meme’s relevance to current events, its relation to extant successful memes, and the interests and values of the people using the spaces in which the meme is unleashed.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet not all Soviet posters transform into Internet memes, as not all of them suit meme-making. Although over the period from the October Revolution in 1917 until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the Soviet propaganda machine generated hundreds of posters, today, paradoxically, only a certain number of them are re-appropriated as digital memes. For instance, the following images have their successful ‘memetic’ counterparts on the Web:

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<sup>56</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, op. cit., p. 202.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

*Motherland is Calling!* (1941) by Irakli Toidze, *Do not Gossip!* (mentioned above) by Nina Vatolina and Nikolai Denisov, and *Did you Volunteer?* (1920) by Dmitri Moor (fig. 5.7, 5.8 and 5.9). As will be seen further, these posters differ from others due to a variety of factors. What distinguishes the first two above named posters, particularly, is the time of their historical dissemination –the Great Patriotic War. The latter poster *Did you Volunteer?* however, was created earlier, during the Civil War (1917-1921), waged between the two rival groups: the Whites and the Reds.<sup>59</sup> *Did you Volunteer?* called on recruits to join the Red Army to fight the Whites. Despite this fact, the poster also circulated widely during the Great Patriotic War and hence I am considering it here alongside other wartime posters.

Obviously, during such intense and turbulent period of Soviet history as the Second World War, visual propaganda was of utmost importance. Posters played a pivotal role in the consolidation of the population, in “influencing people’s perception of the war, of what [was] at stake in it.”<sup>60</sup> These graphic signs carried the ideological message of the government to the entire nation and they did so in an efficient, comprehensible manner. Citing Mark Edele, who conducts a close analysis of Soviet wartime propaganda, I suggest that wartime posters stand out from other posters produced in the USSR.<sup>61</sup> I also assume that it is because of this that such posters are now converted into digital memes and this is why the three posters – *Motherland is Calling!*, *Do not Gossip!* and *Did you Volunteer?* – are ‘viral.’

The core distinction of the wartime posters lay in their visual representation. In other words, these posters differed from their predecessors in terms of *how* and *what* they portrayed. It was their composition, style and depicted subjects that were distinctive. In this regard, Edele observes that wartime iconography was extremely powerful, as it was

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<sup>59</sup> P. Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.34.

<sup>60</sup> M. Edele, “Paper Soldiers: The World of the Soldier Hero according to Soviet Wartime Posters”. *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, Neue Folge* 47 (1), 1991, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

polysemic. It included “strongly polyvalent symbols, which were open to many different ‘readings’.”<sup>62</sup> As Edele maintains, “artists...learned to employ” the ‘adaptable’ icons in such posters, to make them relevant to all social groups.<sup>63</sup> As a rule, this involved multi-vocal generalised images of, for instance, Soviet Motherland (alternatively, but more rarely, Fatherland), heroism or victimhood that, due to their generality, “allowed a wide variety of interpretations.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, these icons appealed to the human core, while calling on one to protect one’s mother, family and children. Consequently, any Soviet citizen, without exception, could have related him or herself to these posters because of such polysemy and association with general human values.

### **5.3.2. *Stiob***

One particular function that memes fulfil in contemporary digital culture is mocking all subjects, including, for instance, our daily life, current affairs or events of the past. Undoubtedly, a great portion of Internet memes exists for the sake of fun. They entertain users through playfulness and absurd ideas that carry either “a little [of] ‘serious’ content,” or no seriousness at all.<sup>65</sup> In recent studies of ‘memetics,’ scholars identify humour as a key element of successful memes, through which the latter achieve popularity on the Web.<sup>66</sup> According to Shifman, humorous memes constitute a prevalent category of digital memes because of users’ tendency to share comical, laughable items that “make others feel good.”<sup>67</sup> In Shifman’s view, the funniest objects, be it images, video, or text, are the most memetic, and it is their ‘funniness’ that prompts excessive forwarding and remaking. The two processes invaluable for production of memes. Taking a form of a parody or ludicrous joke, memes earn public

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pp. 98-99.

<sup>65</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>67</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, p. 66.

attention on the Web and in this manner, they go ‘viral,’ for, as commonly known, nothing is so irresistibly contagious as laughter and a piece of good humour.

Considering the case of Soviet propaganda posters transformed as digital memes, I suggest that humour is central in most of these re-appropriations. Thus, on the Web, past images of totalitarian ideology are often subject to mockery, which ranges from subtle ridicule to sarcasm and even further, to acerbic irony and sardonic laughter. This trend is especially prominent in digital communities that focus on informal cultures and alternative new media genres. As a rule, members of these groups are selflessly devoted to the reproduction of all manner of humorous, if not to say absurd, representations and memes. For instance, such sources as “Lurkmore” (in informal Russian encyclopaedia of Internet folklore), “Absurdopedia” (a parody of Wikipedia) and “Netlore” (another “anthology of net-folklore”) host a multitude of grotesque imitations, among which the most prominent and most ridiculous are those of Soviet posters. In this way, “Lurkmore” displays around fifty remakes of the iconic *Did you Volunteer?* poster; “Netlore” features forty-two memes of *Do not Gossip!*; whilst “Absurdopedia” appropriates these graphic parodies randomly, and so the latter are found in different, unrelated parts of the website or in the articles that have nothing to do with Soviet history.<sup>68</sup>

However diverse they are, all absurd transformations of Soviet posters are remarkable for one particular feature. What distinguishes them from other comic images, is a peculiar type of humour that does not fit any conventional definitions of irony, sarcasm, satire, or even black humour. Rather, it is a strange combination of all these categories, but none of them in pure form. Although in the English-speaking tradition this ‘humorous’ subgenre is relatively unheard of, it prevails in Russian culture, where it is widely known under the name of *stiob*. In the current section, I will examine a few distinctive characteristics of *stiob* and trace their

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<sup>68</sup> <https://lurkmore.co/>, <http://www.netlore.ru/>, [www.absurdopedia.net](http://www.absurdopedia.net), retrieved on 18.04.2016.

development in online environments, particularly relating to the memes of the Soviet wartime posters. I proceed from the assumption that the latter are outstanding carriers of such humour. Uploaded on the Web, these posters have been modified in a peculiar ‘*stiobbish*’ manner. *Stiob*, in general, can be understood as another form of creative transformation of Soviet imagery on the Web.

It is rather difficult to give a precise definition of *stiob*, as the term itself has no direct translation into English. According to John Dunn, “the boundaries of *steb* are somewhat fluid, and it is not entirely clear what should be included under this heading.”<sup>69</sup> While in Russia the word *stiob* is deeply rooted in language and is thus used casually, it has no equivalent in the English-speaking world, where one can only guess about its meaning. Obviously, it is an aspect of typically Russian laughter, which is contradictory, unpredictable and, partially, incomprehensible, but which nonetheless requires coherent explanation. Russian-born anthropologist Alexei Yurchak characterizes *stiob* as “a grotesque version of... irony” that “differs from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor.”<sup>70</sup> As the scholar adds, “it [*stiob*] requires such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* [is] directed that it [is] often impossible to tell whether it [is] a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”<sup>71</sup> In Yurchak’s opinion, *stiob* differs from other satirical genres due to its ambiguity: it shows no clear “boundary between seriousness and humor, support and opposition, sense and nonsense.”<sup>72</sup> *Stiob* is, thus, apolitical, as it never takes any of the rival sides, while instead, balancing somewhere on the edge of authoritative and non-authoritative discourses. In this way, *stiob* cannot be entirely equalled to irony (though being one of its subdivisions). Whilst

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<sup>69</sup> J. Dunn, “Humour and Satire on post-Soviet Russian Television” in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. L. Milne, London: Anthem Press, 2004, p. 187.

<sup>70</sup> A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More: the Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 242 and 250.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 250.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 243.

the latter targets criticism of the dominant power, the former, “on the contrary, avoids any political or social concerns or straightforward affiliation with support or opposition of anything.”<sup>73</sup>

*Stiob* is a phenomenon typical of the late Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Although as an old folk-humorous tradition, it emerged in ancient Russia, it was only during late Socialism that this form of humour gained enormous popularity due to the reality of the time.<sup>74</sup> Particularly, in the late 1970s –1980s, *stiob* prevailed in circles of Soviet intellectuals and non-conformist artists, who used it not only as an aesthetic method, but also as a new ideology, lifestyle and a way of social communication.<sup>75</sup> For instance, the underground group ‘Mit’ki’ was one of the earliest *stiob* performers that appeared in Leningrad in the early 1980s.<sup>76</sup> As Yurchak observes, “its members turned their daily existence into an aesthetic project, performing the practice of living grotesquely *vnye* (inside/outside) the socio-political concerns of the system.”<sup>77</sup> The scholar maintains that “according to the group’s mythology, a real Mitëk (singular of Mit’ki, pronounced mee-TYOK) did not know any ‘news’ of the Soviet world, did not read newspapers or watch television, and did not even go shopping unless absolutely necessary.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Yurchak notes: “the fact that the Mit’ki made no effort to seek out this knowledge meant that they had more time and energy to spend on collective drinking, painting, and neverending *obschenie* (interaction), on constantly performing the role of oblivious, friendly, and all-accepting loafers who were unaware of the common concerns for career, success, money, beauty, health, and so forth.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

<sup>74</sup> M. Yoffe, “The *Stiob* of Ages: Carnivalesque Traditions in Soviet Rock and Related Counterculture”. *Russian Literature* LXXIV 1(2), 2013, p. 212.

<sup>75</sup> Yurchak, op. cit., p. 250.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Thus, according to Yurchak, the main focus of *stiob* artists “were not paintings, films or staged provocations but a ‘total art of living’ with its own *stiob* philosophy, language, forms of behavior, ethical norms, styles of interaction, drinking habits, unhealthy diet, and so forth.”<sup>80</sup> From the 1980s on, *stiob* permeated into a broader cultural field, as it was appropriated in Soviet literature, music and fashion, and was adopted by the public at large as “one of the possible ways to speak and address issues.”<sup>81</sup> Later, after the collapse of the USSR, *stiob* turned into an even more powerful cultural force, since, according to Dunn, this kind of phenomena, “[was] likely to be particularly effective in periods of political and cultural transition, such as occurred in Russia after August 1991.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, straight after the fall of the Soviet regime, Russians witnessed a boom of *stiobbish* aesthetics, which “became the modus operandi in... fashion shows, fund raising happenings, performance art shows, art exhibits, night club shows, all sorts of presentations, openings, and events.”<sup>83</sup>

As for today’s Russia, *stiob* is still very sound in all aspects of public life. Elements of this peculiar Soviet humour are visible on the TV, radio, printed and digital media, while every rank-and-file citizen knows and occasionally uses *stiob* language in everyday talk.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, as this chapter demonstrates, more than in any other cultural field, *stiob* penetrates the Internet, where it has almost unlimited influence and power.

Digital imitations of Soviet propaganda posters are poignant examples of *stiob* aesthetics on the Web. They represent *stiob* at its best, while demonstrating qualities of incongruous, intentionally bad and seemingly tasteless humour. Today these images continue the old yet still relevant tradition of absurd laughter that was initiated by Soviet intellectuals in the 1980s (precisely the time when the Communist system showed its first cracks). For

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Yoffe, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>82</sup> Dunn, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>83</sup> Yoffe, op. cit., p. 214.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

instance, memes of *Did you Volunteer?* poster at [www.lurkmore.com](http://www.lurkmore.com) look pronouncedly grotesque. They utilize the principle of deliberate ‘mismatching’, so typical of *stiob*.<sup>85</sup> Thus, as one can see in these remakes, the original image of the Red Army man is combined with hardly compatible images of famous politicians, fictional characters and strange creatures borrowed from novels, films or cartoons (fig. 5.10). Among them are German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian Patriarch Kirill, a stereotyped Muslim and Santa Claus, fantastic villains Cthulhu and Davy Jones, and many others. When superimposed on the prominent Soviet poster, these icons look by all means, inept; they create a sense of visual irrelevance or, as Knobel and Lankshear call it, an effect of ‘anomalous juxtaposition,’ which bemuses onlooker and makes him or her laugh and cry at the same time. Such disparity is, in fact, intrinsic to *stiob*.<sup>86</sup> Thus, looking back at *stiob* practitioners of the 1980s, Klebanov notes that they often employed incoherence in their works.<sup>87</sup> In this context, perhaps the most daring Russian *stiobber*, Sergei Kurekhin, purposely “[brought] disparate things together” in his onstage performances.<sup>88</sup> He combined incoherent imagery or incompatible music accompaniment, doing it “in a regular Surrealist fashion,” “so as to instigate an emotional shock among the audience: a cultural, emotional, aesthetic shock.”<sup>89</sup>

Under the effect of *stiob* Soviet propaganda posters become not just incongruous, but also unfamiliar and strange, as if they belonged to some other ‘unreal’ dimension, which is neither Russia’s present, nor its Soviet past. Using the terminology of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, the original form of these posters is ‘estranged’ to such an extent that it is

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<sup>85</sup> M. Klebanov, “Sergej Kurechin; The Performance of Laughter for the Post-Totalitarian Society of Spectacle. Russian Conceptualist Art in Rendezvous”. *Russian Literature* LXXIV 1(2), 2013, p. 230.

<sup>86</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>87</sup> Klebanov, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 246.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

now almost impossible to identify their meaning.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, in the digital sphere (where, essentially, there are no originals, but only copies) defamiliarisation seems to be irreversible. The more users alter propaganda posters in such an absurd, *stiobish* manner, the harder it is to find an image that remains untouched. On the Web, a transformation leads only to another (even more bizarre) transformation until the original image becomes completely unrecognisable and decontextualised. An excellent example of this process is the appropriation of the already mentioned poster *Do not Gossip!* at the forum for alternative subcultures [www.punkzone.org](http://www.punkzone.org).<sup>91</sup> While calling itself “the first informal punk portal,” the website hosts its materials in different subthemes, where under the heading ‘punk pictures,’ one finds distinctly *stiobish* parodies of the Soviet poster (fig. 5.11). Interestingly, this collection of *Do not Gossip!* memes does not include the original version of the poster, but only its distorted versions. In many of them, both the icon of the poster and its caption are modified. Overall, there are over forty ironic remakes with no reference to the original image.

Despite their absurd appearance, *stiobish* versions of *Do not Gossip!* on [www.punkzone.org](http://www.punkzone.org) do convey serious meaning. When modified and placed in the context of punk counterculture, this poster comes to symbolise alternative cultural values and views – those of an underground rebellious lifestyle and non-conformist attitude towards anything mainstream. Importantly, members of this digital community mock Soviet posters not in order to subvert them, but to protest against the current agenda, be it today’s political situation, social regulations or cultural norms. Even more so, users sympathise with the old Soviet symbols, thereby choosing them as a means of resistance to the dominant discourse. *Stiob* is instrumental in this regard. It deconstructs, defamiliarises and decontextualises the original form to the extent that the latter can be used for brand new purposes. As Yurchak observes,

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<sup>90</sup> K. Ginzburg, “Ostranenie: predistoriia odnogo literaturnogo priema”. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 80, 2006, retrieved from <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2006/80/gi2.html>.

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.punkzone.org/punkpics/12214-ne-boltay.html>, retrieved on 18.04.2016.

*stiob* rids the symbol (that is any authoritative image, text or ritual) from its ‘constative meaning,’ so that this symbol becomes open to new signification.<sup>92</sup> This is why *stiobbish* images can be employed almost anywhere.

### 5.3.3. *Public Commentary*

While often having a *stiobbish* undertone, memes of the Soviet propaganda posters fulfil another function, apart from pure humour. Thus, although most of them look ludicrous and even futile, they do not exist only for the sake of fun. Paradoxically, the ironic nature of these images allows also using them for ‘serious’ purposes, such as commenting on political issues, discussing hot topics of public debate and generally expressing one’s view about “how the world should look and the best way to get there.”<sup>93</sup> In this connection, according to Ryan Milner, Internet memes act as an instrument for voicing public opinion – by sharing them, users display their attitudes towards current affairs.<sup>94</sup> In this way, for instance, people can criticize modern policies or protest against seemingly unfair legislation; show either support or dissatisfaction with the ruling party, as well as subvert (‘troll’) dominant discourse through mockery, through practices of *stiob* that were described in detail in the previous section. Internet memes are thus not mere tools of laughter, but they are also tools of popular communication. In their ‘funny,’ ‘absurd-looking’ form, they “house potential for populist expression and conversation.”<sup>95</sup>

When I researched the corpus of Soviet poster-based memes on the Web, I discovered that the latter were often employed as a form of commentary on contemporary public issues. Thus, occasionally, these images appeared in quite unexpected places: in political forums,

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<sup>92</sup> Yurchak, op. cit., p. 252.

<sup>93</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, p. 119.

<sup>94</sup> R. Milner, “Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement”. *International Journal of Communication* 7, 2013, p. 2357.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p. 2360.

news blogs and similar websites that covered hot topics of current debate. For instance, this could be online discussion of the war in Ukraine, or a Vkontakte group devoted to the Russian military operation in Syria, a blog debating Putin's presidency at LiveJournal, or an article about the 2014 Sochi Olympics on the popular news service 'Lenta.ru'. The transformed Soviet posters appeared on these and other digital venues that allowed public commentary. Interestingly, the purpose of Soviet images on these forums was not to communicate important information about the topic, but rather post such images to articulate personal views, thus demonstrating how users felt and what they personally thought about the discussed subject. When it comes to expressions of popular sentiment, image-based Internet memes can be quite powerful media. In their variable graphic form (and also adjustable captions), they render all kinds of emotions ranging from approval and accord, to anger and mistrust. Whilst text (a textual fragment) requires time to be read and processed, a visual meme by contrast, illustrates someone's perspective instantly. Because of this immediacy, image-based memes serve as vital markers of public mood.

*Motherland is Calling!* is a poster meriting special attention, as it circulates ubiquitously in the digital sphere. More often than other Soviet posters, it appears in online discussions of modern politics, armed and military conflicts. This is not surprising, given that, initially, this poster spread during the Great Patriotic War. The original image is magnetic. It builds upon the omnipotent icon of Motherland, so cherished by everyone. Thus, the picture shows a woman "in blood-red clothes with one arm in the air and the other extended, holding a piece of paper with 'the Military oath' written on it, against a background of bayonets."<sup>96</sup> During wartime, it was undoubtedly the most famous and powerful symbol of what in Russian is called *Rodina* (literally, 'homeland'). As Graeme Gill notes, the female here is clearly 'the embodiment of the country,' equalled to the notions of 'home,' 'family' and

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<sup>96</sup> G. Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 144.

‘motherhood.’<sup>97</sup> Similarly, another scholar Pat Simpson assumes that during the hardest time for the USSR this poster presented the war “as being fought...on behalf of the Motherland, which connoted everything that was organic, traditional and naturally productive, including the family, particularly mothers and children.”<sup>98</sup> According to Simpson, on portraying “a stern, heroic peasant mother,” the *Motherland is Calling!* poster “helped to entrench this feminised construct of the Soviet land in the popular imagination.”<sup>99</sup>

Today, due to the passage of time, *Motherland is Calling!* no longer serves its original function. Instead, the poster has moved into the digital field, where it has become a part of online discourse covering diverse social, political and cultural issues. Digital derivatives of the *Motherland* image (its memes) are now used as units of popular communication, through which users exchange their ideas regarding any subject whatsoever. In other words, from the former propaganda tool, the poster has been turned into a mode of creative expression. One such example (which are many on the Web) is the inclusion of *Motherland is Calling!* in the discussion of current war in Syria at [www.forum-tvs.ru](http://www.forum-tvs.ru). I will consider this and other similar cases thoroughly in what follows.

The topic, ironically titled “Syria is ours!” at [www.forum-tvs.ru](http://www.forum-tvs.ru) focuses on the role of Russia in the ongoing Syrian war.<sup>100</sup> (The title “Syria is ours!” appeals to the popular slogan “Crimea is ours!”, which became ‘viral’ in Russia after the annexation of Crimean region in 2014). Thus, participants of the forum debate Russian involvement in this military conflict, while also randomly touching upon related and no less controversial themes such as the Russo-Georgian clash of 2008, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, as well as the current relationship between Russia and the U.S. in light of the Middle East crisis. This online

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> P. Simpson, “Liberation and Containment: Re-visualising the Eugenic and Evolutionary Ideal of the *Fizkul’turnitsa* in 1944” in *The Visual in Sport*, ed. by M. Huggins and K. O’Mahony, London and NY: Routledge, 2012, p. 238.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> <http://www.forum-tvs.ru/lofiversion/index.php/t119051-550.html>, retrieved on 18.04.2016.

discussion is by no means neutral in tone. It takes the form of a verbal ‘fight’, in which users “defend predefined socio-political positions rather than search for consensus.”<sup>101</sup> In fact, no one even tries to reach an agreement on this message board, but the purpose is the opposite: to speculate on the subject, to express one’s own point of view and to prove its ‘correctness’. Whilst emotions run high, the online ‘battle’ is never-ending, and so its participants keep on fighting for their opinions, even when these opinions are wrong, groundless or absurd.

Where words are not sufficient for making a point, images help. Thus, in the “Syria is ours!” forum, users include pictures in their comments and they do so deliberately, in order to add extra weight to their statements. When supplemented with an illustration, an argument becomes more solid and convincing; it thus looks as if it were ‘visually approved’. Since in their representational capacity, images function rather differently from words, they bring online discussion onto a new level. For instance, a controversial documentary photograph or a satirical graphic representation can reinvigorate a stagnant debate by triggering a large response of agitated users. Similarly, an image-meme can undermine the established discussion through mocking the main subject. In the digital sphere this practice is widely known as ‘trolling’.

Appropriated at the “Syria is ours!” forum, the *Motherland is Calling!* poster immediately draws one’s attention (fig. 5.12). What first strikes one about this image, is that it has been modified and re-adapted to the topic of online discussion. A few elements of the original poster have been changed: the caption, now saying *Motherland Syria is Calling!*; the background is turned into a Middle Eastern cityscape; the former ‘military oath’ document has been replaced with something reminding either a Persian rug or a book cover. In the meantime, the figure of a ‘stern mother’ remained untouched, so that she holds the same distinctive posture and wears the same red clothes. As the overall composition did not change,

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<sup>101</sup> Rutten and Zvereva, op. cit., 2013, p. 7.

this altered copy of the poster looks as simple and bold as the original version. Yet, due to the mutation of the three aforementioned components (the caption, the background and the ‘military oath’), the poster now sends a different message. The image of *Motherland* does not appeal for recruits to join the army any more. Instead, the depicted mother poses ironic and disputable questions. If Syria is not ‘our’ homeland, then *whom* or *what* are we fighting for? And what is the real purpose of the Russian military intervention in that *foreign* country?

User Misanthrop, who posted the *Motherland Syria is Calling!* remake at “Syria is ours!” forum, proposes his own radicalised view of Russia’s participation in the Syrian conflict. In his opinion, this is just another ‘televised war’ that is currently being “sold to the Russian consumer.”<sup>102</sup> As Misanthrop comments on the image, today the “Syrian war is promoted in the media the same way as the Sochi Olympics were promoted in 2014 – under the flag of ‘ours’.”<sup>103</sup> He maintains that the aim of this promotion is to discompose the Russian everymen, who ‘buy’ almost everything that is ‘sold’ on TV. Misanthrop’s words thus explain the *Motherland Syria...*image. The verbal statement emphasises the absurdity of this digital meme, which mixes the notions of ‘motherland’, ‘war’ and “Syria is ours!” against the background of an iconic Soviet poster.

A different, but no less notable remake of *Motherland is Calling!* is found on another website: [www.profesionali.ru](http://www.profesionali.ru), which functions as a network for professional and business communication.<sup>104</sup> Like the “Syria is ours!” forum, this digital platform enables public commentary. It hosts numerous message boards, where users discuss socially important issues. Likewise, it allows posting pictures in response to any theme, and this is how the *Motherland is Calling!* poster came to be used in the context of the discussion “Russia will

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<sup>102</sup> <http://www.forum-tvs.ru/lofiversion/index.php/t119051-550.html>, retrieved on 18.04.2016.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> <http://profesionali.ru/>, retrieved on 18.04.2016.

slacken because of Generation Z.”<sup>105</sup> As is obvious from the title, this topic has a rather pessimistic mood. It criticizes younger Russians, born after the collapse of the USSR, who, while being in their twenties now, constitute the so-called ‘Generation Z.’ The online discussion starts with a few negative comments about people of that age: they are ‘lazy’, ‘infantile’ and ‘immature.<sup>106</sup> They are incapable of work in principle as they have neither the skills, nor the desire to do any kind of job. As the introduction points out, Russian youth never work hard and only pretend to be busy; they treat work irresponsibly, as a game, while being unprepared for serious labour.<sup>107</sup>

The harsh rhetoric of the “Generation Z” forum encourages users to provide their own comments on the subject. Indeed, the topical issue of ‘infantile’ and ‘not-doing-anything’ youth stirs active debate. Participants in this discussion either agree or disagree with the main argument, yet they always support their point with some kind of ‘proof.’ Thus, for instance, user Mikhail Lebedev includes the *Motherland is Calling!* poster in his statement, which is remarkable. It stands out from other users’ comments. In this context, the image of *Motherland* is, again, transformed. This time, all parts of the poster have been changed: the caption, the background and the figure of the mother (fig. 5.13). One can see that the depicted woman’s arms do not stretch out any more but are now tied with barbed wire, her mouth is sealed with tape, and the plate ‘for sale’ hangs on her neck. She stands against the backdrop of burning domes and churches, while the caption reads “Motherland is calling for help: they are selling your motherland!”

Obviously, the image of the ‘sold motherland’ stresses the overly pessimistic tone of online discussion. The picture illustrates the view of Mikhail Lebedev, who is convinced that

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<sup>105</sup> [http://professionali.ru/Soobschestva/put\\_k\\_sebe/rossiju-oslabit-pokolenie-zhest/](http://professionali.ru/Soobschestva/put_k_sebe/rossiju-oslabit-pokolenie-zhest/) retrieved on 18.04.2016.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

the country (Russia) has no future.<sup>108</sup> In his opinion, Russians were stripped of their homeland under the collapse of the USSR and therefore today the state has no prospects for the younger generation.<sup>109</sup> Assuming that the country ‘has been sold’, Lebedev blames the government (in his words, ‘the system’) for reluctance in “regulating social relations.”<sup>110</sup> Overall, his observation sounds unreasonably depressing, as he claims that Russia moves into a state of chaos, anarchy or devastation. His remake of the *Motherland is Calling!* poster only accentuates this gloomy point. The image adds emotional colour to Lebedev’s negative statement.

The fact that the *Motherland is Calling!* poster is used in a variety of digital contexts is not accidental. The strong, recognisable Soviet icon ‘fits’ any rules of the Web. The power of this image lies in its polysemy and that is in its openness to new readings and interpretations. Because of this, it can accommodate any new meaning.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the digital transformation enhances and extends this ‘polysemic potential’ much further.<sup>112</sup> Now, that parts of the poster can be changed, it is even more multi-vocal. It is a complex intertextual phenomenon, which hosts layers of meanings, references and texts.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, p. 150.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Milner, op. cit., p. 2364.

## **5.4. Stalin is Like Posters**

### **5.4.1. The Concept**

While being as controversial and ambiguous as remakes of Soviet posters, the second category of depictions included in this chapter is no less remarkable. These are *Stalin is like* images that merit special attention for a variety of reasons. Firstly, these representations are significant because they ‘play’ with Soviet trauma. I use the word ‘play’ consciously, as it is arguable whether such depictions reconstruct traumatic memory, or on the contrary, ‘destabilise’ it. As will be seen, the latter is more likely. Secondly, *Stalin is like* images are true digital ‘hybrids’ in that they have no material sources, unlike, for instance, digital versions of propaganda posters that are reproduced from hard copies. Although upon its release in 2012, the *Stalin is like* project showed up in a few printed media, the main venue for distribution of these pictures was the Internet. Thirdly and finally, *Stalin is like* stirs active public discussion. Once published online, this graphic series touched a nerve with contemporary Russians, whose reaction to it was contradictory. In fact, many users debated the appropriateness of these images, thus wondering if depictions like that should exist in principle. Overall, in the digital field the *Stalin is like* project merited all kind of appraisals ranging from ‘creative’ and ‘trendy’ to ‘tasteless’ and ‘underdeveloped’.

The *Stalin is like* series of posters was initially a graduation project. It was Il’ia Tekhlikidi, a student of communications, who came up with the idea for his final diploma work. His task was to design a promotional campaign for any non-profit organisation. Tekhlikidi chose “Russian Association of Victims of Unlawful Political Repressions” which dealt with the Stalinist legacy. As Tekhlikidi comments on his choice, “he picked an organization that was spiritually close to his heart,” as he himself came from a family of the formerly repressed.<sup>114</sup> His great-grandfather was executed in 1937 during the Great Purge,

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<sup>114</sup> I. Tekhlikidi quoted from [http://www.sostav.ru/news/2012/07/02/stalin\\_wordshop/](http://www.sostav.ru/news/2012/07/02/stalin_wordshop/), retrieved on 18.05.2016.

while his great-grandmother survived three exiles, including one in Siberia.<sup>115</sup> Thus, Il'ia came up with idea of *Stalin is like* posters, through which he decided to tell about repressions on behalf of the aforementioned association. As for the target audience of his social campaign, the author selected Russian youth, since they, in his view, had a vague understanding of Stalin's brutalities. According to Tekhlikidi, his aim was to inform the younger generation about the horrors of Stalinism and he opted to do so in "a simple and understandable manner."<sup>116</sup>

As Tekhlikidi searched for 'a suitable language' to talk to youth, he found a creative solution.<sup>117</sup> He designed a series of posters that compared the ruthless dictator with prominent media brands, such as Apple, Facebook, Twitter, Yandex and others. Using these iconic brands, Tekhlikidi drew an ironic parallel between social media and the figure of Stalin to reveal the Soviet leader's atrocities. For the same purpose, the author supplemented each poster with a detailed explanation of Stalin's crimes. For instance, the poster *Stalin is like Twitter* (fig. 5.14) presents a stylized portrait of Stalin, embellished with a moustache in the form of the Twitter logo – the blue bird. The caption reads "Stalin is like Twitter: he was brief." Additional text in the bottom left, precisely, tells "detainees were often tortured and convicted without any trial; their sentences were enforced immediately." In total, there are seven posters furnishing memory of Stalin's terror in a similar way: through the witty play of words and media icons merged with the image of the dictator. The graphics of these posters are attributed to anonymous artist *Nox-13*, who helped Tekhlikidi with his graduation work.

Tekhlikidi submitted his project in 2012, which was not accidental. That year marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Terror initiated by Stalin in 1937. A few Russian (mainly, digital, but also some printed) media covered this event and hence they published the *Stalin is like* posters, whereupon the latter spread rapidly on the Web. As these images went viral, they

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

caused heated debates among users. The reaction of the public was controversial. The opinions split into two groups: one that approved of these posters as a new ‘cool’ way to talk about the Stalinist past and one that found them ‘inappropriate’ and ‘raw,’ thus criticising Tekhlikidi for choosing inadequate means of representing the Soviet trauma. For example, Irina Shcherbakova (a historian and leader of educational programmes at Memorial Society) expressed a positive attitude towards the *Stalin is like* campaign.<sup>118</sup> In her view, it is important to search for new modes of speaking about Stalin’s terror.<sup>119</sup> She assumes that these posters evoke interest in the subject of the former repressions among youngsters, who are generally apathetic to this theme.<sup>120</sup> By contrast, journalist Mikhail Kaluzhskii considers the *Stalin is like* project a total failure.<sup>121</sup> He suggests that the very comparison of Stalin to media brands is irrelevant and inept, as it only confuses the viewer. As Kaluzhskii remarks, “indeed, Stalin is *not* like Twitter, but Stalin is like Stalin.”<sup>122</sup>

Importantly, many Internet users misinterpreted *Stalin is like* posters because of their ambiguity. Some people mistakenly thought it was the rebranding of Stalin’s figure, and not the campaign, that actually denounces his crimes. The problem lay in association. Comparing the brutal dictator with popular media attached some ‘coolness’ to his image, which was taken positively. Thus, instead of the intended negative connotation, these posters sent the opposite message saying, “Stalin is as cool as Facebook (Apple, Twitter, Vkontakte and other).”

The main problem of the *Stalin is like* posters is the inconsistency of their message. As I mentioned above, users often misunderstand these images, while seeing them as ‘hype’ for Stalin. Obviously, this undermines the value of the whole campaign, which (accidentally) turns from anti- to pro-Stalinist because of such misinterpretation. This also means that the

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<sup>118</sup> I. Shcherbakova quoted from [http://bg.ru/society/razgovor\\_o\\_staline\\_eto\\_kak-11350/](http://bg.ru/society/razgovor_o_staline_eto_kak-11350/) retrieved on 18.05.2016.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> M. Kaluzhskii quoted from [http://bg.ru/society/razgovor\\_o\\_staline\\_eto\\_kak-11350/](http://bg.ru/society/razgovor_o_staline_eto_kak-11350/) retrieved on 18.05.2016.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

design of the *Stalin is like* series has significant drawbacks that distort the original concept. The purpose of the current section is to define why these posters fail to communicate Soviet trauma. Or, even if they do partially impart knowledge of Stalin's terror, then why in such an incongruent manner? In what follows, I will examine both graphic and textual components of the *Stalin is like* images in order to reveal their inconsistency. What do these posters look like? How do they represent the most tragic aspects of the Communist past? Do they help, at least partially, to remember Stalin's victims, or are they yet another bizarre transformation of Soviet memory?

#### **5.4.2. Reading *Stalin is Like Images***

At first sight, *Stalin is like* looks like a series of beautiful, alluring pictures that appeal to the viewer. They remind one of typical commercial imagery, used for promoting popular brands. On these posters, the icon of Stalin integrates with media logos, thus creating an initial positive impression, which is then hard to break. As Grigori Dashevskii observes, “[in this series] Stalin ‘adapts’ to a comfortable world of gadgets, media and online technologies – he does not hurt or destroy anything in that world.”<sup>123</sup> The ex-Soviet leader ‘lives happily’ in the new digital kingdom where Apple, Facebook and Twitter prevail. The brutal dictator causes no decay, ruin, or suffering; on the contrary, he is peaceful and quiet. An idyllic picture.

The poster *Stalin is like YouTube* poster (fig. 5.15) is particularly remarkable. It depicts the leader sitting at a desk stylized as the YouTube logo. The icon is exceptional. It represents Stalin in a thoughtful state, seemingly absorbed in work: he is writing something. The picture itself shows no sign of Stalin's cruelties, which distracts the onlooker from the reality of past

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<sup>123</sup> G. Dashevskii quoted from [http://bg.ru/society/razgovor\\_o\\_staline\\_eto\\_kak-11350/](http://bg.ru/society/razgovor_o_staline_eto_kak-11350/) retrieved on 18.05.2016.

crimes. Thus, instead of reminding the viewer about former repressions, *Stalin is like YouTube* portrays a new digital Utopia with the ex-Soviet leader at the fore.

*Stalin is like* posters misrepresent the dictator, while casting him in a positive light. Contrary to its original intention, this series idealises Stalin, although doing so unwittingly. In these pictures, he looks ‘modern’ and ‘trendy’; he is neither a criminal, nor a monster, but a prestigious ‘brand’ upgraded to our time. Association with popular media only embellishes Stalin’s image, which becomes attractive for contemporary users. Thus, instead of repulsion, anger or resentment, the *Stalin is like* campaign evokes positive emotions among viewers, who sympathise with these pictures. These big, glossy icons do not help remembering Stalin’s terror, but rather the opposite, they make one forget about those crimes. For instance, the *Stalin is like Apple* poster is striking, with a large symbol of Apple (fig. 5.16). As this poster merges the iconic logo with Stalin’s face, it stands out, first and foremost, because of its association with the famous technology company. Consequently, the viewer gets the wrong message, assuming that Stalin, like Apple, is ‘cool.’

In the meantime, the caption of the *Apple* poster states the following: “Stalin is like Apple: he cost a lot.” This short phrase, reminiscent of an advertising slogan is, however, rather ambiguous. In fact, it can be interpreted both positively and negatively, depending on one’s attitude towards the Soviet past. Such a caption does not directly criticise Stalinism, but it only alludes to brutalities of that time. Thus, one may wonder: *Stalin cost a lot, but, a lot of what?* The right answer is, probably, that he cost many innocent lives. Yet, to understand this, one needs to have background knowledge about Stalinist atrocities. For someone who is unaware of the Great Terror, the caption “Stalin is like Apple: he cost a lot” does not make any sense. This is a serious drawback, considering that the *Stalin is like* campaign targets Russian youngsters whose understanding of Soviet history is vague.

Other posters of the *Stalin is like* series have equally ambiguous captions. They use ironic wordplay, which does not reach its goal. Consequently, some of these captions are

obscure, imprecise or incomprehensible – they are hard to grasp. One needs to think twice in order to understand the intended meaning of these puns, but even profound thinking does not always yield results. For example, the already mentioned *Twitter* poster reads, “Stalin is like Twitter: he was brief” (fig. 5.14). This phrase, apparently, alludes to Stalin’s manner of talking. He used short affirmative sentences in his speech; he was always concise. The leader was particularly ‘brief’ when giving orders or condemning ‘public enemies’ to death. He never gave additional explanations of his decisions. Nobody dared to question Stalin’s will and so the latter spared words. Although such interpretation of the *Stalin is like Twitter* poster sounds reasonable, it does not reach everyone. Thus, Russian youth (which, as I mentioned above, is the target audience of the *Stalin is like* campaign) may miss this message, as it involves a subtle irony that does not have necessary impact.

The caption of *Stalin is like Vkontakte* is even more disputable (fig. 5.17).<sup>124</sup> It says “Stalin is like Vkontakte: he captured millions.” The problem with this caption lies in the word ‘capture’, which in Russian has dual meaning: it stands for both ‘deprived of freedom’ (negative) and ‘captivated’ (positive). Although the author of the poster, obviously, meant the negative ‘captured’ as he played with the word, the audience read it as the positive ‘captivated.’ As a result, the ironic intention failed, whereupon the phrase acquired positive connotation. Thus, upon perceiving it as “Stalin captivated millions,” Internet users got the wrong message implying “Stalin was popular, as he had many fans.”

Apart from the icon and caption, another important element of the *Stalin is like* posters is explanatory text. In this regard, in the bottom left corner, each image contains a note about the dictator’s crimes. *Stalin is like Vkontakte*, for instance, includes the following commentary: “1 548 366 people were arrested on the charge of anti-Soviet activity” (fig. 5.17). There is also an additional inscription saying “Great Terror of 1937-1938: 75 years is not the time to forget.” The very idea of providing these comments is reasonable – it is an

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<sup>124</sup> *Vkontakte* is a Russian social networking service, analogue to Facebook.

attempt to expose Stalinism. The author Il'ia Tekhlikidi suggested that including these facts in the posters would enhance understanding of past repressions among the contemporary public. To a certain degree, this strategy works, as the comments indeed denounce Stalin's cruelty. They say, for example, that the leader commanded illegal arrests and made false accusations (the poster *Stalin is like Twitter*); or that he deported entire families to hardly survivable regions and zones (the poster *Stalin is like YouTube*).

On the other hand, however, the explanatory notes of the *Stalin is like* posters are not always accurate and hence defeat their purpose; they mislead the viewer. Some of them contain dubious information taken from unreliable sources. The poster *Stalin is like Apple*, for example, indicates a rather questionable figure when quoting the number of Stalin's victims, and it states, in particular, that "681, 692 people were sentenced to death by shooting" (fig. 5.16). This is an inaccuracy, if not a glaring mistake. First and foremost, the exact figure of those who died in the Great Terror is impossible to calculate. Even professional historians cannot agree on the exact number of prisoners killed during that time. Accounts vary from hundreds of thousands to millions of deaths. This includes not only those executed, but also those who died in imprisonment, during interrogations and transportation to camps, not to mention those who 'vanished' without any protocols or trials.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, when calculating the number of executions alone carried out during 1937 – 1938, the figure of 681,692 is obviously too low and unreliable, especially when cited with such precision. Thus, Memorial society quotes 724,000 death sentences made during the Great Purge, while scholar Robert Conquest assumes that it was over a million executed citizens. Yet, even this could be an underestimation.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag: a History*. NY: Doubleday, 2003, p. 584.

<sup>126</sup> [http://www.memo.ru/history/y1937/chronika1936\\_1939/xronika.html](http://www.memo.ru/history/y1937/chronika1936_1939/xronika.html), retrieved on 18.05.2016; R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 485.

Overall, the *Stalin is like* posters produce a contradictory effect. They denounce the horrors of Stalin's regime while paradoxically rebranding his image at the same time. Obviously, these pictures have both their pros and cons, so they are neither a total success, nor a failure; they just spark heated discussion around the Stalinist legacy. This series poses questions that have been pending in Russia for a long time. How can Russians approach Stalin's epoch today, and which means should they use for that purpose? Was Stalin a fanatic tyrant who destroyed millions of people, or a mighty leader who pushed the Soviet Union to victory in World War II? The very emergence of the *Stalin is like* images indicates that the issue of the Soviet traumatic past remains unresolved and requires reconsideration and elaboration.

#### **5.4.3. Irony Misunderstood, Memory Misrepresented**

The *Stalin is like* campaign rests on the ironic play of words and media logos, merged with the image of Stalin. However, as I partially explained above, the form of irony involved in these posters is too subtle to be comprehensible to everyone. The ironic meaning of this graphic series does not reach its target audience, namely, Russian youth. As Linda Hutcheon observes in this context, "irony is 'risky business': there is no guarantee that the interpreter [the receiver] will 'get' the irony in the same way it was intended."<sup>127</sup> Where irony fails, misinterpretations arise, which causes a continuing lack of resolution. In the case of the *Stalin is like* images, miscommunicated irony not only evokes controversy in the public sphere, but leads to a distortion of memory: a false portrayal of Stalinist atrocities. Thus, Soviet trauma on these posters unintentionally appears as 'funny' while the main perpetrator (Stalin) becomes 'entertaining' and 'cool.' The dictator here resembles a comic character, similar to the ones of Batman, Hulk, Iron Man or Joker at the worst. Such representation cannot be

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<sup>127</sup> L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London, NY: Routledge, 2003, p. 11.

taken seriously. Why then does irony miss its target in the *Stalin is like* images? How does this impact public vision of Soviet traumatic history? Broadly speaking, is irony appropriate when covering the sensitive topic of Soviet political repressions?

First and foremost, the ironic meaning of the *Stalin is like* series is tangled because of its deficient design. The graphic structure of these posters does not allow irony to ‘happen,’ or even if the latter ‘happens,’ it does so only partially.<sup>128</sup> Particularly, three basic elements – the icon, caption and explanatory text (that were examined in the previous section) – are somewhat imbalanced; they contradict each other, instead of forming a single whole. As these components mismatch, they fail to produce a coherent (ironic) meaning. The result is a visual incongruity that confuses the viewer. I will elaborate on this further using the example of the *Stalin is like Facebook* poster.

The bright icon of the *Facebook* poster is positively charged (fig. 5.18). It represents a big ‘Like button’ with a slight modification: the depicted hand is holding a pipe, a subtle allusion to Stalin’s smoking habit. This is the first element that the viewer notices and thus gets a first positive impression from the image. Another remarkable element is the caption. It reads “Stalin is like Facebook: he urged to share information.” This second important compound is, however, ambiguous and unclear; it neither supports nor disproves the icon. Thus, one can hardly guess whether Stalin’s “urge to share information” was a merit or a mischief. On the one hand, it may symbolise the excellent performance of intelligence under Stalin, on the other, it may likewise mean that Stalin’s secret police often abused their power. Even more so, since the icon is prominent, it pushes the whole composition towards a positive interpretation. Yet, there is a third element, the explanatory text that, finally, clarifies the situation as it says, “In 1937 – 1938 thousands of Soviet rank-and-file citizens snitched on their colleagues, neighbours, chiefs and friends to the NKVD. The reports were so many that the NKVD simply could not handle them.” Although this note eventually exposes Stalinist

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<sup>128</sup> Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 56.

atrocities, it has less power than the icon or the caption. Thus, compared with the latter two, the explanatory description is unnoticeable. It is in tiny text positioned in the bottom left corner of the poster. By the time viewers actually get to read this commentary, they have already a firm positive impression from the Facebook sign.

In her seminal work *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony*, Hutcheon states that irony, as a ‘slippery’ mode of communication, is hard to grasp.<sup>129</sup> Its ‘presence’ in a phrase or image is always indirect and hence can be missed by its addressee.<sup>130</sup> Thus, rather often, the recipient (the ‘interpreter’, as Hutcheon calls it) of irony does not get it because there are no visible clues, or in other words, nothing indicates the ironic intention. As the scholar maintains, each act of ironic communication requires special signposts ‘signalling’ irony. These can be “textual or contextual markers”: “those that trigger an interpreter to think that irony might come into play... in the first place, and those that then can direct the interpretation of the irony in specific ways.”<sup>131</sup> In Hutcheon’s view, “it is the ironist who must put the interpreter on the trail of the connections between the said and unsaid by clues that foreground certain norms and thus offer hints to guide interpretation.”<sup>132</sup> Put somewhat differently, irony will reach its addressee only if it is properly ‘signalled.’

Relating Hutcheon’s theory to the *Facebook* poster, one notes the following: the intended irony of the phrase “Stalin is like Facebook: he urged to share information” is elusive; it evades the viewer, while being ‘unfixed.’ Although this caption itself is ironic, it can be interpreted in many different ways: literally, metaphorically, as well as both positively and negatively. The ironic interpretation is only one of the possible options. In the meantime, the icon – the key element of the poster – fails to signal ironic intention either, so that the ‘presence’ of irony is unmarked.<sup>133</sup> In this regard, the only ‘ironic marker’ is explanatory text

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<sup>129</sup> Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

that tells the truth about the Stalin era. However, as was explained above, this element is hardly noticeable and thus is inefficient. The note looks like a small print of commercial advertisement, which nobody ever reads and which often seriously undermines the message of the promotional campaign. Simply put, this text escapes from view, while being overshadowed by the flashy icon and caption. Consequently, the ironic implication of the *Stalin is like Facebook* poster is obscured. Irony is invisible due to the lack (or inefficiency) of ironic markers.

The graphic format of *Stalin is like* posters follows a long established tradition of satirical works that often functioned as political weapon against the hegemony of the dominant power. Such were, for instance, John Heartfield's famous photomontages, in which the artist combined accompanying texts with the factual information in order to make possible the intended reading of the images. Supplementing the mixed parts of the photographic prints with explanatory comments, he created powerful statements that exposed the viciousness of Hitler's rule. Heartfield adeptly married the visual and textual elements in his posters thus turning them into exquisite tool of mass communication. Many of his photomontages produced an effect of a blast not only in the Nazi Germany, but also in entire Europe of that period due to their witty critique of the Third Reich and a well-crafted mockery of fascist ideology. While “word and image [were] fused into theatrical gesture rather than simply a message” in Heartfield's works, they stroke the audience with playfulness, dead irony and precision of employed metaphors.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike Heartfield's posters, *Stalin is like* series does not create a necessary impact among public, in a sense that they seem unapproachable for many of contemporary Internet users. As these posters employ visual language of political satire, which is generally quite powerful, this genre does not easily translate into the Web. Moreover, if Russian adults are

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<sup>134</sup> D. Graver, *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-Art in Avant-Garde Drama*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 37.

well acquainted with satirical expressions through the former Soviet magazine *Krokodil*, a younger generation is unfamiliar with this kind of reading, which requires intellectual effort and time for decoding. This goes counter the rules of fast and transient digital space.

Yet, the ironic meaning of *Stalin is like* posters is complicated not only because of their faulty design. Another reason for this miscommunication is the unpreparedness of the audience, who lack sufficient background knowledge. Russian youngsters fail to decipher irony embedded in this series as they have no (or rather vague) awareness of Stalinism. Thus, while many young people are generally indifferent to Soviet history, they cannot realise the scope of horrors perpetrated during Stalin's time.<sup>135</sup> As public surveys show, only a few younger Russians know about Stalinist repressions, and even fewer know details of those past crimes.<sup>136</sup> On the contrary, the majority of respondents express a favourable attitude towards Stalin's figure; they envision him as a strong leader who overcame the Nazis and who thus promoted the USSR as a top international player.<sup>137</sup>

While defining irony as a ‘culture-specific’ form of communication, Hutcheon observes that ironic meaning may not be comprehensible to everyone.<sup>138</sup> Irony, in this regard, is not a universal knowledge, but a communicative act that ‘happens’ among a group of people.<sup>139</sup> Thus, as the scholar points out, “irony is more easily understood in a well-defined or even closed group whose members share a ‘social environment’ which allows irony to become almost a ‘dialect’ in use among them.”<sup>140</sup> This community bases itself on a few common things, such as certain knowledge, ideology, beliefs and values.<sup>141</sup> It is due to this shared background that participants of community can ‘access’ irony.

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<sup>135</sup> T. Sherlock, “Confronting the Stalinist Past: The Politics of Memory in Russia”. *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2), 2011, p. 101.

<sup>136</sup> <http://ibigdan.com/2012/07/03/stalin-on-kak-kto/>, retrieved on 18.05.2016.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Hutcheon's observation explains why younger Russians misunderstand the *Stalin is like* campaign. They do not have sufficient background information to read the ironic meaning of the posters, nor do they share the same ideological views. In this context, the problem is not only the absent knowledge of repressions, but also the illusive image of Stalin. Thus, in the eyes of Russian youth, the dictator reminds one of a somewhat mythical character rather than a historical figure; his actions seem to be unreal, like his crimes. For many of those who are now in their early twenties, Stalin is, indeed, a mere fictional hero. If so, how could he have created that much tangible harm?

Generally, the *Stalin is like* series presents an inextricable paradox. On the one hand, the basic purpose of these posters is to inform Russian youth about the brutalities of Stalinism, as younger people are unaware of Soviet trauma. On the other hand, however, the subtle, ironic meaning of this graphic series reaches only those who already have ample knowledge of Stalin's atrocities. In other words, only someone who knows Soviet history can correctly interpret these posters. By the same token, irony obviously does not fit in the *Stalin is like* images, as it makes them overcomplicated. As Hutcheon notes, sometimes irony can have a negative impact. It brings "unnecessary complexity and... ambiguity," which, in turn, "breeds misunderstanding, confusion, or simply imprecision and lack of clarity in communication."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

## 5.5. Conclusion

The two categories of depictions that have been examined in this chapter exemplify the instability of post-Soviet memory in the digital sphere. They prove that contemporary attitudes towards the Communist period can be ‘extreme.’ This can take the form of an absurd representations, the meaning of which is ‘unfixed’ and ambiguous. It is hard to say whether these images are a mere joke, an expression of someone’s disagreement or a failed attempt to ‘digest’ the Soviet traumatic past which remains ‘unburied’, according to Etkind.<sup>143</sup> Russian users ‘play’ with the symbols of the Communist epoch and there are different reasons for such creative experimentation.

The case of Soviet propaganda posters demonstrates that the old Soviet icons now get their ‘new lives’ on the Web. As they ‘fit’ in the new digital context, their meanings change depending on each particular situation. More often than not, these images are evoked online not for representing the Communist past, but for explanation of Russia’s present. In this way, the propaganda posters ‘travel’ around political forums, weblogs on social issues and other digital venues that elucidate current agenda. Whilst the graphic form of these posters still bears the imprint of Soviet culture, it is ‘re-adjusted’ to present needs, such as commenting on urgent problems, expressing public sentiment or presenting one’s view on any subject. The former propaganda symbols thus become intertextual: they “employ intertextual references to mass media artefacts and personalities, to internet culture practices and aesthetics”; “they interdiscursively connect to historical events, contemporary news stories, and age-old discussions.”<sup>144</sup>

When appropriated as Internet memes, Soviet propaganda posters do not stand for a truthful portrayal of historical reality and so they are not actual media of memory in the original sense. Yet, these depictions offer more than mere memorialisation. They provide new

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<sup>143</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

<sup>144</sup> Milner, op. cit., p. 2363.

analytical tools that the users employ in an attempt to define their position towards the Communist period. Manipulating these images allows contemporary Russians to express what they think and how they feel, both about their past and their present. The very fact that the Communist propaganda posters are now ‘viral’ on the Internet exposes current sensitivity to anything Soviet. Russian citizens are susceptible to the legacy of that time and hence they ‘readapt’ this legacy to the present. The bright, recognisable propaganda icons still appeal to the modern public. They ‘hook’ even those individuals, who never lived under the Soviet regime. Obviously, Russians are not ready ‘to let go of’ their Soviet past, as they need it in the virtual environment, where everything is ‘close’, ‘instantaneous’ and ever accessible.

Alongside digital remakes of Communist propaganda posters, *Stalin is like* images illustrate the instability of post-Soviet memory in the new media sphere. It is another example of how collective recall is never ‘safe’ on the Web, as there is always a risk of misunderstanding, misinterpretation or alteration caused by the digital culture. Both digitised propaganda posters and the *Stalin is like* series loosen current relationship with the Soviet past in the sense that they cannot provide a ‘fixed’ vision of it. The latter category of depictions, however, has a crucial difference from the former. Thus, whilst propaganda posters are usually transformed online for the sake of fun, the *Stalin is like* campaign was created for the serious purpose of communicating the Soviet trauma, although this mission partially failed. This symbolises that traumatic recall is even more volatile on the Web, than all other aspects of public memory. *Stalin is like* proved that the digital environment can be disruptive when dealing with the sensitive issue of Soviet political repression.

The *Stalin is like* images provoked active public discussion around the question of Stalinism, which remains open in Russia. How can one measure the aftermath of Stalinist rule today and which methods should be used for this estimation? How shall one treat the figure of the dictator? While the *Stalin is like* visual campaign poses these questions, it does not provide clear answers. Although these images attempt to resolve the problem of the Soviet

traumatic past in the digital field, they do so inconsistently. The result is, they neither promote, nor totally subvert post-Soviet collective memory: a strange paradox as it is.

Overall, when researching the visual transformations of Soviet memory on the Web, one has to look for ‘alternative’ means of analysis, as habitual ways do not suit such exploration. Only the use of non-conventional methods can yield necessary results. One of the possible options is to consider user-generated content, particularly, the grass-root depictions that travel around different websites. The currently proliferating ‘hybrid’ images of the USSR merit scholarly attention, for they can tell more than one would expect about the Soviet past.

## **Conclusion|**

### **The Soviet Past: Preserved, Transformed or Subverted?**

This project started with a description of a new kind of memory made possible by the spread of new electronic media, for which I used the term ‘media memory.’<sup>1</sup> This modern form of recall is unique, yet it requires thorough examination, since it follows its own rules of functioning in the new media sphere. Although I attempted to give a comprehensive overview of this phenomenon in the previous chapters, I assume that more conceptualisation can be done in this regard, as my inquiry opened only one perspective out of many possible others. I defined new media memory as immediate, fluid and dynamic: “This memory is... made and lost through an ongoing dynamic trajectory of hyperconnections rather than being merely residual (in brains, bodies, media) and also inevitable in decline.”<sup>2</sup> I also indicated that media memory created ambiguity around collective past due to the production of numerous (and not always reliable) historical narratives and representations. If the Web generates thousands of different ‘histories’ daily, then how do we choose the ones to remember and pass on to future generations? Which versions, on the contrary, should be erased from this hypermedia database because of their inconsistency? Will the overload of digital data eventually overwhelm us to such a degree that we will be unable to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ history? Or will the Internet become a new universal medium for preserving and transmitting historical knowledge?

The ‘future’ of memory in the digital sphere is unclear, as it is still arguable whether new media foster or destabilize public recall. As Andrew Hoskins observes, “the digital as a

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<sup>1</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg (ed.) *On Media Memory*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> A. Hoskins, “Archive Me! Media, Memory, Uncertainty”. *Memory in a Mediated World: Remembrance and Reconstruction*, ed. by A. Hajek, C. Lohmeier and C. Pentzold, Hounds Mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 18.

leap into the uncertain does not provide a stable, secure or predictable basis for how the past is made.”<sup>3</sup> He adds that “this is a matter of a loss of control: a giving away of the propriety of memory to the unknowable workings and vulnerabilities of the network,” which sets its own terms for dissemination of digital content.<sup>4</sup> Although in this short conclusion I do not attempt to solve fundamental problems regarding digital memorialisation as such, I aim to pinpoint a few effects that media memory puts on popular vision of the Soviet period. My questions, in this context, are as follows: what are the prospects of Soviet memory in the new media sphere? Since the residues of the former USSR now enter the virtual dimension, will they be ‘safe’ in this new virtual format? Will the Internet preserve Soviet recollections? Will it transform them (and if so, then, to what extent)? Or will it subvert them, thus, depriving Russians from the record of their history?

Today’s prevalence of Soviet images on the Internet turns the latter into a stockpile of Soviet aesthetics and culture. Thus, contemporary Russian-speaking blogs, digital platforms and services accommodate various artefacts belonging to the former USSR. Everything from Soviet domestic appliances to depictions of cars and toys can be found on those websites. There is an archival tendency that urges Russians to bring, upload and share the remains of the Communist epoch in this new hypermedia universe, limitless in its scope. Digital archives of the Soviet past tend to always expand, grow in size and encompass more data, for they present a quintessence of the ‘archontic principle’ described by Jacques Derrida.<sup>5</sup> According to the French philosopher, the ‘archontic’ power of an archive prompts its continuous growth, so that it is never complete and “remains... open to new entries, new artifacts, new contents.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida cited in K. Hellekson and K. Busse *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

It is on the Web that the dream of unlimited archiving finally comes true. Thus, no longer are archives constrained because of physical space; they are now immaterial, constantly expanding networks comprising all sort of items. The most poignant example, in this context, are the above-examined online visual archives of the Soviet past that transcend the logic of traditional material repositories. Instead of a static storage, these digital venues provide interaction, an opportunity for anyone without exception to upload, share and discuss recollections of the USSR. According to Amit Pinchevski, it is “a participatory social practice, which turns the archive as a whole into a collective project” and which “presents new opportunities for the construction of collective memory, away from and beyond national or genealogical constraints.”<sup>7</sup> As chapter 3 of my project explained, online visual archives of the Soviet past offer a ‘place’ for interactive remembering where users not only recall Soviet life, but also enhance its vision. They intentionally post colourful, embellished pictures that evoke positive associations with that period. As Pinchevski observes, “with the inter-archive, collective memory becomes a matter of elective affinities, of active involvement and personal investment, and hence of imagination as much of recollection.”<sup>8</sup> The scholar concludes, “it is in this respect that the technologically mediated archive occasions the return of collective memory to its original sense as intended by Maurice Halbwachs... – to the remembering community and to the collective will to remember.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite contributing to collective recall, the newly emerged online archives also have their weaknesses and cannot be viewed as entirely flawless. They are vulnerable in terms of their content, which is fluid and changeable like everything in the digital sphere. Thus, archival items now seem ephemeral, transient and mutable due to their immaterial nature, but also due to the fact that they are created by common people, who often lack expertise in

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<sup>7</sup> A. Pinchevski, “Archive, Media, Trauma”. *On Media Memory*. ed. by M. Neiger, O. Meyers and E. Zandberg. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 256.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

history. The volatility of digital *archivalia* cannot guarantee the ‘safety’ of our knowledge about the past. Such items can be easily changed or destroyed, and, once erased, they leave no trace. Furthermore, the existence of digital content is conditioned by many external factors, including where, how and by whom it is produced.

The entries in digital archives are, indeed, rather unstable. They can be created, modified, updated and changed with no effort or cost. These artefacts are subject to the rules of new media environment, which not only produces or reproduces any matters instantaneously, but also subverts and deconstructs them at the click of a computer mouse. Hoskins assumes that global networking ushers our memory in uncertainty, for, upon surrendering our past to the Web, we cannot predict what happens next.<sup>10</sup> Will the digital archive really preserve our recollections and, if so, then, for how long? How can one protect digital items from external influence and from unnecessary copying, changes or, furthermore, erasure? What if the new, self-sustainable and self-sufficient media storages become so powerful that they start “exerting control over us”?<sup>11</sup> Although the latter question sounds like a techno-utopia or even a post-apocalyptic dream, the fear is not groundless: it makes us consider the risks that we take when trusting our memories to the digital sphere. Is it, in fact, as reliable as a material repository?

Another problem of digital archives is disorder, which means that their content is hectic and unsystematised, like the Internet itself with its constantly expanding “collection not just of unforeseen texts but of sound and images as well, an anarchive of sensory data.”<sup>12</sup> While the all-encompassing nature of the Web prompts its dynamic growth, the information that one finds online is random and disorganized. It is scattered across websites, social networks and media-sharing services and there is no pattern of distribution. As Wolfgang Ernst admits, the

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<sup>10</sup> Hoskins, “Archive Me! Media, Memory, Uncertainty,” p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> W. Ernst and J. Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. 139.

digital space “adopts the so-called *chaotic storage* method” implying a mess, or absence of any classificatory system that would regulate data.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Web ‘archives’ everything that comes to hand: the necessary and useless, the unique and banal, the valuable and the trash.

Online visual archives of the Soviet past illustrate the principle of disorder, typical of the digital environment. These containers of Soviet memory lack necessary organization. Although they do have separate rubrics that arrange materials into different groups, such systematization is only arbitrary. It is a promise of a system, rather than the system itself. For instance, the topics “Nostalgia”, “Our Lifestyle”, “Made in the USSR” and “Do it Yourself” at [www.20th.su](http://www.20th.su) not only sound similar, but contain identical entries.<sup>14</sup> Here users ‘pile’ everything that reminds them about the USSR, while not thinking much about what and how they are posting. Such websites present ‘gigantic storehouses’ of the Communist epoch that contain everything from representations of Soviet cameras to the photographs of New Year celebrations.<sup>15</sup> Inclusivity and not exclusivity predominates in these virtual multimedia ‘anarchives’ defying the idea of traditional ‘classificatory order.’<sup>16</sup>

Yet, not all digital repositories are chaotic by nature, but some, conversely, have a sound design. Thus, contrary to online visual archives of the Soviet past, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag presents an example of thorough organization. As was discussed in chapter 4, this digital outlet has a well-defined structure, which serves a particular aim: to promote knowledge of Soviet political repressions. In this regard, like any physical museum collection, collections of the Virtual Museum are carefully arranged, classified and documented and therefore it should not be perceived as a mere storage of public recollections. Rather, this intricate project provides a ‘space’ for reconstructing of memory through images, and it is in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> [www.20th.su](http://www.20th.su), retrieved on 11.07.2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

this virtual space that collective memory of the Soviet atrocities acquires a distinct, carefully structured shape. Unlike visual archives of the Soviet past that emerge on the Web spontaneously, the Virtual Museum of the Gulag is a result of diligent work. Creators of this digital initiative paid due attention to its arrangement as they established their enterprise for the important purpose of memorialising victims of Stalinist terror. Although the Virtual Museum is also, in some sense, an archive, it fulfils many functions that go beyond mere archiving, so that calling it an ‘archive’ is imprecise.

As chapter 4 of this thesis demonstrated, the Virtual Museum collects testimonies of the Soviet terror in a form of a database, open for anyone. When placed online, reminders of the Gulag catastrophe become visible and accessible to a larger public – an obvious advantage that a digital space can offer. This, in turn, helps to preserve traumatic memory: saving traces of the past means saving recollections. Apart from this, the Virtual Museum also opens a new perspective on the Soviet trauma, which appears here in ways that are different from those offered by traditional media. Thus, this digital venue constructs a multidimensional narrative of the Gulag that allows users to choose from a variety of tracks, histories and pictures for examination. This multiplicity of narratives and representations is yet another benefit that the virtual sphere offers to our collective memory.

The Virtual Museum facilitates the articulation of Soviet memory on the Web. Upon replacing the physical museum of Soviet political repressions, this online project memorialises the Gulag in the digital space, thus proving the urgency of digital memorialisation practices. Since offline, material-based commemoration of Stalin’s victims is complicated in today’s Russia, the Virtual Museum provides a reasonable alternative, which helps coming to terms with the troublesome past. The Internet seems to be the easiest, fastest and most accessible means for engaging with the horrific legacy of Stalinism. The website succeeds in its mission of educating contemporary Russians about crimes of the Soviet regime. Not only does it serve as a reminder of the partially forgotten tragedy, but it also

brings evidence of those past crimes to the fore. It is due to this digital venue that users now can examine Gulag sites and material evidence while sitting at desktops.

The Internet provides an impressive array of tools for remembering the Communist legacy, which turns Soviet memory into a vivid and multifarious phenomenon. Online archives, virtual museums, digital maps, computer games, blogs, interactive websites and social networking services – these are but a few of online genres that today help us re-approach the Communist period – and there are many more. These new up-to-date formats actualise the Soviet past, while bringing it to the fore of the current political, social and cultural agenda. Furthermore, new digital forms and practices foreground the Soviet past to such a degree, that it refuses ‘to stay’ in the ‘past’, but becomes a part of Russia’s present. As Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading note, “the presentist function of digital media raises new and interesting challenges for thinking through how these new tools (re)present and (re)construct the past, our pasts.”<sup>17</sup> The scholars continue that “more specifically we could say that ‘[t]he past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist: One is the present, which does not cease to pass, and the other the past, which does not cease to be put through which all presents pass.’”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in the researchers’ view, “amnesia may not be the problem at all in a culture where past and present are remembered along the side of one another.”<sup>19</sup>

Communist propaganda posters functioning as Internet memes is a vivid example of how elements of the Soviet past merge with Russia’s present in the digital sphere. As chapter 5 of this thesis demonstrates, these old Soviet symbols are re-appropriated on the Web for a variety of brand new purposes, including, for instance, commenting on current political issues or discussion of social news. While these posters lose their original function, they are re-

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<sup>17</sup> J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins and A. Reading (ed.). *Save as... Digital Memories*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Grosz cited in *Save as... Digital Memories*, ed. by Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

adapted to present needs, in particular, they help voicing one's opinion towards any topical subject. It is thus not surprising that many of these images 'transform' in order to fit the contemporary context: their graphic form changes to accommodate new meanings. However, despite this transformation, the Soviet past is not irrevocably lost, but it persists in the powerful, visually appealing icons that outlast different epochs and changes of regime. Thus, even after significantly changes, Communist propaganda posters keep their reference to the USSR, which, in turn, feeds on collective memory.

Overall, the Internet creates both new opportunities and, paradoxically, obstacles to post-Soviet recall. Given the constant mutability of digital environment, it is hard to predict whether this revolutionary medium will help retaining the knowledge about the Communist epoch, or whether, on the contrary, it will endanger memories of that period. The problem is that under the impact of new media technologies the Soviet past becomes "not only potentially more visible, accessible and fluid...but... also more easily revocable and subject to a different kind of 'collective' influence and shaping."<sup>20</sup> This requires further exploration, whilst my thesis only sets a starting point for such inquiry.

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<sup>20</sup> A. Hoskins, "The Mediatisation of Memory", p. 29.

## Figures

### Chapter Four| Virtual Museum of Gulag

Fig. 4.1. “Burial in Ulyanovsk city next to Strizhov ravine” at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website  
[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

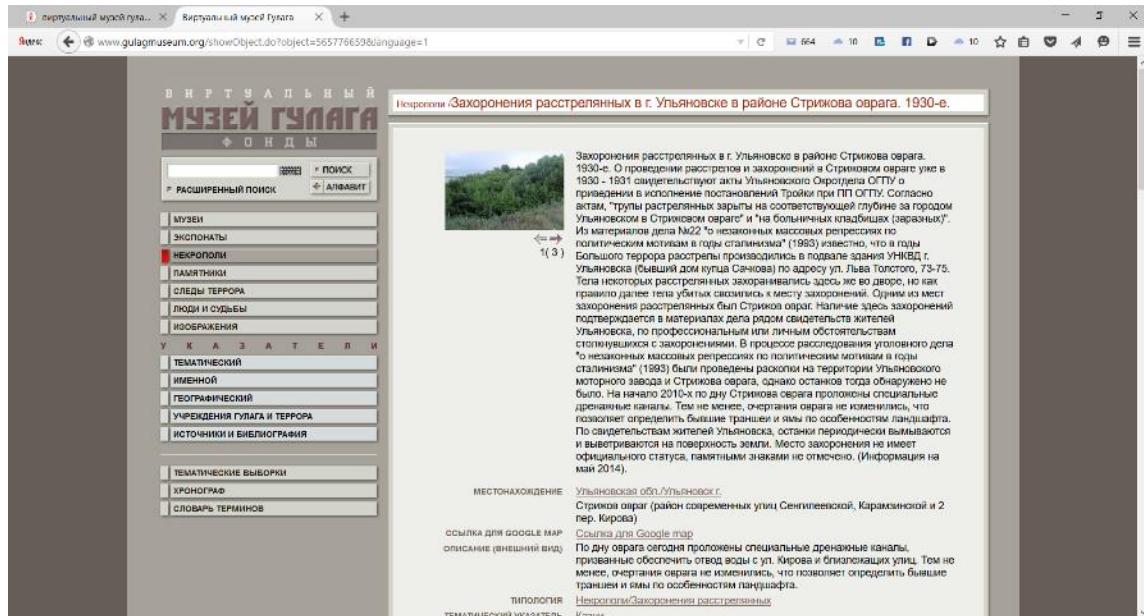


Fig. 4.2. “Burial in Ulyanovsk city next to Strizhov ravine,” image.

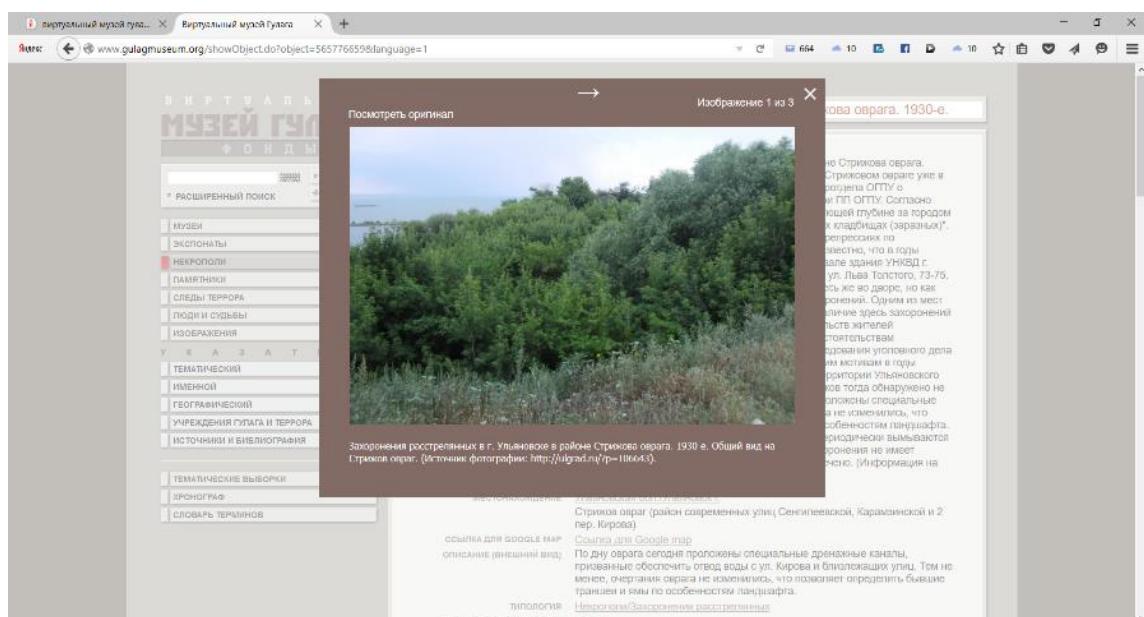


Fig. 4.3. The search query for “Solovetsky” camp at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website  
[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

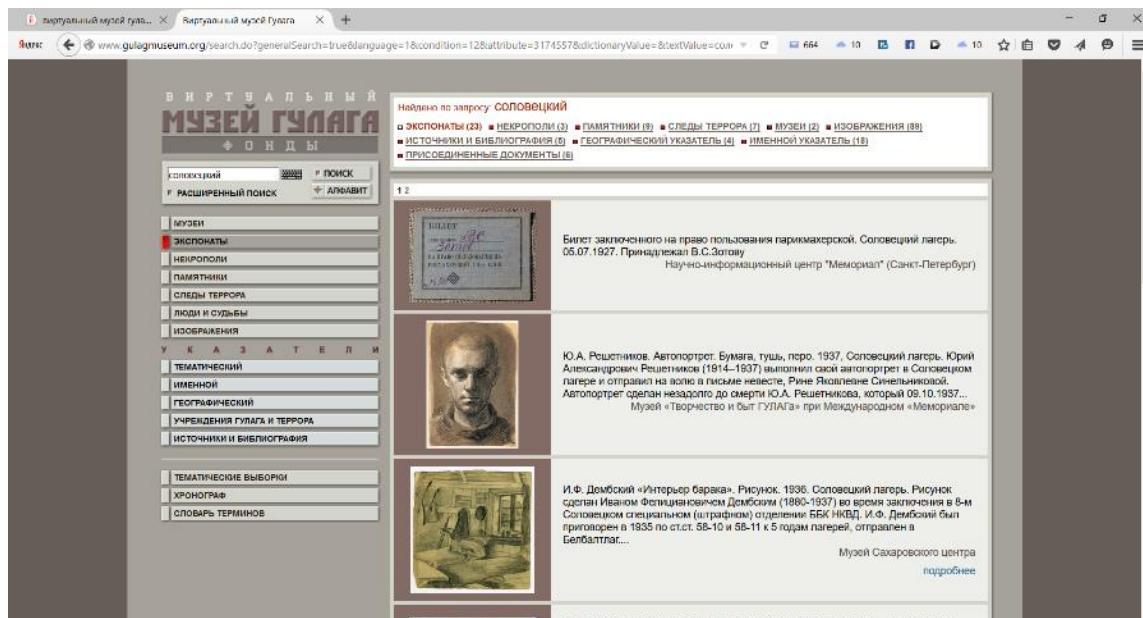


Fig.4.4. “Traces of Terror” section at the “Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website  
[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

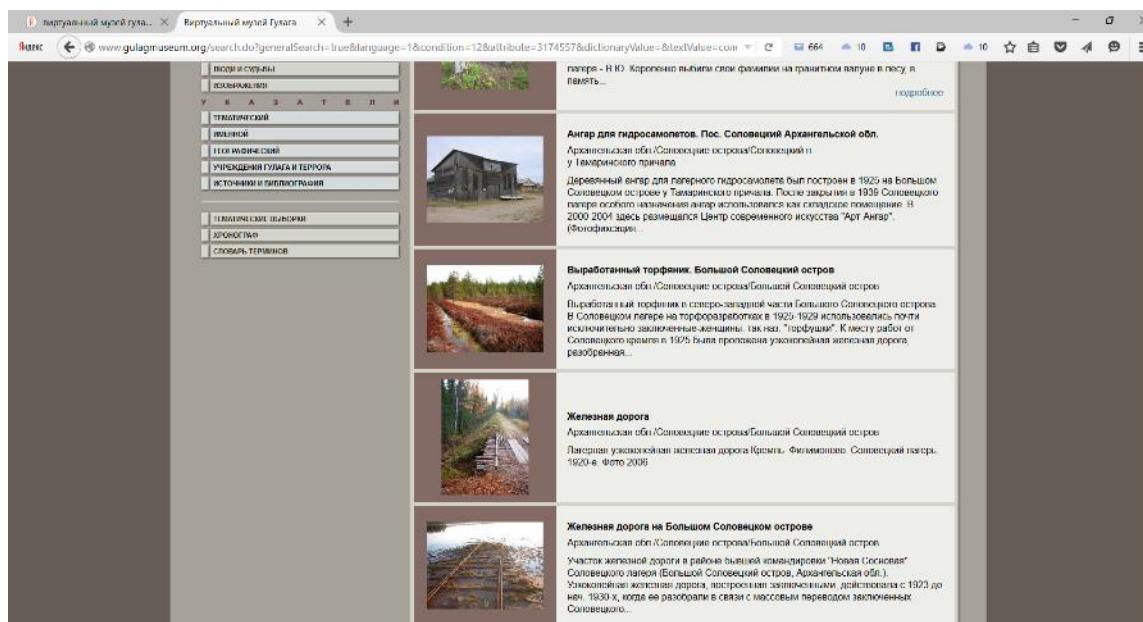


Fig. 4.5. “The Dock of Kem” (“Kemperpunkt”) at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag”, Russian version of the website  
[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

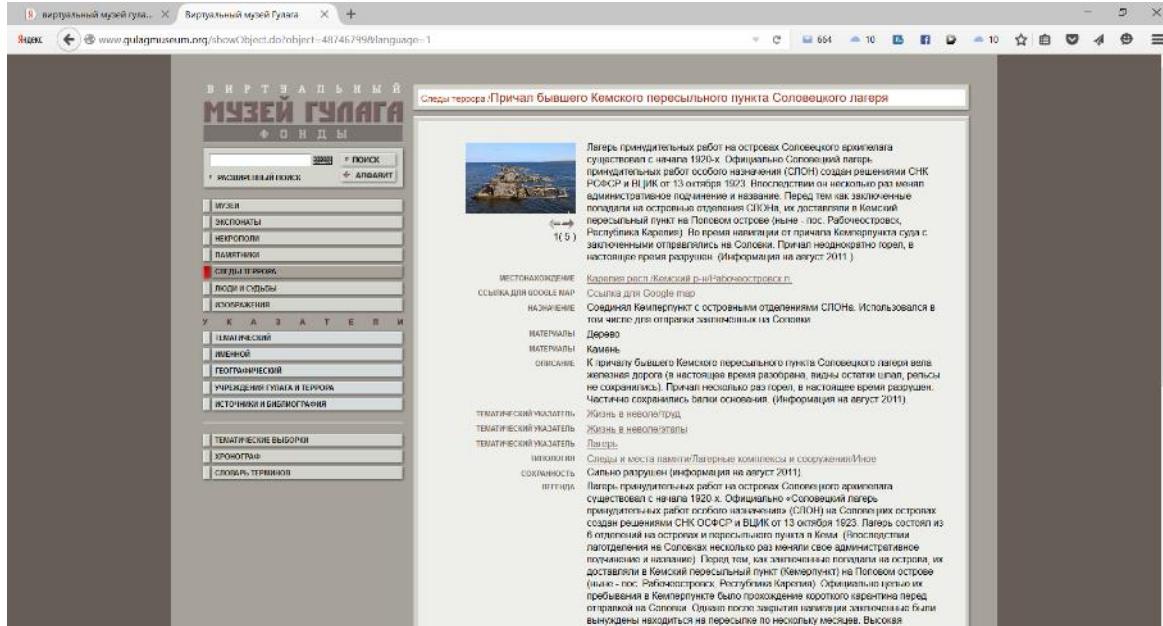


Fig. 4.6. “The Dock of Kem,” image

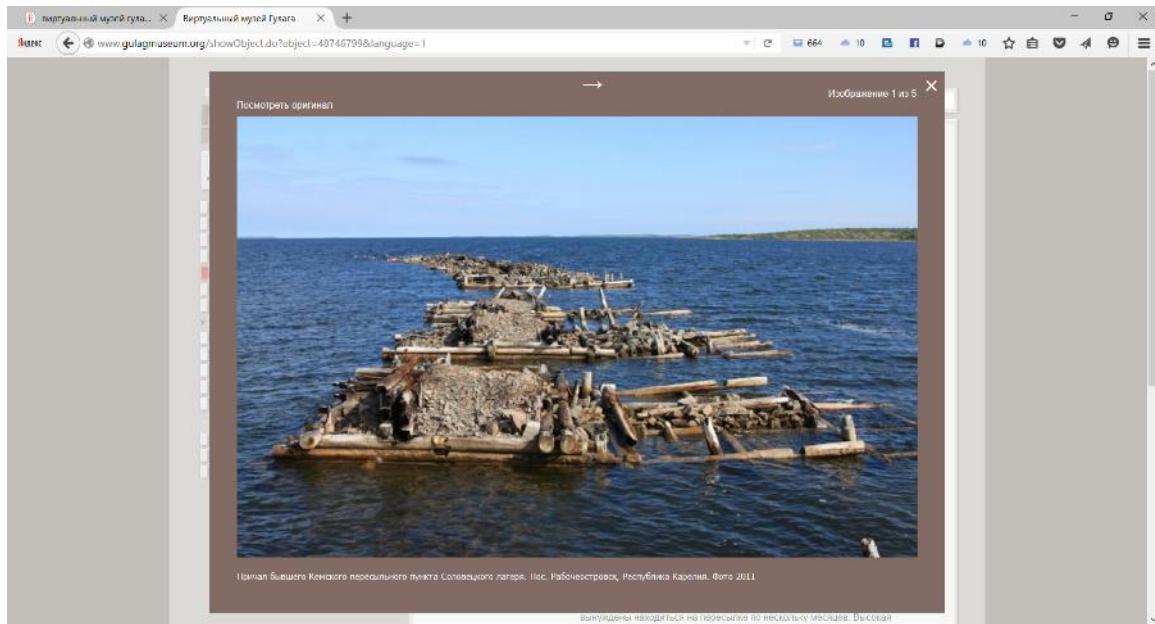


Fig. 4.7. Section “Exhibits” at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website

[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

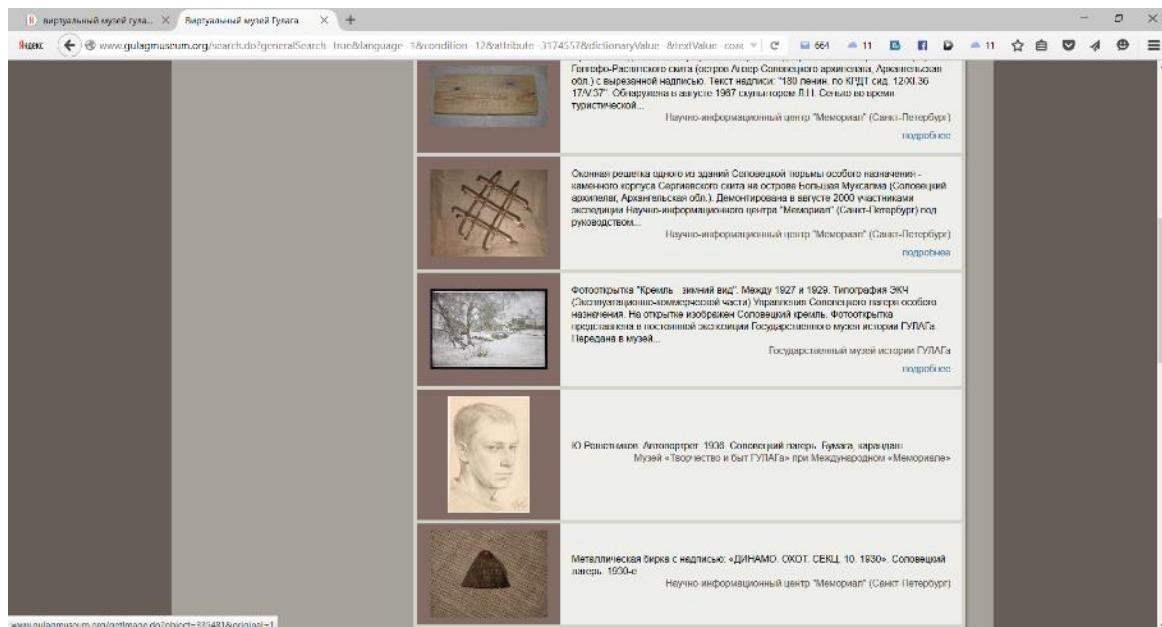


Fig. 4.8. Section “Exhibits,” drawings of Ivan Dembskii at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag,” Russian version of the website

[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

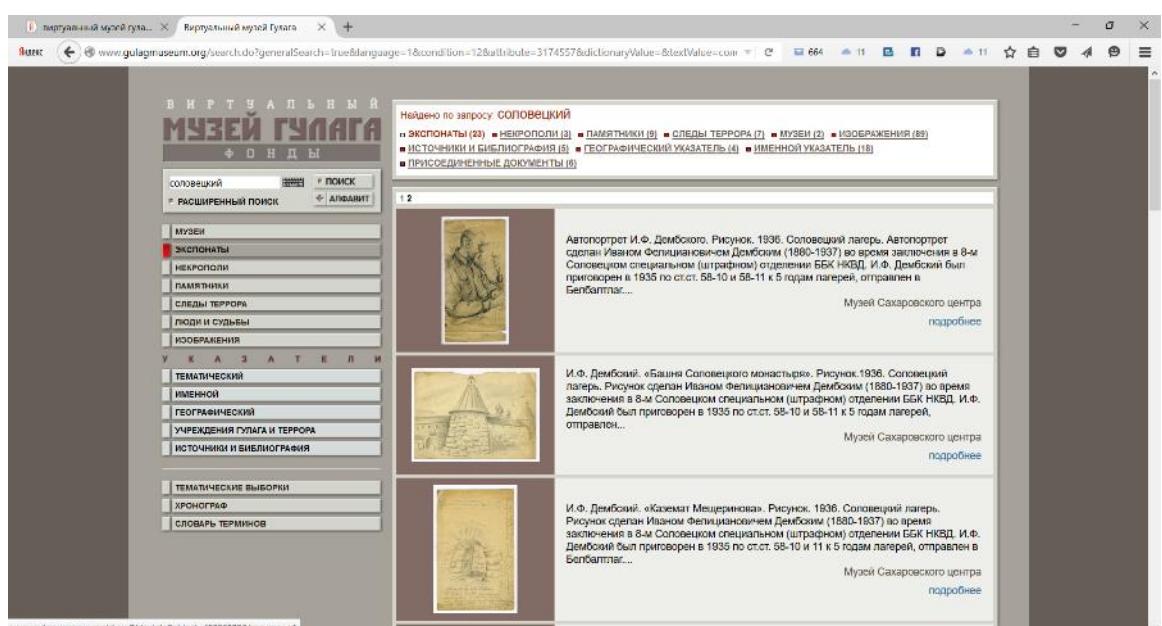


Fig. 4.9. “The Bullet from Sekirnaia Hill” at “The Virtual Museum of the Gulag”, Russian version of the website  
[www.gulagmuseum.org](http://www.gulagmuseum.org)

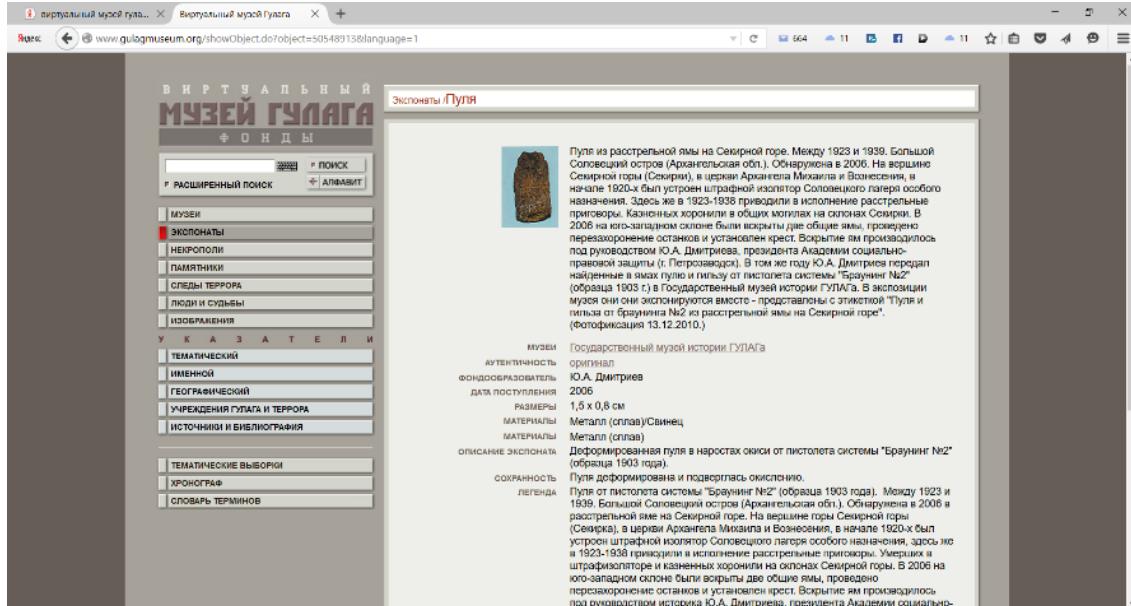
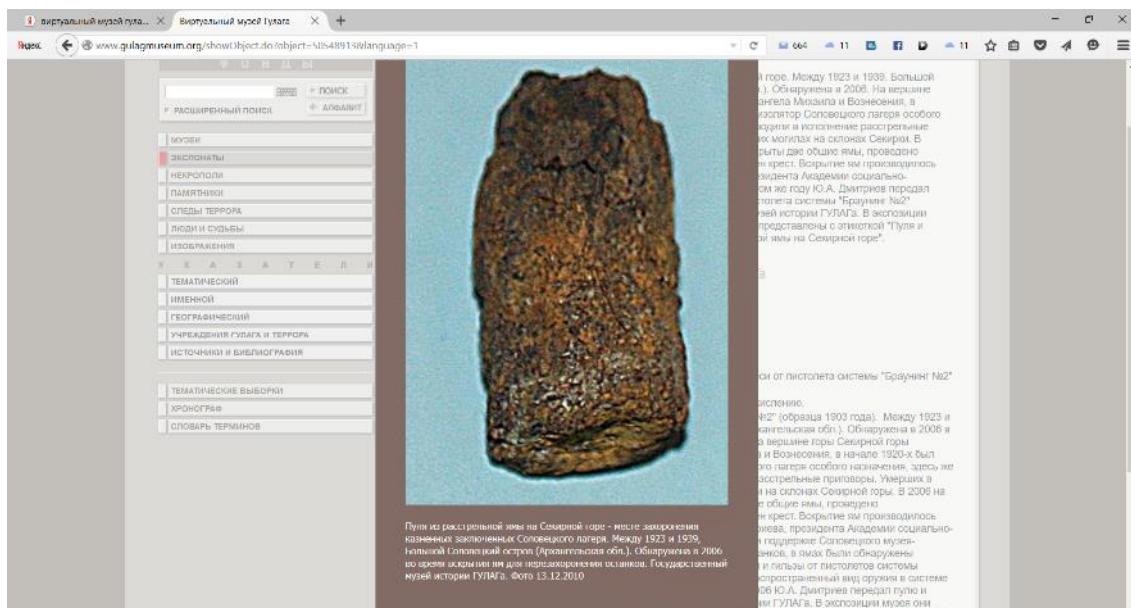


Fig. 4.10. “The Bullet from Sekirnaya Hill”, image



## Chapter Five | Creative Transformations of Soviet Memory

Fig. 5.1. *My name is Lenin, Vladimir Lenin!* creative transformation of Lenin's image  
<http://joyreactor.cc/post/731128>

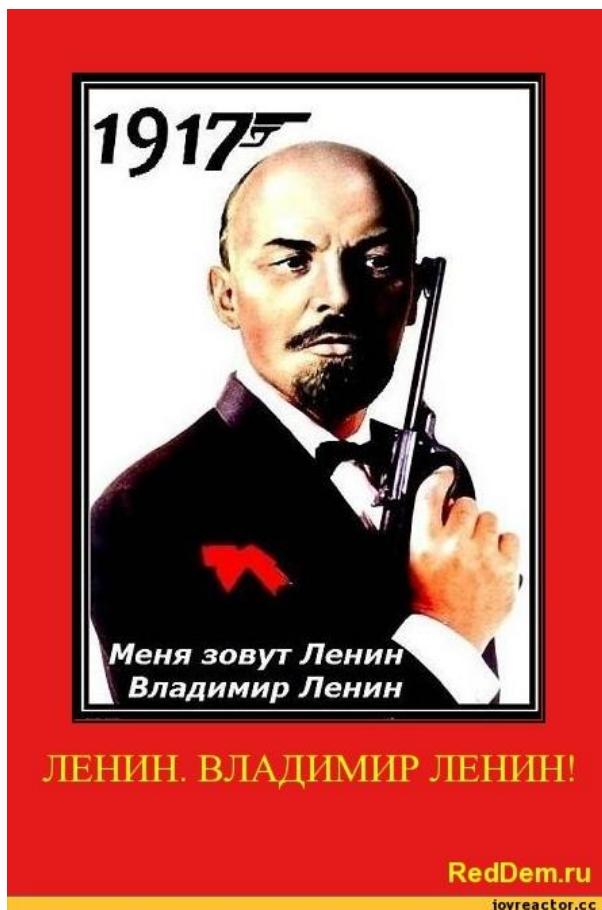


Fig. 5.2. *Lenin was a Zombie*, creative transformations of Lenin's image on the Web,  
<http://fake-mm.musicalmagazine.lclients.ru/articles/LeninWasAZombie>

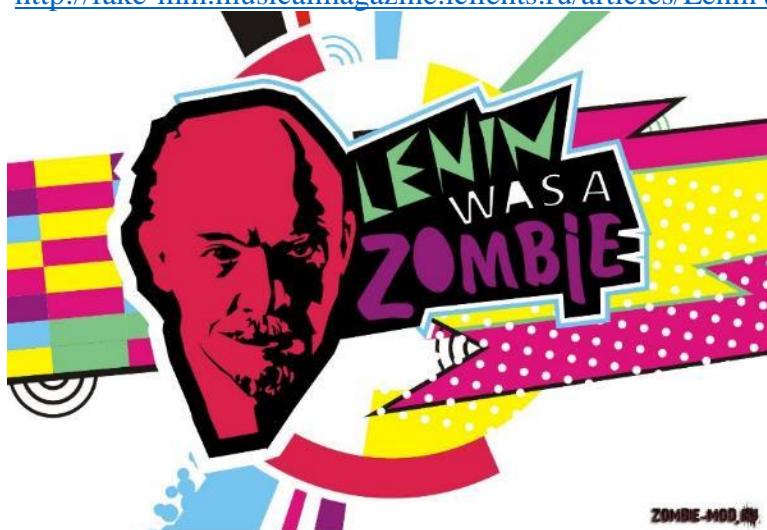


Fig. 5.3. *Lenin is not Dead!* creative transformations of Lenin's image on the Web,  
[http://pikabu.ru/story/lenin\\_4647107](http://pikabu.ru/story/lenin_4647107)

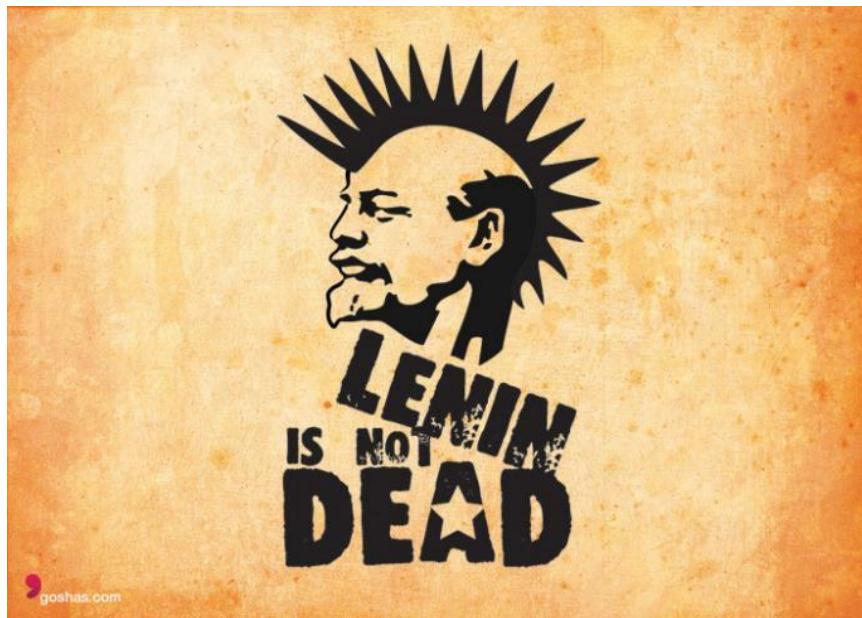
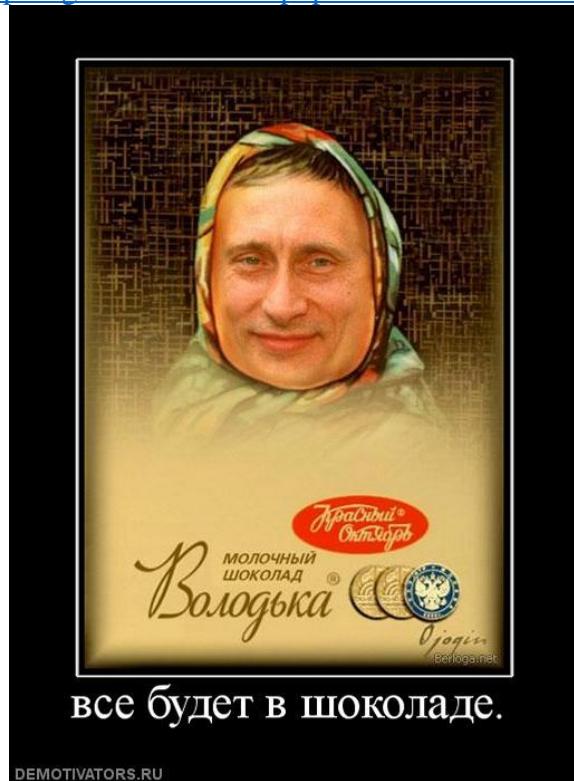


Fig. 5.4. *Alenka*, original image  
<http://историк.рф/>



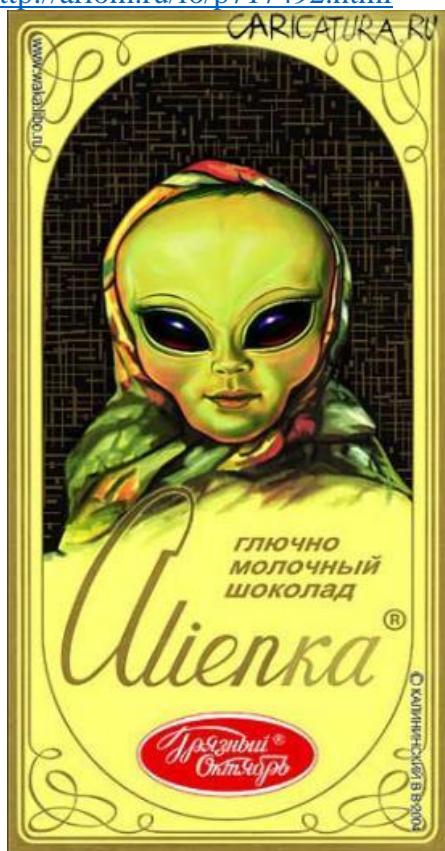
Fig. 5.5. *Alenka*, transformations of the original image

<http://ogoklass.ru/index.php?t=Molocnii-sokalad-Volodika&view=images>



DEMOTIVATORS.RU

<http://ariom.ru/fo/p717492.html>



<http://www.mblshkoblud.ru/smekuechki/692-variacii-na-temu-shokolada-alenka.html>



Fig. 5.6. *Stalinator*, creative adaptation of Stalin's image on the Internet  
<http://joyreactor.cc/post/430775?next=random>

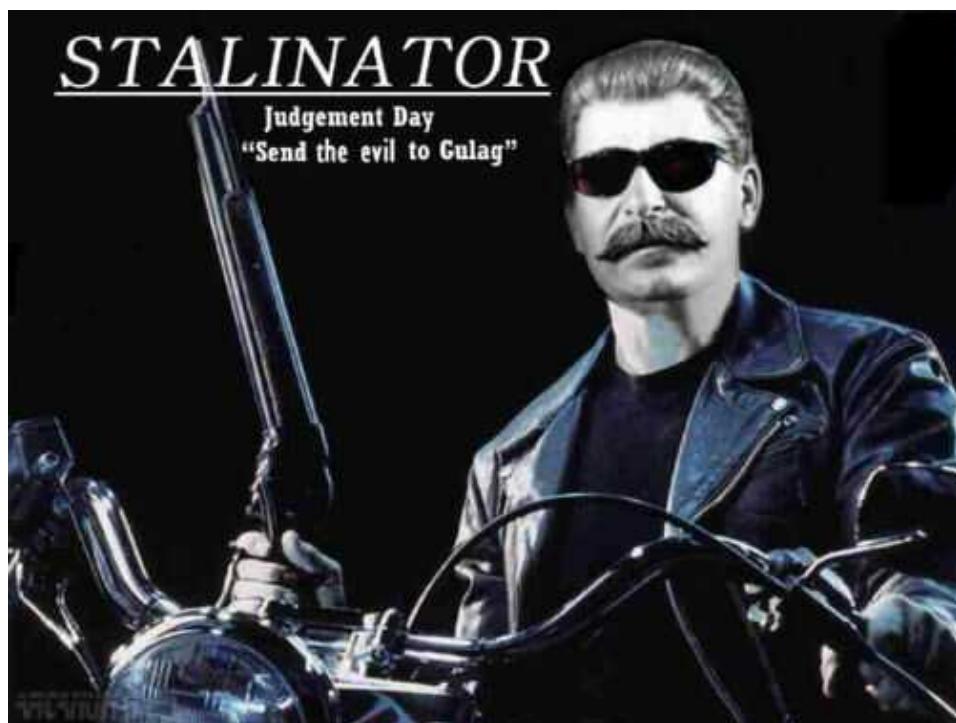


Fig. 5.7. N. Vatolina and N. Denisov, *Do not Gossip!*, 1941  
<http://www.kulturologia.ru/blogs/250416/29279/>

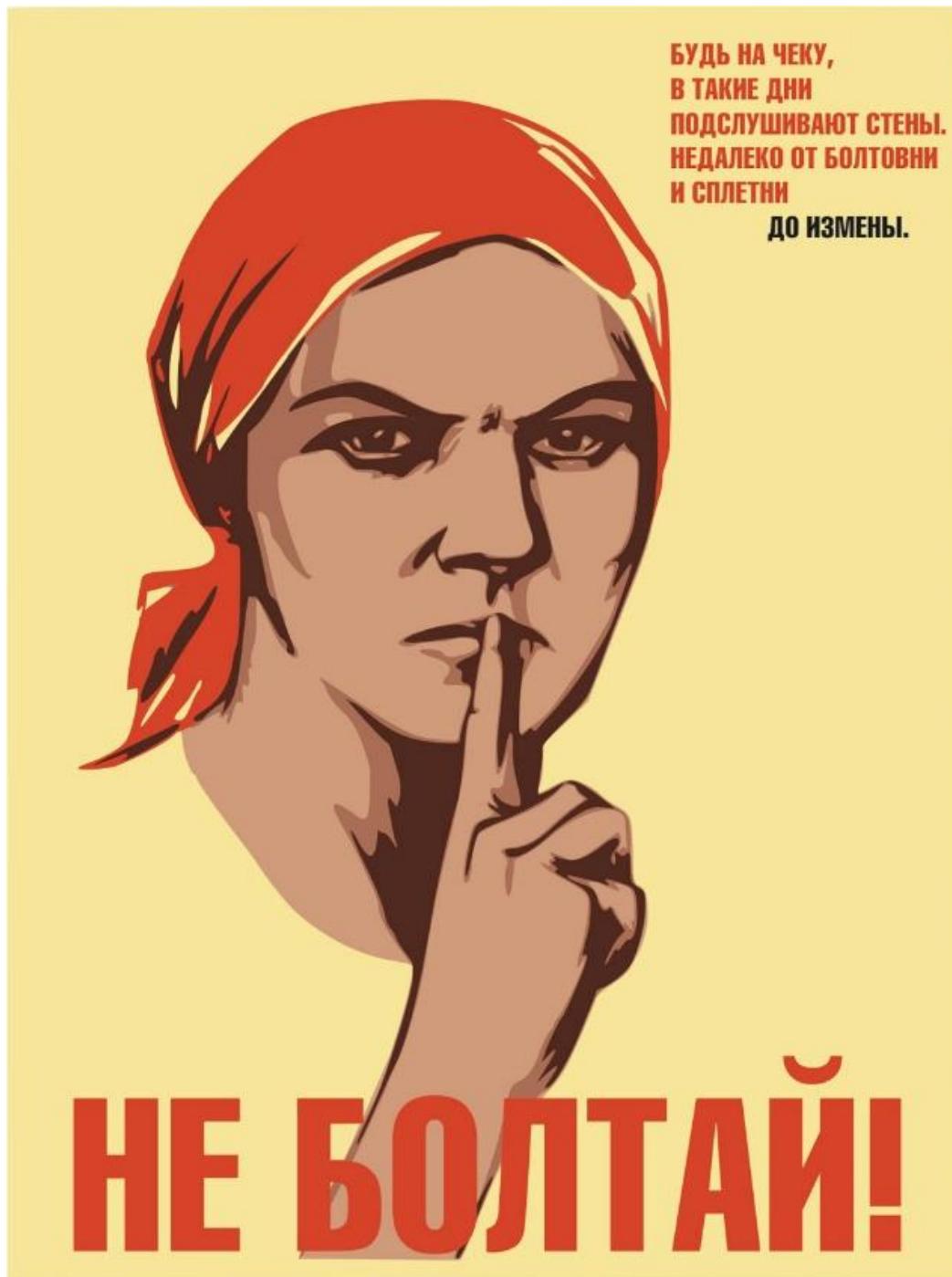


Fig. 5.8. D. Moor, *Did you Volunteer?*, 1920

<http://www.kulturologia.ru/blogs/080615/24797/>



Fig. 5.9. I. Toidze, *Motherland is Calling!*, 1941  
<http://www.kulturologia.ru/blogs/080615/24797/>

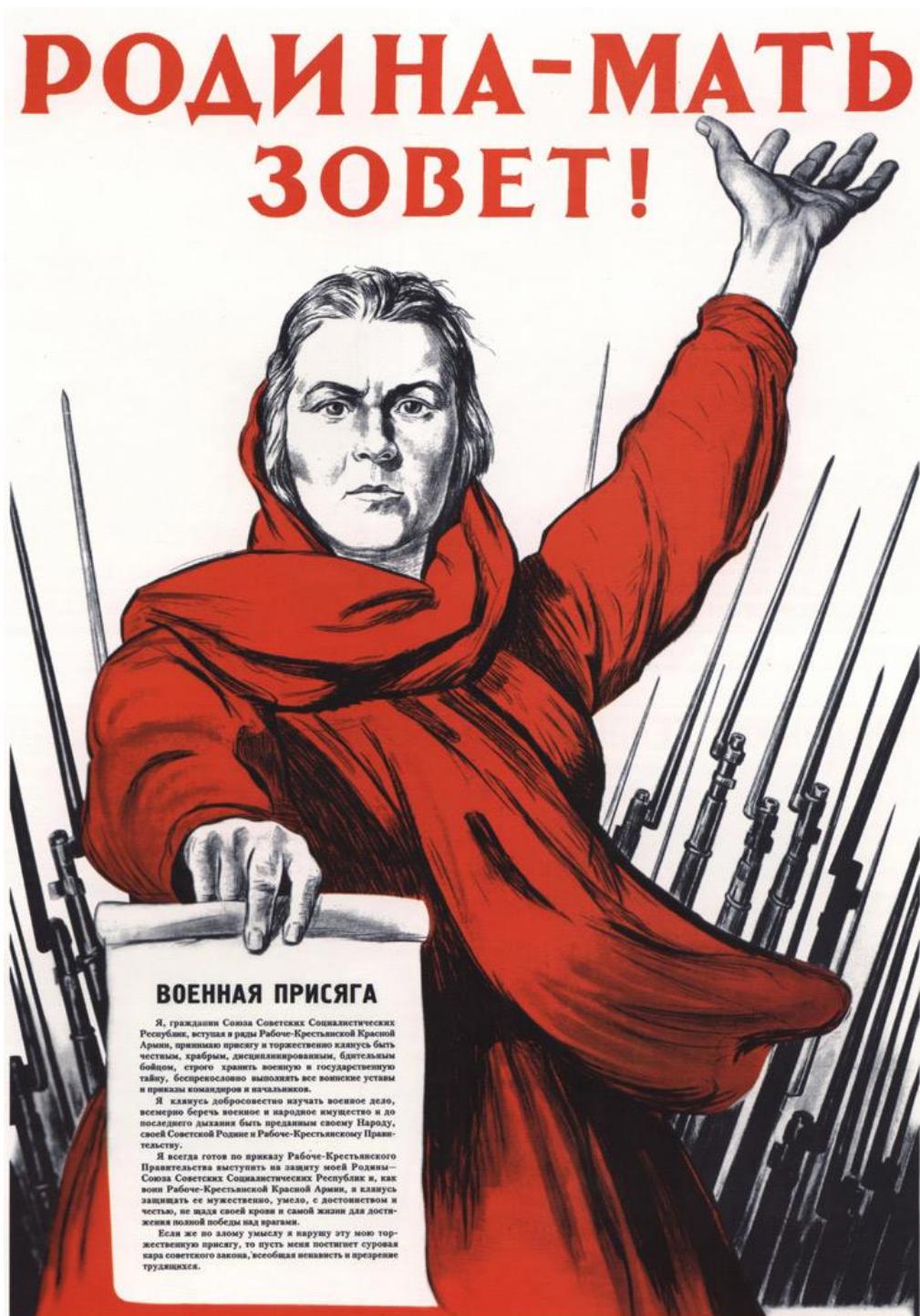


Fig. 5.10. *Did you Volunteer?*, creative remakes of the poster at “Lurkmore”  
<http://lurkmore.to/>

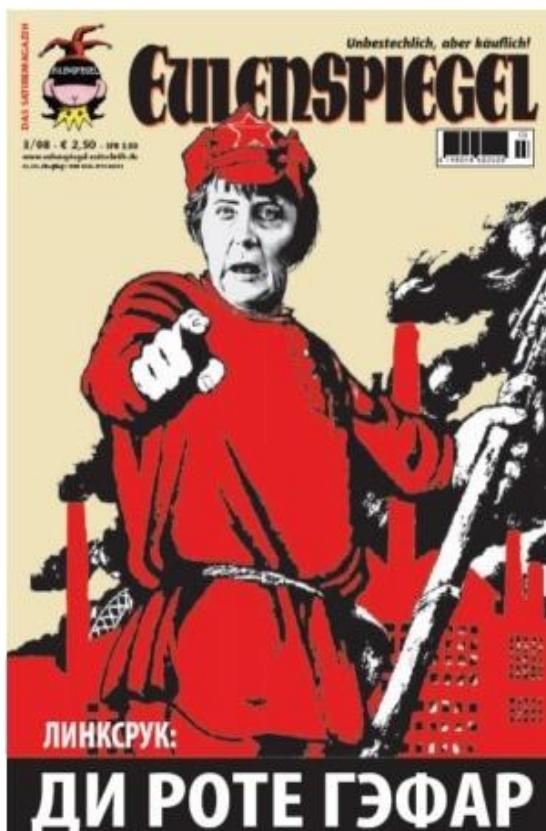
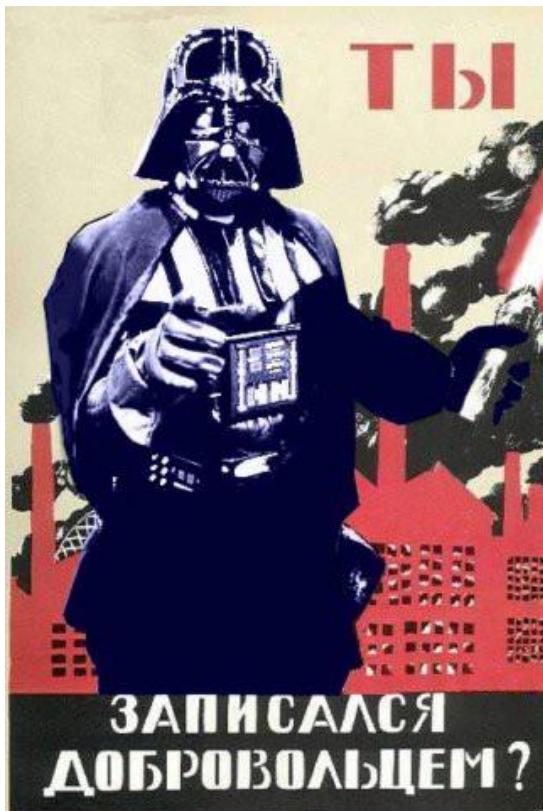


Fig. 5.11. *Do not Gossip!*, creative remakes of the poster at “Punk Zone.org”  
[www.punkzone.org](http://www.punkzone.org)

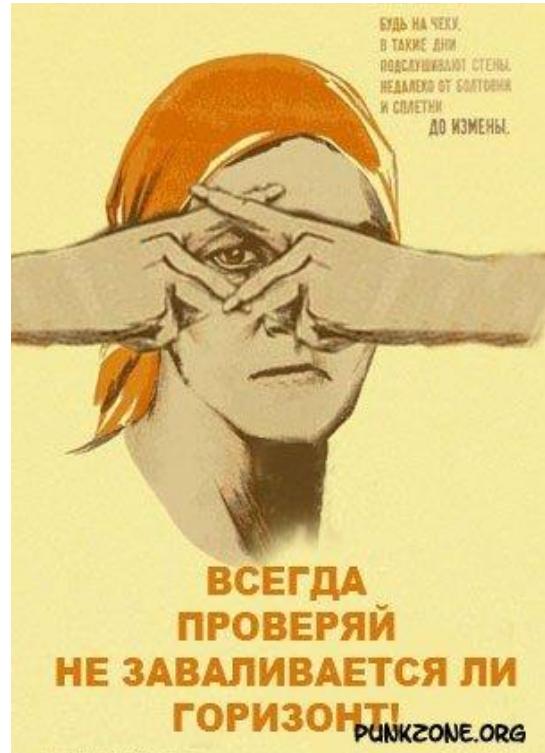


Fig. 5.12. *Motherland is Calling!*, a remake at “Syria is our!” forum  
<http://www.forum-tvs.ru/lofiversion/index.php/t119051-550.html>

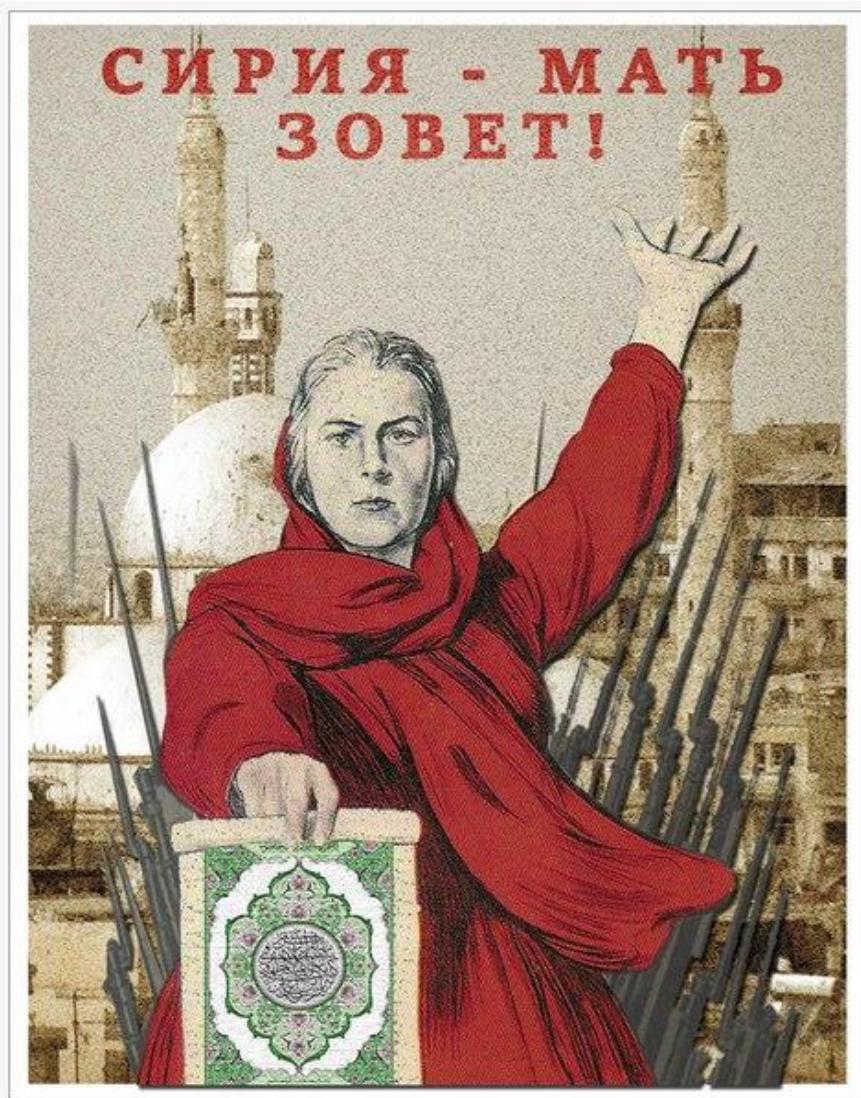


Fig. 5.13. Motherland is Calling!, a remake of the poster at “Professionali”, topic “Russia will slacken because of Generation Z”

[http://professionali.ru/Soobschestva/put\\_k\\_sebe/rossiju-oslabit-pokolenie-zhest/](http://professionali.ru/Soobschestva/put_k_sebe/rossiju-oslabit-pokolenie-zhest/)



Fig. 5.14. I. Tekhlikidi, *Stalin is like Twitter*, 2012



Fig. 5.15. I. Tekhlikidi, *Stalin is like YouTube*, 2012



Caption: *Stalin is like YouTube: he allowed loading and sending*

Bottom left: *Family members of repressed, “capable of anti-Soviet activity,” were sent to camps and special settlements. Often, they were transported to Siberia in boxcars. Such journey could take over a month.*

Bottom left corner: *Great Terror 1937-1938: 75 years are not the time to forget*

Bottom right corner, logo: *Russian Association of Victims of*

Fig. 5.16. I. Tekhlikidi, *Stalin is like Apple*, 2012



Caption: *Stalin is like Apple: he cost a lot*

Bottom left: *681 692 people were sentenced to death by shooting*

Bottom left corner: *Great Terror 1937-1938: 75 years are not the time to forget*

Bottom right corner, logo: *Russian Association of Victims of Unlawful Political Repressions*

Fig. 5.17. I. Tekhlikidi, *Stalin is like Vkontakte*, 2012

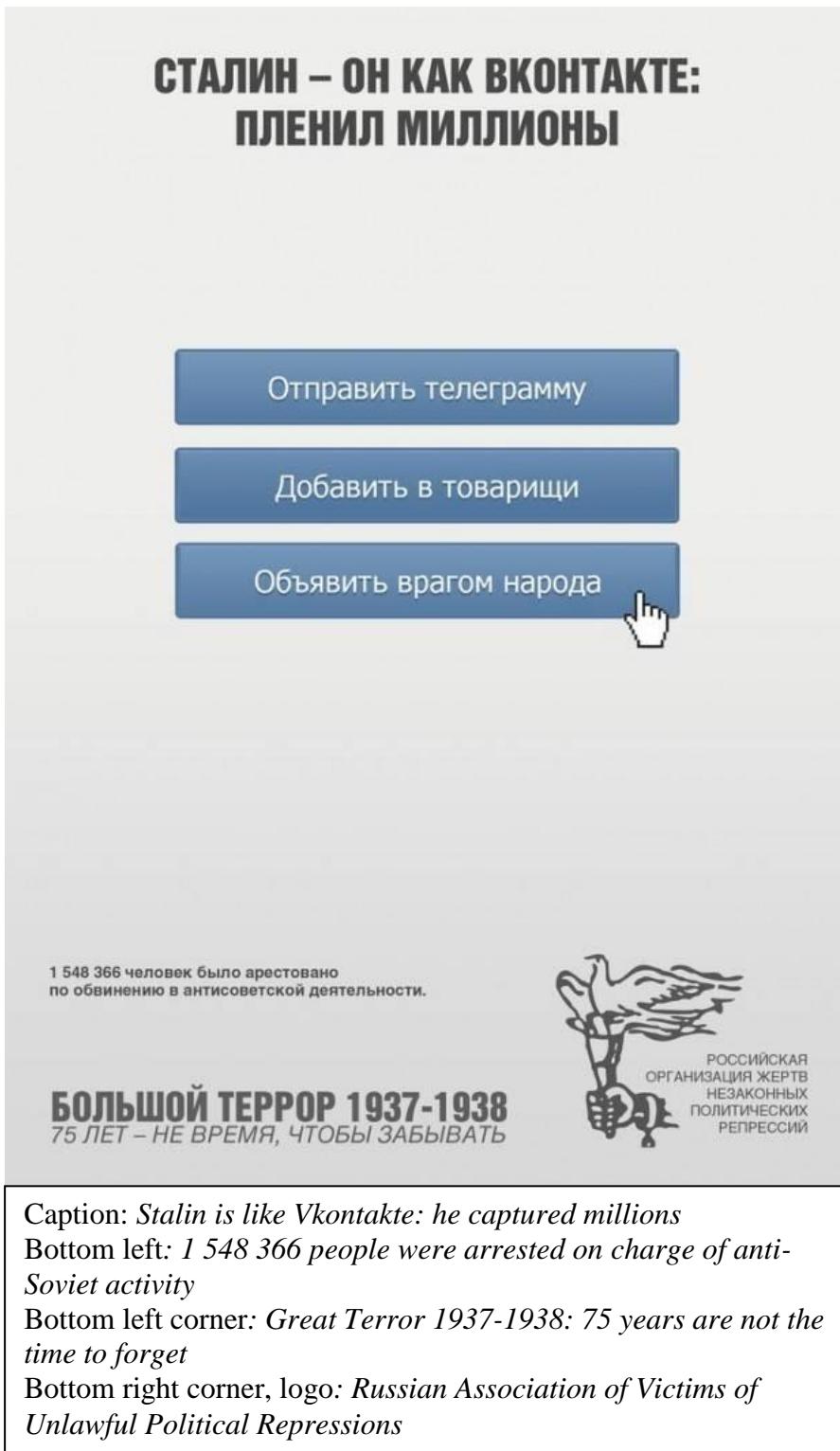


Fig. 5.18. I. Tekhlikidi, *Stalin is like Facebook*, 2012



Caption: *Stalin is like Facebook: he urged to share information*  
Bottom left: *in 1937-1938 thousands of Soviet rank-and-file citizens snitched on their colleagues, neighbours, chefs and friends to NKVD. The reports were so many that NKVD, simply, could not handle them*  
Bottom left corner: *Great Terror 1937-1938: 75 years are not the time to forget*  
Bottom right corner, logo: *Russian Association of Victims of*

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