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Constructing a Usable Past on the Ruins of Empire: Conjunctions and Conflicts between the Federal and Regional Historical Narratives in Russia

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Studies of politics of memory, as an important factor of constructing national and ethnic identities, are largely focused on either national or local levels. However, a comparative approach to mnemonic activity at regional level is none the less insightful, particularly for large countries with varied regional identities rooted in different histories. This is particularly urgent for the states with imperial legacy, where attempts to construct a national historical narrative often confront with heterogeneity of regional memories. This paper addresses the problem of conflicts and conjunctions between the federal and regional politics of memory in contemporary Russia by focusing at current repertoires of usable past.

The long-term efforts of the Russian ruling elites to construct a usable historical past that would be functional for (re)shaping national identity and legitimizing political regime have got much scholars' attention. There is a solid body of literature describing the Russian politics of memory with a focus on activity of state officials and other mnemonic actors at the federal level (Smith 2002; Scherlock 2007; Koposov 2011; Wijermars 2019; Hoffmann (ed.) 2021). However, being the largest country with an imperial background, Russia integrates regions with diverse histories that are not smoothly adaptable to the official narrative of the "thousand-years-long" Great Russian state that has been cultivated since the 2000 (Malinova 2018; Wijermars 2019). The official narrative tends to emphasize national unity, while a real history of relationship between center and periphery could be complicated by violence and injustice. Even those historical processes that are considered common, like the Revolution, Civil War, Great Patriotic War etc. were experienced in different ways across the country's territory. Taking into account that local past is no less essential for regional identities than common history is for nationbuilding, to understand how its mobilization for political purposes functions, one needs to look beyond the federal level. Of course, politics of memory in the Russian regions and its role in center-periphery relations was not neglected by scholars (e.g. Clarkson 2017; Song 2018; Goode 2020; Druey 2020; Gavrilova 2021; Zhurzhenko 2021; Staf 2023). Still, there is a need in comparative studies that highlight differences and similarities between regional politics of memory, and reveal specific tensions between the official historical narrative and local memories, as well as mechanisms of their rapprochement.

This paper aims to contribute to this gap by focusing on the repertoires of usable past and practices of commemoration in 27 regions from different parts of Russia. It is based on 84 expert interviews that were taken for the collective research project about politics of memory in Russian regions (Miller et al. (eds) 2023). The research was conducted in 2020-2021. In January 2023, some additional expert interviews were taken to estimate changes that happened in the context of what is officially named a special military operation against Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022. Although this data is not sufficient for a comprehensive comparative research of regional politics of memory in Russia, it helps to map a variety of local usable past that in some cases reinforces the official historical narrative, while in others collides with it.

Studying repertoires of usable past: conceptual and methodological issues

The politics of memory, as a public activity aimed at promotion of specific interpretations of collective past, deals with a limited repertoire of historical events, figures and symbols. Such repertoire could be extensive, still, it is not equal to what one could learn from a history textbook. To be usable for various political purposes, history should be able to cause a cognitive and emotional resonance in a target group, which is hardly possible when the latter is not sufficiently familiar with a particular aspect of the collective past. The usability of a historical past is facilitated by the *sociocultural infrastructure of memory* that embraces public holidays and established rituals of commemoration, monuments, memorials, museums, toponyms, films, novels, and songs. Not only do they remind about historical events, figures and symbols, but also load them with specific meanings (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 90; Etkind 2004). Developing such infrastructure at both national and local levels is an essential aspect of politics of memory.

A potential usability of a particular historical past is not obvious a priori. What is unknown and emotionally irrelevant for one target group could be highly important for another. What Aleida Assmann called a stored part of cultural memory could easily move to its functional part (2014: 55-58). A lot depends on the mnemonic actors, who are willing to promote specific memory, and have necessary resources and talents to do it. Public conflicts between different interpretations of specific historical events or figures could attract public attention thus raising their further "usability". So, the actual repertoire of historical events that fall to the public agenda due to regular or "round number date" commemorations, or erasing new monuments, or because they are addressed by politicians and media, is changeable. Still, it is possible to detect a relatively steady core of historical events, figures and symbols that are perceived important for local identity and notably used by regional authorities and other mnemonic actors over time.

The national commemorative agenda is largely determined by the federal government that has at its disposal resources, tools and hierarchically organized bureaucratic machine. However, regional authorities often have their own incentives for involvement in politics of memory because they are interested in constructing regional identities, controlling ethnic conflicts, boosting tourism, getting supplementary resources from the federal budget etc. Additionally, there are many other actors who are engaged in this field, either institutionalized like the Russian Orthodox Church, the Memorial society¹, veterans' and Cossacks' organizations, or not. Quite often agency is shared between federal and regional levels, as far as projects that are financed from the central budget are initiated and/or conducted by local specialists and activists, who have considerable autonomy in framing historical content. So, to study regional repertoires of usable past one needs to consider agendas of various mnemonic actors.

One possible way to explore the repertoire of usable past is to look at the sociocultural infrastructure that insistently reminds about specific aspects of historical past, thus making them recognizable. However, availability of symbolic resources does not guarantee that they are actually used. Monuments may "become sites of important rituals or fade into the urban backdrop" (Smith 2019: 1314), public holidays could be the days of commemoration or just days-off, new films can raise public debates about a historical past (Khlevnyuk, Maksimova 2021) or went unnoticed. In Iwona Irwin-Zarecka's words, "the production of symbolic resources makes certain forms of engagement with the past possible, sometimes even necessary, but it does not predetermine the uses to which such resources would be put" (1994: 14). It is an activity of various social actors that makes them vehicles of collective remembrance. For this reason, observing monuments, visiting museums, and reading various texts is necessary but not

were obviously active in some of the studied regions.

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¹ In December 2021, the Memorial International focused on uncovering the history of mass repressions, was ruled to be liquidated by the decision of the Russian Supreme Court for violating the "foreign agents" law. But in 2020-2021, when our research has been conducted, it was an umbrella for many regional Memorial organizations that

sufficient for revealing a repertoire of usable past. Another important way to do it is to address experts, who have information about key mnemonic actors, practices of commemoration and public debates about collective past.

The main part of this research was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was largely based on semi-structured expert interviews with the local historians who studied politics of memory, as well as with museum employees, street tour guides, journalists and, when possible, public administrators from 27 regions (see appendix 1). The interviews were conducted online and recorded by permissions of interviewees. The interview guide included a broad range of questions about politics of memory in a particular region. This article is based on analysis of conversations focused on three questions: 1) Are there historical themes that are specific to your region? 2) What are the most commemorated historical events or figures in your region? How are they commemorated? 3) Do you see any tensions between the federal and regional/local commemorative agendas? The interviews were coded with the MAXQDA-2018 app to reveal common and distinctive patterns. The information derived from the interviews was updated by that from media and, where possible, added by the records of on-site observations made during trips to some of the studied regions.

Which past is most usable: the analysis of regional official commemorative practices

As contemporary regions became parts of the Russian state under various circumstances, and as historical processes that composed nodal points of the national historical narrative were often marked by territorial specifics, the legacy of collective past in the regions is rather diverse. Still, analyzing the experts' conversations about the historical events commemorated in their regions it is possible to detect some typical patterns.

Just as the federal politics of memory prioritized the history of the Great Russian state, the regional official commemorations were largely concentrated on the issues of territorial political subjectivity. The round number anniversaries of the regions' joining to the Russian state, or founding their capital cities, or assigning them as separate administrative units were celebrated most pompously. Such occasions were evidently used for attracting federal money for beautification of regional capital cities and other needs. The commemorations, that were consistently covered by federal media, projected regional identities for publics outside the region. Some of such celebrations were attended by the head of the state. The study of commemorative speeches of the Russian presidents had revealed that in the 2000s, before the authorities started to pay more systematic attention to commemorating pre-revolutionary period, the round number dates of political and administrative history of the subjects of Russian Federation turned to be the most regular occasions for giving speeches about a remote past (Malinova 2015). In 2003, Vladimir Putin took part in celebration of 300-years of founding St. Petersburg, in 2005 he gave speeches on occasions of 1000-years of Kazan and 750-years of "the city of Kaliningrad", in 2007 he marked 450 years of joining Bashkortostan to the Russian state and 860 years of foundation of Moscow city. Dmitry Medvedev celebrated the 1150th anniversary of foundation of Novgorod in 2009, 1000 years of Yaroslavl and 150 years of Vladivostok in 2010. After his re-election, Putin attended the commemoration of the 1000th anniversary of "the unity of the Mordovian people with the peoples of the Russian state" in 2012, and of the 100th anniversary of Tuva's accession to Russia in 2014. Besides, since 2015 the anniversaries of "reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol's with Russia" were celebrated with great pomp.

Regional elites, who were eager to use occasions provided by round number anniversaries, not necessarily cared about historical accuracy. A mismatch between the current administrative units and political history of their territories sometimes led to curious decisions. Thus, in 2007 a double jubilee of joining the contemporary republic to Russia was celebrated in Kabardino-Balkaria: while Kabarda celebrated 450 years of the agreement about military and political collaboration with Ivan the Terrible, that was fastened by his marriage on the Kabardin

princess, Balkaria commemorated 180 years of its application for becoming a subject of Romanov's empire (E-83-01, E-83-02)². In 2020, it was decided to celebrate 100-years anniversary of contemporary Republic of Karelia, though it was debatable, what was its foundation moment. In imperial Russia, Karelia was not a distinctive administrative unit. In the Soviet period, its status varied from the autonomous republic belonging to the RSFSR and self-dependent Soviet Socialist Republic (in the 1940s) and then back to the autonomous republic. In a long run, it was decided to commemorate the establishment of Karelian Labor Commune in 1920 (E-86-02). Yet, the pandemic of COVID-19 did not allow to celebrate this date on a grand scale.

In the ethnic republics, in particular in the North Caucasus, the events connected to *the history of titular "nationality"* make up an important category of commemorated past. It could be festive days, like the Day of Circassian flag, that is celebrated by the Adyghes on the 25th of April, or the days of sorrow, like the Day of commemoration of victims of the Caucasian war (the 21st of May) or the Day of Deportation of the Karachays (the 2nd of May). These annual commemorations are conducted by ethnic communities. The regional authorities tolerate them and try to keep balance between public articulations of memories of different ethnic groups. Noticeably that the Day of Slavic Writing and Culture (the 24th of May) is celebrated on the North Caucasus in the same row, because, by the words of our expert, "the Russians are also our titular nationality" (E-91-01). Yet, in the regions where the ethnic Russians prevail, the history of the indigenous non-Russian ethnic groups is typically neglected. By formulation of one of our experts from Far East, people who populated this territory before it was joined to the Russian state, are considered "an amorphous mass that had no history" (E-8-01).

A tendency to emphasize the connections with the center reveals itself in commemorations of *events related to the members of emperors' family*. There are memorials and memorial desks commemorating their visits to Siberia, Far East, and South of Russia, that were destroyed after the revolution and have been restored in the 2000-2010s. Commemoration of the death of Nickolas II and members of his family is a special theme of mnemonic agenda in Urals. "The Tsar's Days", annually organized on the 16-17th of July in Ekaterinburg, were the murder of Romanov's took place, appear the major commemorative event in the region, that attracts lots of pilgrims and broadly covered by media (E-65-03; E-65-04; T-65-06). The administration of Permsky krai willingly commemorated 100 years anniversary of the death of Great Prince Mikhail Romanov, who was murdered in Perm in 2018 (E-57-02). As soon as the responsibility for murdering of the emperor and members of his family is laid at Soviet authorities, nothing prevents contemporary regional elites to use the memory about these tragic events for emphasizing the role of their regions in the national history.

Probably the most typical pattern of using the past for constructing regional identities is commemorating the episodes of national history that could be associated with the territory of a contemporary region. In this vein, in the South of Russia, in Rostov, Krasnodar or Stavropol regions, the role of Cossacks in various historical events, ranging from appointing Mikhail Romanov on throne to World War I, is particularly underlined (E-60-05; E-03-01; E-07-01). In Irkutsk, commemorating the history of the Decembrists, many of whom were exiled to Eastern Siberia, is a remarkable element of the regional cultural brand (E-25-01; E-25-02). History of Urals is often framed by the words from the poem of Alexander Tvardovsky: "Ural, opornyi krai derzhavy...(Ural, a supporting edge of the state)". Representing Urals as a remote industrial center that largely contributed to Russia's military strength is typical not only for the period of Great Patriotic War, that Tvardovsky wrote about, but also for earlier times, which was not totally accurate. By the words of our expert, "the mass public is not aware that by the end of the

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² References to expert interviews are anonymized and given according to the coded list (see appendix 1). Quatations are translated by the author.

nineteenth century our factories were in a poor condition. So, it is widely considered that already in that time Urals used to be '*opornyi krai derzhavy*", a center of military industry" (E-65-01).

Underlining of the role of a region in the national history is particular noticable in the case of the most commemorated historical event, the Great Patriotic War. Regional identities of territories that had been the places of major battles of this war, like Volgograd or Kursk oblast, are strongly associated with this fact. The initiatives of regional mnemonic actors played a role in creating cultural infrastructure of memory about the less famous battles that were shadowed by ones that were considered more decisive, as Mius (Donbass) strategic offensive in Rostov oblast in 1943 (E-60-02), or the battles of Rhzev in Tverskaia oblast 1942-1943 (E-28-02). Both battles recently were commemorated by construction of splendid memorials. The unveiling of the Rzhev Memorial was attended by the presidents of Russia and Belarus, which enhanced its symbolic status.

Another visible pattern is commemorating *the famous cultural actors* who somehow related to the region. The monuments of writers, poets, artists, architects and other cultural heroes, who were born or lived in the region, or even just visited it, decorate squares of cities and towns, their jubilees are commemorated, in some cases regular festivals devoted to famous fellow countrymen are organized.

Conclusion

Summarizing this thematic repertoire, it is easy to notice parallels with the canon that is typical for nation building strategies. The emphasis is laid on political history, glorious and heroic past, and also on famous cultural heroes. The local projections of the national history appear another typical category of usable past, as they accentuate the symbolic significance of the region on the national background. The practices of official commemorations clearly demonstrate the tendency to correlate the history of a region with the all-Russian narrative, which reveals itself in following its chronological and interpretative template. However, it does not exclude tensions, as even being fitted into the general template, the local historical processes took different shapes. The aspects of the past that are not officially commemorated could be promoted by non-state actors thus appearing a part of the regional mnemonic agenda.

The analysis based on the expert interviews reveals that the repertoires of the usable historical past in Russia's regions are not only diverse, but also uneven. They largely follow the official historical narrative that paints the pre-Soviet period with a wide brash, elevates the Second World War, tends to downplay the Civil War and excesses of Stalin's time, and provides little details about the post-War periods. The regional repertoires of usable past are largely focused on the historical events that constitute focal points of the official narrative and appear important for the state. However, Russia's regions experienced the common historical processes in different ways, and inherited or developed variegated symbolic resources for their commemoration. So, the aspects of historical past that are downplayed or silenced at the federal level might be important for highlighting regional distinctiveness, like penal servitude and exile in the tsarist and Soviet times in Siberia, and indispensable for some group identities, like the memory of White movement for Cossacks in the South of Russia. Besides, some discontent about excessive focusing of the national commemorative agenda at the events that were important for Moscow was expressed by many experts (08-01; 81-02; 28-03; 65-06; 25-02).

While suggesting that this mnemonic divergence can be a reason for conflicts, we asked the experts if there were any tensions between the federal and local commemorative agendas in their regions. Notably, no cases perceived as open conflicts were detected. The conversations inspired by this question were rather insightful for understanding the mechanisms of balancing divergent memories. They are manifold. Quite predictably, the regional authorities tend to conform to the federal agenda (07-02, 65-01, 65-03, 84-01, 28-01, 61-01, 86-02), and "to escape the projects that could raise public resonance", i.e., contestation (07-01). As soon as Moscow

provides some resources for commemoration of the historical events that fit its agenda, they are willingly accepted ("There is no problem in commemorating what the federal authorities want. If they give money, why not commemorate" (08-01)). At the same time, the federal center tries to construct mechanisms of integrating local memories into the general commemorative agenda. It is particularly evident in the case of the WWII. Currently, there are 45 "Cities of Military Glory" and 47 "Cities of Labor Prowess". The bureaucratic practice of collecting local proposals for the general plan of the annual and anniversary commemorations of the Victory coordinated by the Russian Pobeda [Victory] Organizing Committee headed by Putin (E-50-02), facilitates the integration of diverse local memories.

The politics of memory at the regional level is not exhausted by the official agenda. It involves numerous non-state mnemonic actors, either institutionalized or not, who promote commemoration of specific aspects of local past, thus constructing local identities. In some cases, non-state mnemonic actors essentially contribute to the development of memory infrastructure by installing commemorative plaques, lobbying monuments, and creating private museums, which requires negotiating with authorities. Even being short of resources for developing memory hardware, non-state mnemonic actors can affect public discussions, raising awareness about the downplayed aspects of local past. It makes regional repertoires of usable past much more diverse than it one could suggest, if focusing exclusively on a federal commemorative agenda.

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Appendix 1.

The list of expert interviews

The expert's code	The region	The expert's professional characteristics	Date of the interview
03-01	Krasnodar region	The historian	14.04.2020
03-02	Krasnodar region	The historian	06.02.2021
03-03	Krasnodar region	The historian	03.03.2021
03-04	Krasnodar region	The tour guide at the historical park "Russia – my history"	21.03.2021
07-01	Stavropol region	The historian	15.04.2020
07-02	Stavropol region	The historian	18.04.2020
07-03	Stavropol region	Vice-ataman of the Cossack organization	16.03.2021
08-01	Khabarovsk region	The political scientist	18.05.2020
08-02	Khabarovsk region	The political scientist	18.05.2020
08-03	Khabarovsk region	The member of regional department of the Russian Military Historical Society	27.05.2020
18-01	Volgograd region	The historian	20.12.2020
22-01	Nizhny Novgorod region	The historian	15.01.2021
22-02	Nizhny Novgorod region	The tour guide	18.01.2021
22-03	Nizhny Novgorod region	The journalist	24.01.2021
22-04	Nizhny Novgorod region	The historian	18.03.2021
22-05	Nizhny Novgorod region	The scholar of cultural studies	21.03.2021
25-01	Irkutsk region	The historian	12.06.2020
25-02	Irkutsk region	The historian	02.05.2020
27-01	Kaliningrad region	The historian	26.04.2020
27-02	Kaliningrad region	The historian	01.05.2020

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27-03	Kaliningrad region	The historian	13.05.2020
28-01	Tver region	The historian	04.07.2020
28-02	Tver region	The professional photographer	14.07.2020
28-03	Tver region	The journalist	14.07.2020
36-01	Samara region	The historian	18.11.2020
36-02	Samara region	The historian	17.03.2021
41-01	Leningrad region	The archeologist	26.11.2020
41-02	Leningrad region	The historian, works at a museum	25.10.2020
41-03	Leningrad region	The museum curator	12.12.2020
41-04	Leningrad region	The historian	12.12.2020
50-01	Novosibirsk region	The historian	18.06.2021
50-02	Novosibirsk region	The local official	19.01.2022
57-01-1	Perm region	The historian	26.04.2020
57-01-2	Perm region	The historian	19.01.2023
57-02	Perm region	The political scientist	26.04.2020
57-03-1	Perm region	The historian	20.03.2021
57-03-2	Perm region	The historian	14.01.2023
57-04	Perm region	The historian	19.01.2023
60-01	Rostov region	The historian	12.04.2020
60-02	Rostov region	The historian	18.04.2020
60-03	Rostov region	The director of museum	20.04.2020
60-04	Rostov region	The political scientist	05.05.2020
60-05	Rostov region	The historian	17.12.2020
60-06	Rostov region	The tourist guide	14.07.2021
61-01	Ryazan region	The historian	17.04.2020
61-02	Ryazan region	The historian	22.04.2020
65-01	Sverdlovsk region	The historian	21.04.2020
65-02	Sverdlovsk region	The political scientist	24.04.2020
65-03	Sverdlovsk region	The historian	26.04.2020
65-04	Sverdlovsk region	The municipal deputy	27.04.2020
65-04-2	Sverdlovsk region	The municipal deputy	19.01.2023
65-05	Sverdlovsk region	The historian	09.09.2020
65-06	Sverdlovsk region	The tour guide	10.11.2020
69-01	Tomsk region	The journalist	11.11.2020
69-02	Tomsk region	The political scientist	16.11.2020
79-01	Republic of Adygea	The sociologist	17.04.2020
79-02	Republic of Adygea	The historian	21.04.2020
79-03	Republic of Adygea	The historian	23.04.2020
79-04	Republic of Adygea	The historian	24.04.2020
80-01	Republic of Bashkortostan	The historian	03.06.2020
81-01	Republic of Buryatia	The historian	15.06.2020
81-02	Republic of Buryatia	The historian	17.06.2020
81-03	Republic of Buryatia	The historian	23.06.2020
82-01	Republic of Dagestan	The historian	26.05.2020
82-02	Republic of Dagestan	The journalist	29.05.2020
82-03	Republic of Dagestan	The historian	31.05.2020
83-01	Republic of Kabardino- Balkaria	The historian	10.06.2020
83-02	Republic of Kabardino- Balkaria	The historian	13.04.2021

84-01	Altai region	The political scientist	10.09.2020
86-01	Republic of Karelia	The historian	04.05.2020
86-02	Republic of Karelia	The historian	03.05.2020
86-03	Republic of Karelia	The historian	05.05.2020
90-01	Republic of North Ossetia	The historian	14.04.2021
91-01	Karachay-Circassian Republic	The political scientist	26.05.2020
92-01	Republic of Tatarstan	The historian and tourist guide	31.05.2020, 2.06.2020
92-02	Republic of Tatarstan	The historian	08.08.2020
92-03	Republic of Tatarstan	The journalist	23.01.2021
92-04	Republic of Tatarstan	The journalist	27.01.2021
94-01	Republic of Udmurtia	The tourist guide	15.02.2021
94-02	Republic of Udmurtia	The local historian	26.02.2021
94-03	Republic of Udmurtia	The historian	24.02.2021
94-04	Republic of Udmurtia	The specialist in ethnography	16.03.2021
94-05	Republic of Udmurtia	Teacher of history	09.03.2021
94-06	Republic of Udmurtia	The historian, the tourist guide	09.03.2021