# 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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1

# An Encounter with Collective Memory

While on a trip to Moscow in 1997, I spent a day at a high school known for its strong students and excellent instruction. In addition to observing several classes, I had the opportunity to engage some eleventh grade students in a discussion about World War II, and in this context I asked about the role that the United States had played in this conflict. In response, "Sasha," a sixteen-year-old boy, turned to me and said something like the following:

> The United States made a lot of money from selling arms and other things to countries during the early years of the war, but it did not really contribute as an ally. In fact, along with Great Britain it refused to open a second front in 1942 and again in 1943. It was only after the U.S. and Britain began to think that the Soviet Union might win the war by itself and dominate post-war Europe that they became concerned enough to enter the war in earnest by opening a second front in 1944.

Sasha's comments left me with an impression as well as a question. The impression had to do with the way he spoke about these events. He made his presentation in a straightforward, confident manner, displaying little doubt or hesitation. It was almost as if he was providing an eye-witness account of what had happened. The idea that a competing account might exist seemed not to have been an option in his mind. Furthermore, based on the nods of Sasha's classmates and other evidence to be outlined in later chapters, it is an account that has some currency among his generation in Russia.

The question I had was tied to this impression of certainty. I wondered: Where did Sasha and other members of his generation in Russia get this account of the past? After all, neither he nor anyone else in his generation actually witnessed the events – indeed, they were not even born until nearly four decades after World War II was over. The obvious answer is that they had learned about World War II at school, at home, from the media, and so forth. Such learning invariably takes the form of mastering narrative texts about who did what to whom, for what reasons, and in what context,

and there is little reason to doubt that this is how Sasha had developed his account.

Instead of being grounded in direct, immediate experience of events, the sort of collective memory at issue in this case is what I shall term "textually mediated." Specifically, it is based on "textual resources" provided by others – narratives that stand in, or mediate, between the events and our understanding of them. Some may view this as being memory only in an unusual sense since it is not memory for events that have actually been experienced. From such a perspective, memory for a text may be involved, but this is not memory proper – that is, memory for the events themselves.

But the fact remains that what Sasha presented often *is* discussed under the heading of collective memory, a fact that raises the question of what we mean when we use the term. As I shall outline in Chapter 3, the unfortunate answer is that "collective memory" can mean any number of things depending on the conversation in which it is embedded. Furthermore, even when speakers assume they have one meaning in mind, this meaning often turns out to be fuzzy and not clearly differentiated from others. This unfortunate state of affairs is what motivates one of my major aims in the chapters that follow – sorting through and categorizing the various meanings of "collective memory."

Returning to my encounter with Sasha, the fact that he relied so totally on textual mediation makes the impression of certainty all the more striking. I was almost tempted to ask him, "How can you, a person who was not even alive at the time, be so sure of what you are saying?" As far as Sasha was concerned, however, he was recounting the events themselves, not some narrative about them. He seemed not to be the least bit tempted to qualify what he said with something like "What our textbooks tell us is . . . " or "The version provided in our movies is . . . ."

But it is of course not only Sasha or his generation in Russia who displays this lack of awareness of the textually mediated nature of much of collective memory. It is characteristic of collective memory more generally, and is an instance of what can be called the "transparency" of language. It was as if Sasha were "looking through" the narrative text he was employing and could not see it or appreciate the way it shaped what he was saying. It may be possible for people whose collective memories of World War II are quite different from Sasha's to detect the mediating texts shaping his account, but this clearly seems to have been something that escaped his attention. In reality, however, one can ask how often any of us recognizes such mediation in our accounts of the past.

These points came into sharper focus when I related my encounter with Sasha to American colleagues and friends. In this context, I have often encountered comments such as, "Where did he get that story?" or "That's the kind of thing you would expect them to say." And reactions sometimes shade over into indignation, giving rise to responses such as, "That's just

not true! He doesn't know what he's talking about!" Conversely, Russians are surprised – if not dismissive or even deeply offended – when they hear accounts of World War II based on U.S. textbooks or on Hollywood movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*.

What all this suggests is the need to make visible and to understand the role of textual mediation in collective memory. Among other things, this means analyzing the specific forms that mediation takes in this case, especially narratives, and it calls on us to understand how such narrative texts are produced by the state, the media, and so forth, and how they are consumed, or used, by individuals and groups.

I shall approach these issues as part of a story about the more general category of "mediated action" (Wertsch, 1998). From this perspective, speaking, thinking, and other forms of human action are taken to involve an inherent, irreducible tension between agent and "cultural tools" such as language and narrative texts. This does not mean that such tools mechanistically determine how we act, but it is to say that their influence is powerful and needs to be recognized and examined. From this perspective, memory – both individual and collective – is viewed as "distributed" between agent and texts, and the task becomes one of listening for the texts and the voices behind them as well as the voices of the particular individuals using these texts in particular settings. In this approach, performances such as Sasha's are inherently "multivoiced" (Wertsch, 1991) rather than the product of an isolated speaker or cognitive agent. We implicitly recognize this when we respond to what he said by asking, "Where did he get that story?" In such instances, we are asking about the general perspective, or "speaking consciousness" (Holquist & Emerson, 1981, p. 434) that Bakhtin (1981) defined as "voice." Similarly, when we respond to Sasha's account by saying, "That's the kind of thing you would expect them to say," we are commenting on the speaking consciousness or general ideological perspective of the members of a collective (i.e., "them"), a collective that provides the narrative texts employed by Sasha to formulate his account of the past.

By implication, this approach identifies two things that Sasha was *not* doing. First, despite any impressions he might have had to the contrary, he was not simply relaying "what really happened." For this to be possible, we would have to presuppose a single, universally accepted, exhaustive, and true account of these events, one that would not allow for the sharp differences between his account and that of others. Second, the version of the past that Sasha provided was not the product of independent research. In principle, of course, it would have been possible for him to consult primary and secondary sources and arrive at his own formulation of what happened. It was not entirely surprising, however, to hear from his teacher and others familiar with his and his friends' ideas about World War II that this was not the case. Instead, Sasha was doing what most of us do

most of the time when we produce collective memory accounts of the past – especially the past that occurred before our lifetime. Namely, he was employing an item from the "stock of stories" (MacIntyre, 1984) that exist in his sociocultural context.

This is not to say that Sasha was unable or unwilling to defend what he said. I did not go into a detailed discussion with him, but in countless discussions over the years with people like Sasha, I discovered that they are quite capable of backing up their own accounts with additional information. For example, if he were challenged about the motives his narrative attributed to the United States, he would be likely to point out that America emerged from World War II in a vastly more powerful economic position than it had in 1941. If we were to agree, but argue that this was not because the U.S. tried to improve its economic standing, he would be likely to say this is quite naive, and even might be able to point to documents or political decisions to support his interpretation.

Or in response to the argument that any attempt to open a second front earlier than 1944 would have resulted in an unacceptable level of casualties, Sasha might argue that the losses involved in D-Day were quite small compared with those experienced by the Soviets. Using even the more conservative estimate of war dead accepted during the Soviet years, the USSR lost *on average* 14,000 people every day between 1941 and 1945. This compares with 6,603 American deaths on D-Day in 1944 (The National D-Day Memorial Foundation homepage, June 10, 2000). Of course, using statistics to compare levels of pain and suffering is not a very satisfactory way to discuss such matters, but in fact, American claims about huge losses on June 6, 1944, and Russian claims about their relatively small size are often encountered in discussions about what happened in World War II. In short, Sasha was quite capable of supporting and defending his account and was not simply repeating it mindlessly.

Such observations highlight the fact that an active agent is involved in textually mediated collective memory. This requires us to keep a focus on how active agent and cultural tool operate in tandem rather than on how either element functions alone. Among other things, this means that textual resources used in collective memory usually do not take the form of isolated, hermetically sealed units that are either used in unmodified form and in their entirety or not used at all. Instead, they constitute a much more flexible kind of instrument that can be harnessed in combination with others in novel ways.

This line of reasoning is consistent with the past several decades of research in the psychology of memory. Such research has shown time and again that memory is more a matter of reorganizing, or reconstructing, bits of information into a general scheme than it is a matter of accurate recall of the isolated bits themselves. As Neisser (1967) argued decades ago, memory is not so much a matter of "reappearance" as it is a matter of active

construction based on traces from earlier experiences. In this view, humans are often quite good at recalling the gist of what happened, a process that involves selectively using, and often distorting or deleting, pieces of information that do not contribute to the overall picture they are reconstructing. These are general points that apply to the resources of textual mediation as much as to any other kind of information.

Extending this line of argument, one can say that the narrative texts used in collective memory are best viewed as tools, or raw materials to be employed in organizing or reconstructing an account of the past. Instead of serving as containers of precise, unchanging information, these texts seem to play a role in memory by serving as indicators of "the sort of thing" an individual or group would say. Instead of remembering the precise words that someone uttered, we are much more likely to remember the gist of what he said, and in this effort we are likely to rely heavily on a sort of "implicit theory" (Ross, 1989) of what that voice, or type of voice, would utter.

A concrete illustration of these points can be found in how I remembered what Sasha had said on that morning in 1997. After relating this encounter from memory several times to others, I decided to write about it, and this took me back to the tape recording I had made of that discussion. At first, I thought I had been unable to find the right segment of conversation since I did not recognize what Sasha had said. But then I realized that what he said differed in some very significant ways from my recollection of it. I had remembered some bits of what he had said, but I had done a lot of "editing" to make them consistent with what I apparently believed he, or a person like him, would have said. A transcription from the tape of what said Sasha yielded the following:

> Well, I think the United States benefited from that war. And Great Britain, too. They agreed to help other countries but won much more afterward. For example, when Germany began the war, England and France promised to help Eastern Europe but did nothing, and Hitler realized that they would not even come to the aid of Poland.

As any contemporary psychologist of memory would point out, my account of this incident had distorted it in some very predictable ways. To be generous, I got the gist of what Sasha had said, but I had also introduced, distorted, and deleted some important bits of information. Instead of remembering his precise words, or even his precise ideas, I apparently used pieces of what he had said as a basis for generating a text that I thought he would have produced. In short, what I remembered had more to do with the voice, or type of voice, I assumed was doing the talking than with what he actually had said.

Among other things, this little experiment reflects one final point I would like to make about the textual resources used in collective memory. In most

cases, these resources are not neutral cognitive instruments that simply assist us in our efforts to remember. Instead, we are often committed to believing, or not believing them, sometimes in deeply emotional ways having to do with fundamental issues of identity. In my encounter with Sasha, this is reflected in the motivated way in which my recall was distorted. In retrospect, I found a level of defensiveness about historical accounts that surprised me.

It surprised me because over the past twenty-five years, I have had extensive exposure to Soviet and Russian accounts of World War II and have conscientiously tried to sort out what can be supported on rational, objective grounds and what cannot. In the process, I have come to believe very strongly that we in the West often vastly underestimate the Russian contribution to the war effort and overestimate our own. On countless occasions when speaking to Western friends and colleagues, I have recognized that massive blunders, self-inflicted loss, and monumental stupidity were part of the story of the Soviet war effort, but I have always made a point of emphasizing that the Soviets nonetheless deserve the lions' share of credit for winning the war against Hitler. In short, I had thought that after years of trying to understand the Russian account of World War II, I was fairly sensitive, and even sympathetic to their perspective.

Nevertheless, it appears that I had reacted with a good deal of defensiveness to what Sasha said. This defensiveness undoubtedly arose in response to being harangued by Soviet publications and the occasional individual about the pernicious tendencies of American capitalist cliques, and so on, and so on. Over the years, I had recognized that such statements were often best understood as public displays for the audience at hand rather than reflections of the core beliefs of the performers. Nonetheless, it appears that what I had been saying in public to Western colleagues differed from what at least some part of me believed in private. The result was that I had reconstructed Sasha's statement on the basis of more pernicious, Soviet-sounding motives to Allied actions than had appeared in what he actually said.

Put together with the shocked, and sometimes angry, response I hear from other Westerners when they encounter Sasha's account, my systematic distortion provides a reminder of something about the narrative texts used in the textual mediation of collective memory: They are important to us. Such accounts do not simply reflect different objective viewpoints to be accepted or not in a dispassionate way. Instead, they reflect strongly held commitments to a particular narrative account, commitments that are often masked by the tendency to think that our account simply relates what happened.

2

# Methodological Preliminaries to the Study of Collective Remembering

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my perspective on collective memory, both in terms of theoretical and methodological commitments and in terms of broader historical context. The approach I shall outline does not fall neatly within any single academic discipline, a fact that I take to be an asset when studying this complex topic. Many research traditions have contributed to the study of this topic, and I believe it is important to draw on them as flexibly as possible. In this connection, I owe a great deal to studies in history, sociology, semiotics, psychology, and anthropology in particular, and the list does not stop there.

In developing my claims about collective remembering, I shall employ a set of illustrations. Indeed, several of the chapters that follow are almost entirely organized around such illustrations. These come primarily from a contemporary natural laboratory of collective memory: Russia as it makes the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet times. In particular, I shall be concerned with how state authorities in these two settings have played a role in shaping collective memory of an official sort. States are certainly not the only entities that try to purvey collective memory in the modern world, but they are unrivaled in the power and resources they have devoted to this effort. Indeed, their efforts constitute the most important experiment in collective memory in the world today, and hence make an obvious focus of study.

## Sociocultural Analysis

The general theoretical framework I shall employ to hold the various strands of research on collective remembering together is what I term "sociocultural analysis" (Wertsch, 1991, 1998). My use of the term "sociocultural" reflects an intellectual heritage grounded largely in the writings of Russian scholars such as Vygotsky (1978, 1987), Luria (1928, 1979), and Bakhtin (1981, 1986). It is a heritage that has also been discussed by Cole