



BOOK REVIEW

**V. V. Lapin, A. I. Miller (Eds.). (2021).
Simvolicheskie aspekty politiki pamiati
v sovremennoi Rossii i vostochnoi Evrope
[Symbolic aspects of the politics of memory
in modern Russia and Eastern Europe].
EUSP Press¹**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research under Grant No. 21-011-43023 “The official discourse of Russian politics of memory concerning the Soviet past: interpretation strategies, actors and commemorative practices.”

Memory studies are increasingly attracting research interest as an effective strategy for interpreting the past. Following this global trend, several Russian research centers have focused on producing the public discourse of the politics of memory, including the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), the Russian Historical Society (RHS), the Center for the Study of Cultural Memory and Symbolic Politics at the European University in St. Petersburg (EUSP.org) and others. Furthermore, Russian researches with diverse affiliations and provenance

¹ This review is an abridged and revised version of Rusakova O.F., Gribovod E.G., & Moiseenko Y.Yu. (2022). Diskurs politiki pamiati: Issledovaniia simvolicheskikh aspektov [Discourse on the politics of memory: Studies of symbolic aspects]. *Discourse-P*, 19(2), pp. 154–171. https://doi.org/10.17506/18179568_2022_19_2_154

have started to address commemorative practices with the purpose of unraveling manifestations of the politics of memory in different contexts (e.g., Kovba & Gribovod, 2020; Miller & Efremenko, 2020; Rusakova & Rusakov, 2019). Nevertheless, symbolic aspects of the politics of memory still remain for the most part on the periphery of contemporary academic discussions, which is the reason why our major concern has become to identify those prominent works revealing symbolic aspects in the structure of *memory studies* as a discipline. That is why we undertake a brief analytical review of the collection of scientific papers entitled *Symbolic Aspects of the Politics of Memory in Modern Russia and Eastern Europe*, published in St. Petersburg in 2021, edited by V. V. Lapin and A. I. Miller.

The “Introduction: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Memory” to the collection written by O. Iu. Malinova and A. I. Miller, both acknowledged authorities in memory studies, continues debates on a methodological dilemma that has been plaguing researchers in the field of the politics of memory for decades. This dilemma is generally presented in terms of an enduring speculation on the hierarchy between politics of memory and symbolic politics; the issue of distinction between these two concepts has been repeatedly raised in previous publications (e.g., Malinova, 2015, 2018). In particular, a correlation scheme for such categories as historical politics, politics of memory, and symbolic politics was previously proposed by O. Iu. Malinova (for further details, see Malinova, 2018).

According to the presented hierarchy, the broadest concept here appears to be symbolic politics. Both O. Iu. Malinova and A. I. Miller claim symbolic politics to be a public activity aimed predominantly at producing different ways of interpreting social phenomena. It is important to highlight that both authors associate symbolic politics with an activity of competing to interpret reality in one particular way (Malinova & Miller, 2021, p. 11), i.e., there is a symbolic battlefield taking place where different mnemonic actors struggle against each other using different symbolic weapons to establish their dominance in the order of things. However, if anyone conducting research adheres to such a definition of symbolic politics, the question naturally arises: How does the concept of symbolic politics differ from the concept of political discourse? After all, if researchers are guided by Malinova’s interpretation, then they are bound to attribute the characteristics of symbolic politics to the political discourse as well. In this situation, it may be relevant to mention J. Torfing’s work, where a number of similar statements relate political discourse, rather than symbolic politics, to a certain way of producing interpretations of reality, with a competition emerging between these interpretations (Torfing, 2005, pp. 10–17). Similar features of political discourse may be discovered in works of Russian researchers (e.g., Rusakova & Rusakov, 2011, pp. 98–99).

It turns out to be rather unclear how to delimitate political usage of the past, politics of memory, and historical politics. According to O. Iu. Malinova, the former of the three concepts seems to be wider than the others and includes politics of memory. At the same time, historical politics should be treated as a particular case of politics of memory. Defining the concept in greater detail, O. Iu. Malinova and A. I. Miller suggest that politics of memory be perceived as a “governmental (non-governmental) activity aimed at asserting ideas about the collective past and forming the cultural

infrastructure to support these ideas, educational policy and sometimes legislative regulation” (p. 15). From our perspective, any conceptual distinguishing here seems rather irrelevant, since traditional historiography uses these concepts interchangeably (Achkasov, 2012, p. 137; Nelina, 2020, p. 249).

At the same time, we consider that politics of memory should be characterized mainly by its general focus on managing the collective memory. Whether it is by the state or by non-governmental mnemonic actors, the produced interpretations of the past aim to construct images, meanings, symbols, myths, or narratives, which are significant for a given society in terms of political values. This is why the national identity is established predominantly through commemorative practices, whereas social and cultural resources provide an infrastructure for governmental legitimacy.

It can be reasonably argued that politics of memory should be understood as a complexity of managing collective ideas about the past, which bears those specific elements of symbolic politics in its internal structure, and not vice versa. In this regard, we believe that the title of the collection of papers under review is entirely justified, since only politics of memory provides a background for any discussion of symbolism, including its entire repertoire of ideas, images, narratives, monuments, rituals, etc.

It is quite remarkable that a number of articles in this collection confirm the antagonistic trend established in some post-Soviet countries towards Russian politics of memory. Unfortunately, this governmental trend appears to monopolize the official political discourse in Eastern Europe, with any other interpretation of the historical past being perceived as an ideological sabotage of unity and national security. Miserable consequences of this trend include legislative activity, which has been intensified in many post-Soviet states, imposing legal limitations on any attempts to challenge the governmental politics of memory. Due to such governmental policy, the destiny of post-Soviet nations has been deliberately victimized in reference to their experience of the Soviet past, with myth-making of the *Holodomor* being one of the most illustrative examples. This toxic discourse of victimization, which appears to be invulnerable to any constructive criticism, works simultaneously for ensuring the national security of a state (Miller & Efremenko, 2020, pp. 13–14).

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