

MEMORY STUDIES

Spinning the past: Russian and Georgian accounts of the war of August 2008

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Abstract

Efforts by national media and political leaders to 'spin', or shape the public interpretation of events, are examined from the perspective of collective memory. It is argued that top-down analyses of such efforts overlook essential aspects of how shared national narratives shape collective interpretation and memory. Political leaders' efforts to manage public discourse about important events provide insight into the existence and structure of 'deep memory' and the 'narrative template' that mediates it for a mnemonic community. Using the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 as an illustration, two different national narrative templates are outlined and used to account for radically different views of the war and its causes.

Key words

collective memory; deep memory; Georgia; narrative template; Russia

Research in psychology has long suggested that the activity of retrieving information about an event may have as much to do with remembering it as the original experience itself. For example, the vivid 'flashbulb' memories we have for where we were when we heard about 9/11 may not be as accurate as we think, instead being the product of numerous intense discussions following the event. This line of reasoning has been elaborated through controlled experimental studies in cognitive psychology. For instance Roediger et al. (1996) have shown that false memories can be created by systematically manipulating retrieval activities between an experience and its eventual recall.

Political leaders do not usually rely on cognitive psychology when planning campaigns and rallies, but in some cases it almost seems as if they do. In contemporary parlance, what we have in mind falls under the heading of 'spin' or the practice of systematically managing public discussion of an event, ideally as soon as possible after it has occurred. This has become a standard part of American politics where 'spin doctors' rush to tell viewers what a political candidate just said in a televised debate and analysts reflect on a major speech the minute it is finished.

While media in other societies may not encourage such practices to the degree they are practiced in the USA, the function served by spin can be found in other guises. In particular, it is not uncommon for the political leaders of a country to make public statements or hold rallies in light of an event that has just occurred, and these practices may shape memory for the event as much as initial impressions or experiences. In what follows, we examine a striking example of such practices as they occurred in Russia and Georgia after their short war in August 2008 in the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia. In this case, the two sides portrayed the conflict in such different ways that it sometimes seemed as if they were creating an image of the past out of whole cloth rather than talking about the event itself.

The brief, but fierce military conflict between Russia and Georgia began in the late hours of 7 August with a Georgian bombardment of Tskhinvali, a city in the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia, and it was largely over by 12 August with the rout of Georgian forces from the region. Russia's invasion of Georgia continued for several more days in South Ossetia as well as in a second secessionist region of Abkhazia and other areas of Georgia.

In Russia, the conflict was repeatedly presented by leaders and the media as an unprovoked attack by an aggressor that resulted in a well-deserved and forceful rebuff aimed at protecting Russian citizens. In striking contrast, the Georgian leadership and media presented the August war as a long planned invasion of a small nation's sovereign territory by a huge military power intent on re-annexing it into its empire. Georgian efforts to interpret the war went even further as some leaders sought to recast the obvious military defeat in August as a victory in a larger scheme of things. This effort was reflected in political rallies that occurred even as Russian tanks were only a few dozen kilometers from the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

How could such wildly different ways of interpreting the August events exist side by side in Russia and Georgia? Where did they come from, and why do they appear to have such staying power? When answering such questions it is tempting to focus on 'top-down' forces, especially in the form of state-controlled media. In an age of widespread access to the internet and other forms of IT, however, such explanations leave something to be desired. In this particular instance, people in each country were in fact quite familiar with the version of the events being presented in the other, but large numbers of them remained obdurate in their commitment to their own version. They tended to reject the other account out of hand, dismissing it as profoundly uninformed, if not simply a delusion or malicious fabrication.

Of course, this is not to say that attempts at top-down control by political leaders and media have no impact on what people in Georgia and Russia believe. Scholars such as Michael Schudson (1993) have documented how extensively the media can shape collective memory for events such as the Watergate scandal in Richard Nixon's administration in the USA. However, it does suggest that in order to be effective, this control must harness deeper traditions of what Brian Stock (1983) calls 'textual communities,' or large-scale discursive collectives that form around texts such as the Bible or national narratives. It will be these collective, bottom-up processes that will be the primary focus of what follows. Specifically, we shall examine these textual traditions

from the perspective of how Russian and Georgian national narratives shape collective memory and the interpretation of the August war.

MEDIATION, NARRATIVE TEMPLATES, AND DEEP COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Our account of interpretation and spin rests on three basic assumptions. First, we believe that collective memory is best understood in terms of 'mediation' (Wertsch, 1998), especially mediation by 'narrative tools' (Wertsch, 2002). This is part of the larger issue of what Ernest Cassirer termed the 'curse of mediacy' (1946: 7) or the processes whereby symbolic means stand between humans and the reality about which they speak and think. From the perspective of Cassirer or figures such as Lev Semënovich Vygotsky (1981), most human experience is mediated, and the problem becomes one of understanding what symbolic means are involved and how they shape understanding and interpretation.

Such symbolic means can provide both the power of insight and the blindness of prejudice. In the case of the August war between Georgia and Russia, there were people who had relatively direct access to the event, but even they had to use symbolic means to interpret what they witnessed, usually by fitting events they observed into a story. And in most cases their experience was further mediated by reliance on others' eye witness accounts and media reports.

The narrative tools involved in these processes are not simply a matter of individual psychology. They also are crucial to understanding what Frederic Bartlett called 'memory *in the group*' (1932: 296), that is, patterns of remembering that are shared by members of a collective. For Bartlett this is not reducible to 'memory *of the group*' (1932: 296), which would be some form of collective consciousness that exists independently of group members' psychological processes, but it is consistent with recognizing social and political forces that shape the narrative tools employed in common by group members. From this perspective the 'effort after meaning' (Bartlett, 1932: 20) pursued by members of a group is knit together by the use of a common set of narrative tools, and collective memory is collective because of these shared narrative resources.

The second assumption that undergirds our line of reasoning concerns a distinction between collective memory and what Maurice Halbwachs called 'formal history' (1980: 78). Whereas practitioners of the discipline of history aspire to provide accounts of the past that take into account multiple forms of evidence and competing points of view, collective memory typically relies on simplifying narratives that are 'impatient with ambiguity' (Novick, 1999), especially moral ambiguity, that could get in the way of a group's identity project.

The distinction between formal history and collective memory is neither simple nor easy to maintain (cf. Mink, 1978), but there remain crucial differences between the two ways of relating to the past. In its quest to provide ever more comprehensive accounts of the past, formal history views narratives as hypotheses against which evidence from archives, interviews and other sources can be tested. This approach rests

on the assumption that a narrative may be modified or even rejected in light of new information. In contrast, collective memory often takes narratives as objects of dogmatic loyalty, and for this reason they are nearly impervious to change even in the face of strong contradictory evidence. This difference in orientation has led scholars such as Pierre Nora (1989) to argue that formal history and memory stand in an opposition where historical analysis is a threat to the comfortable certainties of memory. In short, history is willing to change a narrative in order to be loyal to facts, whereas collective memory may be willing to change facts in order to be loyal to a narrative.

A third assumption that guides our argument is that examining the narrative resources involved in collective memory requires two levels of analysis. On the one hand are 'specific narratives', which concern concrete events that occur at unique times and places. Media accounts of the August war between Russia and Georgia are examples of specific narratives. On the other hand, specific narratives typically reflect the workings of underlying 'narrative templates' (Wertsch, 2002) that operate at a more general, schematic level.

The idea of a template suggests that an underlying general story line is used repeatedly to make sense of multiple specific events. In some cases, the existence of the narrative template is reflected in the very terms used to refer to events. For example, in Russia the cataclysm of 1941–45 is known as the Great Fatherland War (Великая Отечественная война), an appellation that echoes the expression 'Fatherland War' (Отечественная война), or what is known in the West as the French invasion of Russia in 1812. The implied equivalence between the two events becomes all the more apparent when one considers that the expression 'Hitler as a second Napoleon' has long enjoyed widespread usage in the Russian mnemonic community. The list of parallels stemming from this template is much longer for Russians than these two wars, with the implication being that the same basic story line (i.e. narrative template) with different characters has played out many times over past centuries.

The notion of a narrative template grows out of ideas that have long been part of the humanities and social sciences. Among its predecessors are the ideas of Vladimir Propp (1968[1928]) on textual 'functions' found in folk tales and Bartlett's notion of schema. Narrative templates mediate what can be termed 'deep collective memory' (Wertsch, 2008), a form of representation that is deep both in the sense that it is largely inaccessible to conscious reflection and in the sense that members of a collective tend to have deep emotional attachment to it. This emotional dimension is evident in those instances where it is clear that questioning a collective's narrative template is taken to be a personal attack on group members themselves.

This concern with emotion would seem to suggest a parallel with the notion of deep memory used by Lawrence Langer (1993) in his analysis of Holocaust testimonies, but the two ideas and the phenomena they are meant to address are somewhat different. Langer's notion grows out of a concern with the resistance that horrendous, traumatic events have to being interpreted within a coherent system of meaning, whereas the narrative templates that mediate deep collective memory are almost too powerful as a 'cognitive instrument' (Mink, 1978). Indeed, this sort of deep memory can provide interpretations that are, if anything, so facile that they remain superficial and misleading.

THE AUGUST WAR AND THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL NARRATIVE TEMPLATE

As outlined elsewhere (Wertsch, 2002, 2008), a narrative template that shapes much of Russian collective memory is the 'Expulsion of Foreign Enemies' story made up of the following elements:

1. An 'initial situation' in which Russia is peaceful and not interfering with others.
2. 'Trouble,' in which a foreign enemy viciously attacks Russia without provocation.
3. Russia nearly loses everything in total defeat as it suffers from the enemy's attempts to destroy it as a civilization.
4. Through heroism and exceptionalism, against all odds, and acting alone, Russia triumphs and succeeds in expelling the foreign enemy and defeating this enemy in its own land.

The existence of this narrative template has been supported by analyses of accounts of the past found in the public sphere. For example, Wertsch (2002) has documented how various versions of the Great Fatherland War in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian history textbooks share its underlying structure even in the face of striking differences in how the specific narratives from the two periods portray actors and their motives. Wertsch (2008) has also argued that this narrative template is behind episodes in the politics of memory such as that played out in 2007 over the meaning of a war monument in Estonia.

These analyses suggest that the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template is widely employed by members of the Russian mnemonic community. It provides a framework for emplotting the unique events of specific narratives such that they take on the form of the same story with different characters, something strongly suggested by expressions such as 'Hitler as the second Napoleon.' This should not be taken to suggest that the specific narratives associated with this template are simply fabricated or figments of the imagination of this mnemonic community. Russia obviously *has* suffered at the hands of foreign enemies on numerous occasions. But it is to say that the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template provides a powerful interpretive framework that guides the thinking and speaking of the members of this community, especially when they encounter a new event whose significance is not yet clear.

It is not difficult to see how Russians could interpret events such as the invasion by the Swedish King Charles XII of the 18th century, the Napoleonic War of the 19th century and the German invasion of the 20th century as instantiations of the same narrative template (Wertsch, 2008). However, the power and extent of use of this interpretive framework is sometimes quite striking to those coming from other mnemonic communities. For example, it often surprises members of other groups to hear Soviet communism described as a foreign enemy, this time in the form of western ideas that Russian people managed to defeat and expel.

Some might question whether the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template is peculiarly Russian. At least some of its elements would appear to be in the repertoire

of narrative tools used by members of other mnemonic communities. The American view of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, for example, is built around the notion of an unprovoked attack. The fact that such questions arise reflects a basic property of narrative templates: their abstract, schematic nature. Precisely because they are abstract, they are consistent with a range of specific narratives, including some from more than one mnemonic community.

But a second defining property of national narrative templates concerns a tendency that stands in opposition to abstraction and generality. Namely, national narrative templates are built around a kind of unique specificity that reflects what Jan Assmann (2007) has termed 'ethnocentric narcissism'. The narcissism involved is not that of selfishness. Indeed, Russia often views itself as just the opposite of selfish, namely as a collective that has been willing to take on sacrifices in order to save larger groups or all humankind. Instead, the narcissism involves an inability to see events from any perspective other than that of one's own nation. This orientation produces deep incommensurability of interpretations, in some cases leading to the impossibility of communicating across the borders of 'sealed narratives' (De Waal, 2004).

How do these properties of the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template shape Russia's interpretation of the war of August 2008? They are not difficult to detect in official interpretations of the conflict. Russian officials argued that their country (or at least the people in South Ossetia who had been given Russian passports over the preceding few years) was the victim of attack. Vitali Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the UN, for example, said in a news interview on 12 August: 'Well, of course Russia was the victim' (Online NewsHour, 2008). From this perspective, the 7 August bombardment of Tskhinvali was another instance where Russia, which had been living peacefully and with no intention of interfering in the affairs of others, was attacked wantonly and without provocation.

An essential part of this story is that the attack by Georgia was part of a larger program of aggression by a foreign enemy. Namely, it was taken to be just the tip of an iceberg of a NATO effort to move gradually but inexorably to surround Russia. From this perspective, the roots of aggression extend back several years into the post-Soviet era and include the support from western countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as well as more direct aggressive actions such as US plans for anti-missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic.

From the official perspective of the USA, such views qualify as reflections of 'ethnocentric narcissism' or even paranoia and Russian actions in August clearly constituted a disproportionate response to the Georgian bombardment that had set off the conflict. While this bombardment was viewed as foolhardy by the USA, in comparison with the subsequent actions by Russia it was quite limited. In the American view, the Russian invasion of Georgia was part of an effort to crush a fledgling democracy and perhaps bring down a sovereign country's government and even re-annex the country as part of a new Russian empire. The invasion was taken to be part of an effort to remind other countries, especially in Russia's 'near abroad' that it had re-emerged as a regional power that had to be reckoned with. Similar interpretations could, of course, be found

in Georgia. From a Russian perspective, however, claims about Georgia as an outpost of liberty and democracy, regardless of their source, were disingenuous at best, and in reality were part of a thinly veiled agenda of aggression that echoed earlier iterations of the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies story.

Numerous statements by Russian authorities in the aftermath of the August war make clear the extent to which they harnessed this narrative template to fashion the specific narrative that applied in this case. For example, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made the following statement at a press meeting on 12 August, near the end of the most active phase of the conflict:

Now, let me explain why we went there. I have already explained the military aspect to you. Now let's remember how WW2 started. On September 1 [1939], Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Then [in June 1941] they attacked the Soviet Union. What do you think the Russian Army should have done [later in the war]? Do you think it should have reached the border [of Germany] and stopped there? (Russia Today, 2008)

The notion that the Georgian bombardment on 7 August 2008 could be compared to the attack of Germany on Poland in 1939 will strike many western observers as far-fetched, and the claim that it could be compared to the massive German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 is even more difficult to accept. However, Putin was clearly committed to his view and reportedly was somewhat irked that he had to explain the parallels yet again to western observers. Furthermore, this is a formulation that was apparently broadly shared in Russia, suggesting that it reflects a deep, widespread commitment to an interpretive framework that those outside the Russian mnemonic community may not appreciate.

The inclination to invoke the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template when discussing the events of August 2008 was enhanced by lingering feelings of humiliation in Russia after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Putin, who at the time of the invasion of Georgia was generally viewed by Russians to be the most respected and credible spokesman for the country, made his own opinion about this break-up clear when he said in 2005 that it was 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century' (MSNBC, 2005). The confluence of a desire to rise above this perceived humiliation and to maintain vigilance against potential foreign aggressors is reflected in another analogy used by Putin in his 12 August discussion where he stated:

Our American partners kept training the Georgian military. They invested a lot of money there. They sent a large number of instructors there, who helped mobilize the Georgian army. Instead of looking for a solution to the difficult problem of ethnic strife and ethnic conflicts, they just prompted the Georgian side to launch a military operation. This is what actually happened. So, naturally, we had to respond. What else did you expect? Did you expect us wipe our bleeding nose and bow our head down? What do you want us to do? (Russia Today, 2008)

Putin's reference to 'American partners' reflects Russian concern with a bigger and more powerful set of potential enemies than Georgia. As noted earlier, from this

perspective, Georgia is viewed as just the tip of a much larger NATO spear and is viewed as little more than a puppet of its American handlers. What is probably most striking to western readers, however, is the clear positioning of Russia as a victim of aggression and bullying by alien enemies in this account. Such images derive from the narrative template that lay behind Putin's comments about this particular episode, and from this perspective it is not surprising that Russia decided to react strongly, especially after feeling that it had been humiliated by not being able to respond during the previous several years.

THE AUGUST WAR AND GEORGIAN NATIONAL NARRATIVE TEMPLATES

In contrast to using the Expulsion of Foreign Enemies narrative template to interpret the events of August 2008, Georgian leaders employed something quite different. In part this reflected the immediate situation in which they were operating, but as in the Russian case, a major determinant of their interpretive framework was a well-established and widely shared narrative tool of their textual community.

President Mikheil Saakashvili and his leadership team were under pressure to reassure and unite Georgia in its time of crisis and also rebut mounting criticism from voices of domestic political opposition. Although muted at the time of the military conflict, this opposition was already raising questions about who was responsible for getting Georgia into the unenviable situation of having lost a major military conflict and having Russian troops on its territory.

As the country approached the middle of August, the feeling of crisis was at a peak. Georgian soldiers were streaming back in disarray from the defeat in South Ossetia and word was spreading that Russian tanks were only a few dozen kilometers away heading toward the capital Tbilisi. The Saakashvili government issued multiple responses in this setting, but the most elaborate was a large rally held in front of the parliament building in Tbilisi on the day that the crisis hit its highest point.¹ This was Tuesday 12 August, the same day that Putin made his comments at the press conference mentioned earlier. This date had powerful significance because it was the anniversary of Georgia's greatest victory over foreign enemies in the Battle of Didgori in 1121. Georgian state television called on people to come to the rally to celebrate 'Didgori Victory Day'. In reality, this call contrasted with the usual non-observance of this date by Georgians other than small groups of historically conscious nationalists. Indeed, the battle in 1121 occurred on 15 August, so the call to the rally required a stretch of the historical imagination. Nonetheless, virtually every speaker at the rally invoked the memory of this battle in one way or another.

The Battle of Didgori was won by Georgia's greatest historical leader King David the Builder (1089–1125). At a site about 30 km from Tbilisi, he led a vastly outnumbered Georgian force to a decisive victory over a Muslim army of Seljuk Turks, Persians, and Arabs, thereby solidifying his status as the builder of a militarily strong country that controlled a territory roughly the same as today's Georgia. His victory was a central

element in the 'Golden Age' story of the nation (Wertsch and Batiashvili, in press), an era marked by the attainment of sovereignty and territorial integrity. David the Builder is also viewed in Georgian collective memory as establishing a precedent for peaceful, tolerant and democratic rule. These elements of the golden age are held up in Georgia as ideals that the nation has often been thwarted from achieving, again because of outside enemies and internal dissension.

The narrative template at issue in this case can be summarized as the 'Georgian Struggle for Independence and Democracy', which includes the following elements:

1. Georgia exists as a small, independent nation with territorial integrity at a perilous crossroads of East and West, and it seeks to remain part of the European tradition of democracy.
2. Georgia is invaded by a powerful enemy and incorporated into a larger empire.
3. Resisting demands for allegiance to the larger empire, Georgians maintain their struggle for independence and democracy, and hence their national identity.
4. Georgia regains its independence and re-establishes a European-style democracy.

Like the Russian narrative template outlined earlier, this account presents the country as being the victim of repeated invasions. Beyond that, however, the two accounts are quite different. This is reflected first of all simply in the appearance of 'Georgia' instead of 'Russia' as the main actor, something that reflects the narcissistic ethnocentrism characteristic of any national narrative. But the differences go beyond that. In comparison with Russia, which enjoys great power status in the region, Georgia is a small country. This is well understood by Georgians and on 12 August provided a starting point for interpreting the August war at the rally. For example, taking advantage of a convenient parallel with the King David the Builder's name, Saakashvili proclaimed, 'Georgia's battle against Russia is the battle of the biblical King David with Goliath'. In the Georgian view, being small, along with being at the center of a titanic struggle between East and West, makes its position forever precarious. Placing Georgia at the heart of a grand Manichaean struggle, for example, Saakashvili asserted, 'Georgia is the frontier, the border between Good [i.e. EU, NATO, USA] and Evil [i.e. Russia]!'

The Georgian and Russian narrative templates also differ in the role given to democracy. In Georgian collective memory, David the Builder is presented as a strong leader who did not hesitate to use force to consolidate and protect the state. In Georgian accounts, David the Builder is also endowed with having had the foresight to insist on tolerance for minority groups, and this is taken to be a defining feature of democracy. Georgians often point out that Jews have lived in their midst for well over two millennia with no major pogroms or other forms of oppression. They also note that the most successful experiment in their region to create a democratic state in the aftermath of the break-up of the Russian empire in 1917 was in their country. The country remembers well its short experiment with social democracy between 1918 and 1920, which was brought to an abrupt halt by Bolshevik intervention and the annexation of Georgia into what became the Soviet Union. And finally, Georgia is proud of its status as the most democratic country in the region during the post-Soviet era.

The notion of democracy needs a special attention in this context. A survey conducted by the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation in Tbilisi in the spring of 2008 showed that 'democratizm' and some other values associated with it have become as central to Georgian national identity as Christian Orthodoxy. The survey covered four years 2004–08. During this period, the democracy dimension of national identity increased dramatically, compared to other, traditional dimensions such as language and traditional cuisine. The fact that democracy, alongside of religious orthodoxy, has become a major element of Georgian national identity suggests a form of conflation of notions in the current national mentality. It appears that democracy is subliminally perceived as an index of chosenness, Europeanness and Christianity, all of which are important for a nation historically surrounded by Muslim states.

All of these points provide another reminder that we are dealing with collective memory rather than formal history. There clearly are elements in Georgian accounts of the past that are grounded in objective documented history, but like any collective effort after meaning, these accounts highlight some issues and ignore others that would be more likely to appear in formal historical analysis. For example, while the Georgian past has indeed been characterized by a level of tolerance for minorities that is striking in comparison with other countries in the region, part of the problems in South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be traced to destructive and self-defeating Georgian nationalism and intolerance. This was particularly in evidence during the time that Zviad Gamsakhurdia served as the first democratically elected president of post-Soviet Georgia.

The fact that the Georgian Struggle for Independence and Democracy story is a template is reflected in several comments made at the 12 August rally, comments that indicate the existence of a basic story line that is used to employ multiple specific narratives. For example Saakashvili said:

I want to tell you that during the last five days of confrontation, [the image of] Russia has been damaged more that it has ever has since the 1939 war with Finland ... During just one hour the Russians brought in 1200 tanks into Georgia – more than they brought into Afghanistan in 1979, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 ... The Tbilisi of today, of 12 August 2008, is the Prague of 1968, Budapest of 1956, Finland and Karelia of 1939.

It is worth noting that Saakashvili's claims about the parallels between past and present events went beyond saying that the story being played out was *like* that of 1939, 1956, and so forth. His point was that 'Tbilisi of today, 12 August 2008, is the Prague of 1968 ...', an assertion that seeks to collapse the distinction among several events, all of which reflect the same underlying narrative template.

In making these comments, Saakashvili was encouraging his nation to view the Georgian experience of being invaded by its giant neighbor as just one of several episodes that constitute a pattern of aggressive Russian expansionism perpetrated against smaller countries. Several other speakers at the rally picked up this theme by linking the ongoing Russian invasion with an attack of Soviet troops on unarmed civilians in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989 during the unstable period of Soviet disintegration. Giorgi Baramidze, the State minister for Euro-Atlantic integration, for example, proclaimed:

The emotions that bring us here together today are as pure and clean as the emotions which brought us together here that night of 9 April 1989, when we were facing the same threat... All of us were here, we were not split, when the barbaric force stormed us and killed our women in particular ...

Baramidze's formulation of parallels between the events of 1989 and 2008 obviously went beyond neutral cognitive interpretation and sought to make an emotional appeal. This was an appeal based on traditional forms of thinking about groups and the need to protect them from outsiders. One of the general hallmarks of such thinking is its tendency to collapse temporal and spatial distance. As already noted in Saakashvili's comments, from this perspective events in the here and now are not just *like* past events, they *are* the past events. In such cases, narrative templates play the role of providing the framework within which close parallels – if not out and out conflation – can be formulated.

An example of this tendency can be found in comments by Otar Koberidze, the first master of ceremonies at the 12 August rally. Koberidze was an actor who starred in patriotic films dating back to the 1950s based on literary classics about Georgian knights and soldiers who fought for the freedom of the nation. In his comments he said:

I want to address our soldiers, who are fighting now. They are the mountain goats, with sharpened horns, with golden crowns and the Holy Cross on their heads! They are the sons and warriors of St George! ... We are the sons of St George and are led by St George in this battle!

The theme of defending Georgia from foreign invaders who would conquer and annex it runs throughout these remarks, but like Saakashvili, the speaker was going beyond making an objective observation about similarities. His was an emotional call to action based on seeing contemporary events as one more instantiation of a narrative template that had been heroically lived out in previous centuries, and the power of his appeal stemmed from identifying closely with earlier heroes, indeed from *being* earlier heroes.

A final striking fact to note about the Georgian narrative template is that it takes as natural a condition that has in actual historical fact been quite rare. Georgia's independence and territorial integrity have existed only for relatively short interludes between long centuries of annexation and domination by others. Nonetheless, the Georgian national narrative sets out these interludes as the norm rather than the exception. The Battle of Didgori may have been a glorious chapter in a longer golden age, but this golden age lasted less than two centuries before Georgia was once again overrun, first by the Mongols and then by other powers in what is often called its 'dangerous neighborhood' made up of groups such as Turks, Persians and Russians. Nonetheless, the relatively brief periods of independence and territorial integrity have been positioned in the national narrative as the baseline or normal condition of the nation, whereas an objective timeline of the nation's history would highlight their infrequency. This reflects what Eviatar Zerubavel calls a 'disproportionate mnemonic preoccupation' (2003: 31) with certain periods of the past to the exclusion of others.

This disproportionate mnemonic preoccupation has played out in Georgia in background presuppositions about the baseline, or normal condition of the nation that was reflected at several points in the comments by speakers at the 12 August rally. For example, David Bakradze, the speaker of Georgia's parliament said:

Sokhumi [the capital of the breakaway region of Abkhazia] and Tskhinvali [the capital of South Ossetia] have become what Jerusalem would be for the Jewish people – the place they yearned for over millennia and eventually retrieved. So we will also remember Sokhumi and Tskhinvali and retrieve them no matter how long it takes, in 10, 100, 500, 1000 years!

Instead of taking the events of the previous few days to be the defeat that most objective observers called it, Bakradze was suggesting that it was part of a larger story that would ultimately lead to victory and take Georgia back to its natural state of affairs.

In point of historical fact, there were long periods when Georgia would lose its provinces and regain them either as an independent country or as a region under foreign rule. For example, 'South Ossetia' as the name for a region came into existence only in the 1920s when Stalin drew up its borders and hence created it. For centuries the area had been known as Inner Kartli and was at the heart of Georgia. Abkhazia represents an even more complex case, but the general point is that throughout history Georgia has not been an independent state for long periods, yet it has a very robust mnemonic preoccupation with a vision of the country as a whole.

SPIN AND MEMORY

We have presented a picture in which narrative templates concerned with a nation's past have a powerful impact on the interpretation of events in the present. In speaking with the media, holding press conferences, organizing rallies and engaging in other efforts to explain and defend their positions, political leaders often find national narratives to be essential tools. Russian and Georgian leaders clearly did this in their efforts to spin the Russian–Georgian war of August 2008. And instead of simply being a matter of top-down control of the media, this involved harnessing the narrative tools of collective memory, the result being that different mnemonic communities had very different interpretations of what happened. Indeed, the differences are so stark and emotion laden that many fear they will lead to more armed conflict.

At a more general level we should note that we are not suggesting that political elites engage in spin primarily to control the collective memory of the future. Instead, we view the use of national narratives tools as part of an effort to explain – and often to justify actions to domestic and international audiences. Nonetheless, this effort at spin can be expected to frame the interpretation and shape the retrieval of information about events in future recall. Just as David Middleton and Steven Brown (2005) have argued that small group interaction aimed at persuasion often has an additional, if unintended impact on memory, we see collective memory at the national level emerging as a sort of an accidental by-product of the public discourse of political leaders. From this perspective, collective memory is often a spin-off of spin.

In contrast to laboratory studies in cognitive psychology, there are few opportunities to control spin as an independent variable in public discourse and collective memory. However, research in the psychology of memory does suggest some ideas (if not hypotheses in the strong sense) to pursue when formulating the dynamics of collective memory. It may not be realistic to examine collective memory as a straightforward outcome, or dependent variable of efforts of spin such as those in Russia and Georgia, but the question of how collective memory shapes, and is shaped by, practices of public discourse is one that needs to be on the docket of memory studies.

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Note

- 1 This rally was covered by Georgian Public Broadcast television, now renamed Channel One in Tbilisi, Georgia. Quotes from speakers at the rally were transcribed from a DVD provided to the second author by Channel One.

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