Foundation EVZ Remembrance Responsibility Future

Russia's critical memory

An empirical study of Russia's culture of remembrance, 2023

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Levada-Center

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Dr. Ralf Possekel

Study findings

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A: About the “Russia’s critical memory” study

Motivation

With its war of aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has irrevocably and explicitly violated the founding consensus of the EVZ Foundation, which is dedicated to fostering lasting international understanding and a peaceful Europe in light of the violent history of the 20th century. As a supporter of Russia’s[1] democratically oriented civil society, the EVZ Foundation explored the extent to which Russian society supports this radical shift and the attitudes and perspectives shaping its people. **Cultures of remembrance serve as vital resources for providing political meaning and direction.** But in what way and to what extent does the Russian culture of remembrance still hold critical potential that educational activities could build upon? In light of this, in 2022 the EVZ Foundation commissioned an internationally renowned, independent opinion research institute in Moscow to carry out a study on Russia’s culture of remembrance.

It is now no longer possible for Russian civil society to collaborate legally with supporters outside the country. At the same time, it is reorganizing itself in exile and seeking strategies to promote social change from this new context.

The findings of the study may be of interest to institutions that, by mandate, will continue to engage with Russian society – whether within the country or in exile – in the future. The complete study by Lev Gudkov and Natalja Zorkaya, featuring empirical data and analyses, will be published in July 2024 in the journal OSTEUROPA.

The following presents selected empirical findings on Russia’s culture of remembrance, accompanied by commentary from the EVZ Foundation’s perspective. Our interpretations do not always directly align with those of Gudkov and Zorkaya but sometimes focus on other contexts, particularly comparisons with the findings of the Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor (MEMO studies) for Germany. The EVZ Foundation initiated these studies in collaboration with the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University in 2018, in response to the rise of anti-democratic and populist movements in Germany (particularly since the AfD entered the Bundestag in 2017), conducting five surveys and a youth study up to 2023 (www.stiftung-evz.de/was-wir-foerdern/handlungsfelder-cluster/bilden-fuer-lebendiges-erinnern/memo-studie/).[2]

The survey

The Levada Center conducted the surveys (22 questions) in Russia from February 21 to 28, 2023. This involved a representative sample of 1,626 adults (18+) from urban and rural populations across 137 localities and 50 administrative units (federal subjects of the Russian Federation). The participants were interviewed in their homes. Levada has data on the Russian culture of remembrance spanning the past 25 years, which helps identify long-term trends. The survey was designed and analyzed by Lev Gudkov and Natalja Zorkaya.

Culture of remembrance as a critical resource

Insights from the MEMO studies in Germany suggest that cultures of remembrance evolve slowly and are often marked by inertia. This does not exclude the possibility that certain segments of society – specific generations or social groups – respond more quickly to certain events and adjust their attitudes. We assume, however, that the findings from early 2023 remain valid and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

The EVZ Foundation is particularly focused on the critical potential of cultures of remembrance, or "critical memory". It aligns with the understanding developed in German society after 1945 that "negative history", such as the era of National Socialism and its crimes, must never be forgotten or dismissed in the name of making a clean break. The remembrance of "negative history" is closely tied to the mandate for political education: the memory of National Socialist crimes is meant to instill values and guiding principles for citizens of a democratic state.

Russian society also harbors deeply ambivalent memories: On one hand, the dominant narrative of heroism and victory in the Great Patriotic War, and on the other, the memory of Stalinism as an extreme manifestation of state injustice during the Soviet era from 1917 to 1991. As in Germany, both memories are shaped by the transition from "communicative" to "cultural memory", although the memory of Stalinism, with very few exceptions, primarily remains rooted in the so-called "communicative memory".

The memory of the Second World War as the "Great Patriotic War" is itself ambivalent, as it not only includes heroism but also the long-stigmatized groups labeled as traitors, such as Soviet prisoners of war and the so-called Eastern Workers.

The murders of Red Army commanders in 1937–38 and the crimes at Katyn are just two examples of Stalinism's negative history.

How Russians position themselves within Russia's ambivalent culture of remembrance can serve as an indirect indicator of their relationship to current Russian politics.

Study design

The study is exploratory, allowing for the design of further surveys if needed. The development of this initial design did not yet take the following questions into account:

How can colonial or imperial perspectives on the culture of remembrance among citizens of the Russian Federation be empirically distinguished from anti-colonial views in a nationwide representative survey? This is a new discourse for the Russian general public, suggesting that critical perspectives are likely to be scarcely noticeable. Direct comparative data from earlier studies is limited. Developing suitable indicators and, if necessary, conducting a representative survey remains a task for the future.

How can the "cynical approach" to remembrance, as openly and crudely displayed on Russian talk shows, be empirically studied? This is also an increasingly relevant question for future research – not only in Russia.

The study also serves as a pilot project for developing transnational frameworks. The evaluation also incorporates some comparable data from the MEMO studies in Germany.

The validity of the responses

The data collected by the Levada Center remains significant despite respondents' fear of repression. Addressing the debate on the reliability of opinion polls in Russia, Prof. Heiko Pleines from the University of Bremen has commented on recent data collected by the Levada Center, asserting that it remains significant even amid the current war situation. Although the responses do not reflect "what people truly think and do, but only what they are willing to express 'in public' (i.e., in conversation with someone they do not know personally)", Pleines argues that "this does not render the surveys useless or misleading.

They must be taken for what they are: Publicly expressed opinions. This is highly significant for many research questions."[3] Gudkov and Zorkaya also highlight that surveys reflect "public opinion", shaped by the "influence of social institutions".

B: Study findings

1. Decreasing interest in history within Russian society

While 73 percent expressed an interest in history in 2008, this number had dropped to 66 percent by 2023.[4] However, only 22 percent expressed a strong interest (2008: 24 percent). This trend seems valid, as the younger generation's strong interest in history was significantly lower in 2023 (13 percent) compared with older individuals (27 percent).[5] This finding is notable, considering that Putin frequently justifies his policies in detailed and explicit historical terms.

A decline in interest in history may stem from two causes: Firstly, unlike state socialist societies, modern societies derive legitimacy less from history and more from their rules and prosperity. In this respect, it may represent a long-term trend in a society's modernization. For example, in 2023, only fifteen percent of young people in Germany expressed a "strong interest" in history, showing no difference between young people in Germany and Russia in this regard.

Another clear interpretation links the decline in historical interest to the frequent and often blatant manipulation of history. This is reinforced by the fact that interest in history has also decreased among older people in Russia.

Nonetheless, it can be assumed that about half of Russians are still receptive to historical arguments. The situation is no different in Germany.[6]

2. "Negative memory" lacking a foundation in society

In Russia, interest in negative historical topics varies, ranging from twenty-one percent (Stalin's repressions) to five percent (persecution of dissidents).[7] This declines as the generational distance from the events increases: Younger people (ages 18 to 39) are less interested in such historical events than older generations.

Notably, this trend is reversed in Germany, where younger generations show significantly greater interest in negative history (around 80 percent) compared to the general population (around 54 percent).

The responses to the question of a clean break point in the same direction in both Germany and Russia: At least half of those surveyed in Russia still generally supported actively remembering Stalin's repressions. However, older people (53 percent) are more likely to believe this than younger people (39 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds).[8] In Germany in 2022, by contrast, only 25 percent of the general population believed we should "make a clean break with the National Socialist era", and the figure was even lower among young people (15 percent).[9]

While "negative remembrance" is embraced and supported by the younger generation in Germany, this is not true in Russia. It can therefore be assumed that the history of the 20th century will become less accessible in Russia as a critical resource for addressing present challenges.

This is paired with an increasingly positive perception of Stalin as a figure: When asked whether Stalin had done more good than harm, only 16 percent agreed in 1994, compared to 61 percent in 2023.

Did Stalin do more good than harm? (Agreement in percent)

1994	1999	2003	2008	2012	2016	2023
16	26	29	25	27	40	61

The broad absence of critical remembrance in Russia aligns with a strong sense of historical fatalism: 71 percent of those surveyed agreed that people today are still capable of committing crimes like those perpetrated by the National Socialists in Germany during the Second World War.

In Germany, the comparable figure in 2022 was much lower at 53 percent.[10] When asked if *Germans* could commit similar acts again, the figure was even lower at 31%.

Critical remembrance can thus coexist with moderate historical optimism.

3. Disillusionment regarding Russian history

A culture of remembrance is always tied to emotions, which are more enduring and motivating than cognition and can serve as important unifying forces in society. Russian state history policy seeks to evoke emotions in various ways, such as through major film productions or public displays like the "Immortal Regiment" commemorative march, where participants carry photos of family members who fought in the Second World War.[11]

Among the Russian population, a noticeable detachment from their historical past is evident – except for two key events: the victory in the "Great Patriotic War" and the collapse of the USSR. In this regard, Russian history politics and propaganda are certainly effective at times. However, this is unfolding against the backdrop of a longer and likely stronger trend of weakening emotional connections.

The data suggests that the government has successfully maintained a consistently high level of pride among the population in the victory of the Great Patriotic War – between 1999 and 2023, 82 to 89 percent of respondents expressed pride in it. It is hard to determine whether these responses result from the extremely high social pressure to conform in this area or genuinely reflect personal feelings. Notably, the sense of pride has declined, to varying degrees, on other topics over the past 20 years (percentage agreement):

Pride in the following aspects of Russia's history:	1999	2008	2018	2023
Victory in the Great Patriotic War	86	89	87	87
Leading role in space travel	60	61	50	49
Russian science	52	46	37	37
Russian literature	46	49	40	27
Russian weapons	35	36	36	18
Unique moral qualities of the Russian people	45	35	31	17
Stabilization of the country under Putin	-	33	18	15

This includes the sharp decline in pride regarding the reintegration of Crimea, which dropped from 43 percent in 2017 to 20 percent in 2023. The war against Ukraine has also affected emotional reserves: only 7 percent of respondents said the war made them feel proud, while 8 percent expressed shame.

This trend is consistent – though with slight variations – across all age groups and applies equally to feelings of shame. This has also declined significantly. For example, the shame over Stalin's terror decreased from 34 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2023. The only exception is shame about the collapse of the USSR, which has remained constant or risen slightly, from 48 percent in 1999 to 51 percent in 2023. However, this finding may also reflect overt pressure to conform.

Disillusionment regarding Russian history poses both a risk and an opportunity. The risk lies in disinterest, cynicism and the breakdown of social cohesion. The opportunity lies in the potential for new, emotionally compelling narratives to emerge through social media or pop culture, connecting people across regions and social groups. Recent lavishly produced feature films with propaganda-driven narratives have yet to fill this vacuum.

4. Political and apolitical families – an increasingly apolitical society

The truly private space of the family holds the potential for "counter-narratives" that contrast with public discourses. **A clear trend of depoliticization in private spaces can be observed here:** In 2023, 41 percent of families avoided discussing historical or contentious current political issues, such as the war in Afghanistan, political leadership, the economic situation, censorship, repression under Putin or emigration (1989: 25 percent; 2008: 17 percent).

As expected, the leading topic among those discussing such issues is the war against Ukraine, mentioned by 41% of respondents. This is not necessarily evidence of politicization, as the focus is likely on personal concerns, such as the impact on family members. As expected, the topic of emigration, which closely intertwines political and personal aspects, has also gained importance – albeit at a low level – rising from 6 percent in 1989 to 7 percent in 2008 and 12 percent in 2023.[12] In contrast, explicitly political topics play a much smaller role, with only 8 percent discussing repression and censorship under Putin.

Even though such surveys only provide a limited glimpse into family life, the data supports the assumption that society is currently largely depoliticized. This suggests that, unlike in 1989 or even 2008, people in this society currently see no real opportunities for meaningful change that would require them to take a personal stance.

5. Widespread conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy thinking simplifies complex social dynamics by attributing them to secret powers, helps individuals make sense of their feelings of powerlessness, creates images of an enemy, and can shape social and political behavior accordingly. This, in turn, fuels populist politics and paves the way for justifying rule violations. When hidden powers operate in secrecy, it provides a rationale for implementing extraordinary measures. Conspiracy thinking often reflects political irrationality and a sense of powerlessness. It is evident in both autocratic and democratic societies.

A significant majority of Russian society (61 percent) subscribes to conspiracy thinking, particularly among supporters of Putin's policies. Only a minority of society remains unaffected by it.

The link with political orientation is clear: 63 percent of supporters of current policies agree with conspiracy thinking, while only 17 percent disagree. In contrast, 49 percent of policy critics agree with conspiracy ideas, and 28 percent disagree.

Approval ratings steadily increase with the respondents' age. (Agreement in percent)

18–24	25–39	40–54	über 55
43	55	65	67

In Germany, however, 30 percent of the general population agreed with this statement in 2022, according to our MEMO study, with the highest approval ratings among younger people (40 percent).[13]

Political irrationality and a sense of powerlessness are thus twice as prevalent in Russia as in Germany. Among young people, however, the differences between the two societies are not significant.

6. Germany – rejection and role model at the same time

Relations with Germany have steadily worsened since the annexation of Crimea in spring 2014 and are now at an all-time low. Positive perceptions have dropped from over 80 percent in 2011 to 20 percent by May 2022. This is no doubt due to Germany's unconditional and increasingly clear support for Ukraine.

Nevertheless, positive attitudes persist among some segments of the Russian population in 2023. Nearly half (45%) of respondents still agreed that Germany has successfully overcome its dark past and accepted guilt and responsibility for National Socialist crimes. However, approval declines with the respondents' age. (in percent)

18–24	25–39	40–54	über 55
51	47	46	40

The picture is even clearer regarding the approval ratings for the presence of many National Socialist memorials in Germany and a memorial to the murdered Jews in the center of Berlin. 64 percent of respondents view this positively, though approval decreases significantly across older age groups. (in percent)

18–24	25–39	40–54	über 55
50	55	65	72

Both findings highlight the limits of the prevailing state discourse. **In the future, focusing on concrete stories of responsibility and solidarity with the victims of National Socialism could be a meaningful approach to communication.**

This hypothesis is supported by another finding: More than half of respondents (56%) consider Germany's efforts to come to terms with National Socialism as "important" for remembering Stalinist crimes. (in percent)

	18–24	25–39	40–54	über 55
	58	51	58	57

This view is clearly shared across all generations and endures despite the significant deterioration in relations with Germany. There may be many reasons for this. The payments made to former forced laborers in the 1990s and 2000s, which drew significant attention in Russia – particularly in light of the absence of rehabilitation for Stalinism's victims – likely contributed to this perception.

7. NS forced laborers no longer traitors

Another finding supports this: **Former forced laborers are no longer regarded as "traitors" in Russia.** Only 3 percent of the general public view them as traitors, while 90 percent regard them as victims who deserve to be remembered. Unlike 30 years ago, basic knowledge of this aspect of history now appears firmly embedded in Russian collective memory. 80 percent of respondents state they are aware that millions of Soviet citizens were deported for forced labor in the German war economy, although this knowledge diminishes with each generation.

The historical German-Russian connection through National Socialist crimes and Germany's assumption of responsibility remains a valuable topic for discourse, independent of state propaganda. The disappearance of the "traitor" stigma is not primarily due to German-Russian efforts to jointly address this history, but is instead a result of the growing presence of a "victimhood" narrative within Russian social discourse. This issue warrants further exploration.[14]

8. Putin's youth – no significant politicization

A focus on young people, specifically 18- to 24-year-olds (Generation Z/P),[15] is particularly interesting for two main reasons: The attitudes of young adults can indicate how the views of the general population may shift as generations change. However, this is not guaranteed, as attitudes may shift during life transitions, such as entering phases focused on family and career or later transitioning into retirement. Additionally, Generation Z in Russia is also a "Generation P", influenced by their parents' post-Soviet experiences and shaped by the Putin era in a Russia closely connected to the globalized (Western) world.

Lev Gudkov and Natalja Zorkaya estimate that only 6 to 7 percent of young people hold a broadly liberal attitude. Differences in the views of Generation Z/P from those of the general population do not suggest a particular politicization of young people or a more rational perspective on Soviet-era history. However, there are noticeable differences from the general population, making it difficult to form a clear generational profile.

Compared to the general population, young people in Russia exhibit:

less
- Interest in history
- Interest in the Great Patriotic War
- Interest in even more remembrance of the victory over Germany and less knowledge about the history of NS forced labor.

more
- Interest in Russian modernity
- Interest in the dissidents
- Pride in Russian literature
- Pride in perestroika
- Shame for repression and terror
- Shame for the incompetent corrupt state
- Shame for the war against Ukraine

Young people
- talk less about politics in the family
- are less conspiracy-minded
- are less fatalistic

9. Conclusion: 10 percent exhibit explicitly critical attitudes, while 20 percent show potential for a critical culture of remembrance

If Russia's "critical memory" is used as an indicator of potentially critical attitudes within the population, this potential stands at approximately 20 percent.[16] This is twice as high as the proportion of explicitly critical attitudes toward current events, which is less than 10 percent of respondents.[17]

Russia's "critical memory" is a valuable resource that should be preserved and strengthened by supporting relevant civil society actors. A key medium-term challenge is engaging the next generation in Russia.

Endnotes

1 "Russia" refers to the "Russian Federation" and its citizens. The official English name of the country is the Russian Federation. However, the Russian name "Российская Федерация" (Rossiyskaya Federatsiya) refers to all citizens of Russia, not just ethnic Russians, emphasizing that its population is not exclusively made up of (ethnic) Russians.

2 The responsibility for this evaluation rests solely with the EVZ Foundation and the author. The study published in OSTEUROPA provides far more extensive data and focuses its interpretation on Russia as a society that remains strongly post-Soviet in character.

3 Heiko Pleines leads the Department of Politics and Economics at the Research Center for Eastern Europe at the University of Bremen and serves as curator of the "Opinion Polls" section on the Discuss Data online platform. There, on 2 February 2023, he wrote that Levada's data "still achieves a reasonable degree of representativeness". According to him, over time and depending on the topic, this difference becomes increasingly significant. Heiko Pleines, comment: The Levada Center's opinion polls on the Discuss Data online platform. The debate over the data's informative value. In: Russland-Analysen no. 430, www.bpb.de/themen/europa/russland-analysen/nr-430/518037/kommentar-die-meinungsumfragen-des-lewada-zentrums-auf-der-discuss-data-online-plattform-zur-diskussion-um-die-aussagekraft-der-daten/ [viewed on October 18, 2023].

4 In 2023, unlike in 2008, one possible answer was "partly".

5 Here, 18 to 24-year-olds are compared with respondents over 55 ("pre-retirement and retirement age").

6 57 percent expressed interest, with 22 percent very interested and 35 percent somewhat interested. In Germany in 2022, interest – albeit in German history – was similarly high at 54 percent (22 percent strong interest, 32 percent rather strong interest).

7 In contrast, interest in positive aspects among citizens of the Russian Federation ranges from 42 percent (USSR achievements) to 68 percent (victory over Germany).

8 47 percent of 25- to 39-year-olds support actively remembering Stalin's repressions.

9 Cf. MEMO – Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor, study 5, 2022, p. 30 evz_brosch_memo_2022_de_final.pdf (stiftung-evz.de)

10 Ibid.

11 Methodologically, exploring emotions may be the most effective way to uncover genuine attitudes—after all, emotions are involuntary unless strong social pressure enforces conformity around specific feelings. Cf. the research of Ute Frevert.

12 The percentage was highest in Moscow at 15 percent and lowest in small towns with populations under 100,000 at 10 percent.

13 Cf. MEMO – Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor, study 5, 2022, p. 30, evz_brosch_memo_2022_de_final.pdf (stiftung-evz.de).

14 The discourse surrounding the "Great Patriotic War" remains unclear: when asked in 2023 what should be remembered "more than in the past" in the future, 88 percent still highlighted the heroic deeds of soldiers and officers. Significantly fewer – only 56 percent – supported remembering human suffering.

15 Generation Z refers to those born between 1997 and 2012. It does not refer to the "Z" of Russian war propaganda. Here, P refers to Putin, not to be confused with Generation P from Viktor Pelevin's novel or the Pepsi Generation of 1963.

16 The indicators are interest in Stalinism (19 percent), the desire to learn more about Stalinism (21 percent), and shame regarding repression (24 percent).

17 8 percent feel ashamed of the war in Ukraine, and another 8 percent mention censorship and repression under Putin.