Voices of Collective Remembering

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Introduction and Acknowledgments

In this book, I take up three main tasks. First, I outline the meaning (rather meanings) of "collective memory." Because this term has almost as many interpretations as interpreters, I devote considerable attention to it, especially in Chapter 3. Second, in parts of Chapters 1, 2, and 3, I outline a particular approach to collective memory, one that focuses on how "cultural tools," especially narrative texts, mediate its functioning. From this perspective, collective memory is best understood as being "distributed" between active agents and the textual resources they employ. This amounts to narrowing the field of memory studies, but it remains an effort to harness ideas from a wide range of intellectual traditions. And third, in Chapters 4 through 7, I have sought to put these ideas to work in connection with a body of empirical evidence from Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. As will become clear, this is often not so much a matter of putting well-formulated ideas into practice as it is one of clarifying these ideas in the first place.

The general plan of the volume, then, starts out broadly and converges on a narrower set of concerns. It begins by opening up several issues that could, and eventually should, be addressed under the heading of collective memory, moves to outlining a particular way to proceed, and then to harnessing this particular approach to look at empirical examples. Any one of these topics could have taken up an entire book in its own right – and each almost did in various incarnations of this one. However, I have tried to weave them into a single discussion because I view the analysis of each as informing the others.

Nonetheless, it is possible to read sections of this book in relative isolation. Those interested primarily in the conceptual landscape that frames discussions of collective memory in general can turn to Chapter 3, and perhaps Chapter 2 as well. If the more specific issue of collective memory as a distributed phenomenon is one's interest, it is possible to focus on parts of Chapters 2 and 3 to get the overall argument. And if one's concern is

with how the textual resources of collective memory have been produced and used in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, then it may make sense to go directly to Chapters 4 through 7.

I hope, however, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The glue that holds these parts together is the claim that collective remembering is a matter of agents using cultural tools, especially narratives. Drawing on others' ideas about the "multivoiced" nature of human consciousness, I emphasize that these cultural tools always have a history of being used by others, and as a result bring their own voices to the table. This line of reasoning provides a thread for tying together the pieces of the wide-ranging discussion in Chapter 3, and it is what lends coherence to the discussion of the empirical examples.

Regardless of how one reads the chapters that follow, it will undoubtedly strike some that my treatment of each of the three issues I take up is incomplete, a charge to which I am undoubtedly guilty in more ways than I can imagine. One reason for this partial picture is my focus on one kind of collective, the modern state. And under this heading, I have narrowed things even further by examining Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This setting is a "natural laboratory" capable of providing insights that would be hard to come by elsewhere. In particular, it provides insights into the central role that modern states play in forming collective memory and what can happen when they lose their legitimacy. Hopefully, the insights that I glean from the Russian illustrations have implications for collective remembering in other settings as well.

Russia is also a significant site for me in a more personal way because it has been a major source of my intellectual inspiration over the past quarter century. Beginning in the 1970s with a post-doctoral year in Moscow, I have lived and worked there on numerous occasions to study with colleagues in psychology, semiotics, and other areas of the human sciences. My initial encounters in Moscow with figures such as A.R. Luria, A.N. Leont'ev, V.V. Davydov, and V.P. Zinchenko in the 1970s had a profound impact on me in all kinds of ways. After helping me overcome an early period of confusion and even resistance to radically new ideas, they, along with people in the United States such as Michael Cole, led me to appreciate the brilliance of the ideas of Lev Semënovich Vygotsky and others.

With this as a beginning, I went on to benefit from the intellectual guidance of friends and colleagues such as Michael Holquist, who introduced me, as well as so many others, to the ideas of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. Along with Aleksandr Romanovich Luria and Vladimir Petrovich Zinchenko, I count Mike as one of my most important teachers. In recent years, my sources of instruction and inspiration have expanded to include colleagues such as Aleksandr Asmolov, Andrei Kvakin, and Irina Medvedeva in Moscow; Elena Ivanova in Kharkiv; and Martin Conway in Durham.

Closer to home, I have benefited immensely from my discussions with several people at Washington University in St. Louis. The list includes Wayne Fields, Roddy Roediger, Marc Raichle, Hillel Kieval, and Alison Wiley. Together we went through the process of searching for a candidate for the Henry R. Luce Foundation Professor of Collective and Individual Memory at Washington University, something that broadened my horizons immensely. The arrival of Pascal Boyer to fill this position has added to the discussion, while at the same time it is a discussion that has expanded beyond the borders of my own institution thanks to colleagues such as Cathy Caruth, James Young, Sam Wineburg, Jennifer Jenkins, and Peter Seixas. I am particularly indebted to Mike Holquist, Martin Conway, Roddy Roediger, and Elena Ivanova for their close readings and detailed commentaries on this manuscript.

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