

Syllabus/Programme

History and memory in contemporary Russia

Alexandra Kolesnik & Aleksandr Rusanov

When & Where:	Mondays at 15:00 CET	Off University Moodle**
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Hosted by:	Bielefeld University with 3 ECTS Certification*
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Department	History, Philosophy and Theology
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Description:

This course, developed in collaboration with the Memory Studies Association, explores memory and historical culture in contemporary Russia through an examination of both state memory policies and grassroots initiatives working with the past. In Russia, official narratives emphasise patriotism, military achievement and state-centred interpretations of history, limiting critical discussion of controversial topics such as the Second World War, Stalinist repression and the socio-economic transformations of the 1990s. All these processes have intensified since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. At the same time, independent voices — from bloggers to journalists and grassroots memory activists - are offering alternative perspectives, challenging official discourse and advocating for a more inclusive and critical approach to historical memory.

The course demonstrates the diverse ways in which Russia's past is interpreted, contested and commemorated. We will analyse the role of museums, monuments, popular culture and public debates in shaping collective memory and historical narratives. Particular attention will be paid to the tensions between official memory policies and independent memory initiatives. Through a combination of academic readings, media analysis and case studies, participants will critically engage with the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of memory culture in Russia. The course includes lectures designed to provide an in-depth introduction to key issues in contemporary memory and history culture. Secondly, it includes seminars in which participants are actively involved in working with, familiarising themselves with and discussing various sources, analysing them independently and discussing them in a comparative perspective.

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Aimed Outcomes of the course

A general understanding of:

- approaches and theories of contemporary memory studies and public history;
- diversity of forms of work with memory and the past;
- specifics of late Soviet historical culture and its transformation in the first post-Soviet decade;
- politics of history and memory in contemporary Russia;
- grassroots initiatives to work with the past and historical counter-narratives.

The skills to be gained upon active participation:

- knowledge of and ability to navigate the current research literature on memory studies and public history;
- knowledge of key concepts and approaches for working with memory and the past;
- ability to apply the approaches studied to analyse and critically evaluate historical culture, history and memory policies in different political contexts;
- ability to critically analyse a range of sources.

Course components

The methodology includes:

- Lectures
- Discussions
- Readings and commenting
- Media analysis

The **final grade** for the course will be based on the following:

- Active participation in the discussions during the course (at least 4 seminars);
- Assignments: presentation on the final round table or writing a final paper.

Requirements for the assignments

Oral presentation:

- Prepare an oral presentation (the length of the presentation will be determined depending on the number of speakers) for the round table, be ready to answer questions about it, preferably be ready to ask questions to other round table participants;
- In the presentation, participants need to formulate and disclose the research problem based on a case of their own choice, using the concepts and literature that we discuss during the course;
- The presentation form is free, but it can be based on a simple three-part structure. The introductory part states the presentation problem, and the methods used. The main part examines and analyses a specific case. The conclusion outlines the results of research;
- Presentation could be based on the analysis of online sources, official documents, oral memories, interviews, films, popular music, research literature, etc.

Written paper:

- Volume: 10 characters;
- Format: 14 point Times New Roman, one and a half pt.
- Written paper should demonstrate the student's ability to (1) formulate a research question, (2) formulate propositions, and (3) support and refute them with arguments and facts from sources and scholarly literature;
- The text of the written paper should consist of three parts - an introduction, a body and a conclusion. In the introduction, the student explains the nature of the problem in detail and indicates how they are going to reveal it in the text. In the main body, the participant formulates their statements within the framework of the stated problem, supports these statements (or refutes the statements of others) with arguments and facts from sources and scientific literature. In the conclusion, the participant presents the conclusions reached in the main part;

- The topic of the written paper is formulated by the participant independently after prior consultation with the instructors;
- Instructors evaluate the structure of the written work, the correctness of the facts stated in the text, the clarity of the statements and arguments formulated, their logical connection, as well as the correctness of the quotations given in the text;
- No plagiarism is allowed in the text.

Timeline of the Course Schedule

All online classes are held on Mondays, from 15:00 to 17:00 CET

Week 1: April, 7	Introduction lecture “Public history and memory studies in the contemporary Russian context: what can be said and what can be seen”. Kick-off Seminar: Introduction, exchange of expectations for the course, work formats, and organizational matters.	Lecture Seminar
Week 2: April, 14	Historical and memorial politics in the late USSR and the post-Soviet Russia	Lecture
Week 3: April, 21	<i>Holiday in Germany</i>	
Week 4: April, 28	Problematising state and society in today’s Russia: Concepts of Post-Socialist, Post-Soviet and <i>Homo Sovieticus</i> and their critique	Seminar
Week 5: May, 5	State-sponsored history: education, youth, and ideology	Lecture
Week 6: May, 12	New tools of state historical politics: “Affective management” of the past in today’s Russia	Seminar
Week 7: May, 19	Struggles against centralisation of memory: decolonial approach	Seminar
Week 8: May, 26	Memory and heritage activism in Russia: from late Soviet initiatives to New grassroots movements	Lecture
Week 9: June, 2	Memory activism and hidden stories: gender and queer histories in Russia	Seminar
Week 10: June, 9	<i>Holiday in Germany</i>	

Week 11: June, 16	“Web memory wars”: history, propaganda, and new media	Lecture
Week 12: June, 23	Remediating the traumatic and inconvenient past in Russian social media	Seminar
Week 13: June, 30	Post-Soviet nostalgia in Russian propaganda and grassroots projects Deadline for choosing form of evaluation and topic of presentation or written text	Lecture
Week 14: July, 7	Nostalgia for the 1990s and counter-narratives in Russian popular culture	Seminar
Week 15: July, 14	Final round table and discussion of presentations	
Deadline: July, 21	Submitting written papers	

Organisation of the course – Focus/Topic of the week & Reading List

Week 1: Public history and memory studies in the contemporary Russian context: what can be said and what can be seen (Lecture)

The lecture will discuss differences between public history and memory studies: tasks that these disciplines have, the ways they work with the past, how they distinguish memory and the past. The main focus will be on the hopes, challenges and opportunities of these projects in the context of political changes in Russia in the 2010-20s.

Reference materials:

Khodnev, A. (2016) “Memory Studies ‘Boom’ in Russia,” *Public History Weekly*, vol. 4, no. 11, pp. 1–5.

Zavadski, A., Dubina, V., Isaev, E., Kolesnik, A., Lajus, J., Suverina, K. (2022) “Public History in Russia: The Past, the Present, and (Thoughts About) the Future,” *International Public History*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 143–156.

Week 2: Historical politics in the USSR and the post-Soviet Russia (Lecture)

The lecture will be an introduction to the broad context of key narratives of state use of the past in the late Soviet Union and Russia and their evolution. Much attention will be paid to the different research approaches to this phenomenon and the possibilities they offer for critically examining its agents and practices.

Reference materials:

Koposov, N. (2017) *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 238–299.

McGlynn, J. (2023) *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 29–50.

Week 3: Holiday in Germany

Week 4: Problematising state and society in today's Russia: Concepts of Post-Socialist, Post-Soviet and *Homo Sovieticus* and their critique (Seminar)

In this seminar, we will critically discuss several concepts that are widely used to analyse society, power, and their relations, including in contemporary Russia. We will discuss what zones of tension they (re)produce, how they are criticized by contemporary researchers, and what other forms of generalization of social and historical analysis can be proposed.

Reading materials:

Müller, M. (2019) "Goodbye, Postsocialism!," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 533–550.

Sharafutdinova, G. (2023) *The Afterlife of the 'Soviet Man'. Rethinking Homo Sovieticus*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 73–91.

Week 5: State-Sponsored History: Education, Youth, and Ideology (Lecture)

The lecture will focus on the main areas of state-sponsored history — youth work and education. The focus will be on the Unified History Textbook and the 'Russia — My History' museum project. The key agents and mediators of this policy will be discussed.

Reference materials:

Klimenko, E. (2023) Politically Useful Tragedies: The Soviet Atrocities in the Historical Park(s) "Russia — My History", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 70, no. 5, pp. 544–556.

Rumyantsev, S. (ed.) (2025) *Education and the Politics of Memory in Russia and Eastern Europe Infested with History*. London: Routledge, 1–13, 289–297.

Week 6: New tools of state historical politics: "Affective management" of the past in today's Russia (Seminar)

The seminar will discuss the concept of “affective management of history” using the example of Victory Day celebrations in Russia since the early 2010s as a fundamental event in Russian memorial policy. Special attention will be paid to the emotional involvement of participants and spectators in Victory Day celebrations.

Reading materials:

Hanukai, M. (2021) “Resurrection by Surrogation: Spectral Performance in Putin's Russia,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 79, issue 4, pp. 800–824.

Oushakine, S. (2013) “Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1, pp. 269–302.

Week 7. Struggles against centralisation of memory: decolonial approach (Seminar)

In the seminar, we will discuss how postcolonial theory can be applied to the study of memory (and oblivion) of various ethnic groups in contemporary Russia. We will pay attention to the tensions and conflicts between central and regional narratives. As a case study, we will discuss issues of identity and memory of Yakut, the protagonist of Alexei Balabanov's movie *Kochegar*.

Video material:

Kochegar (The Stoker) (2010, dir. Alexei Balabanov).

Reading materials:

Tlostanova, M. (2019) “The postcolonial condition, the decolonial option and the postsocialist intervention,” In Albrecht, M. (ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Newcolonial Present*. London: Routledge, 165–178.

Week 8: Memory and heritage activism in Russia: from late Soviet initiatives to New grassroots movements (Lecture)

The lecture will focus on examining both the concepts of “memory and heritage activism” and the specifics of these phenomena in contemporary Russia. Much attention will be paid to the transformation of memory and heritage activism in the 2010s, changes in activist tactics, and discussions around new urban activism.

Reference materials:

Tchouikina, S. (2023) “Exhibitions on Soviet Repressions at the Moscow NGO Memorial (2011–2021): Transforming Family Memory into Cultural Memory,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 70, no. 5, 557–569.

Tykanova E., Khokhlova A. (2020) "Grassroots Urban Protests in St. Petersburg: (Non-) Participation in Decision-Making about the Futures of City Territories," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, no. 33, pp. 181–202.

Week 9: Memory activism and hidden stories: gender and queer histories in Russia (Seminar)

The seminar proposes to discuss the problem of memory activism related to gender and queer histories in Russia, which were extremely poorly represented in the Russian public sphere. After the adoption of the law banning "LGBT propaganda" in Russia, such hidden histories became even less accessible. The seminar will be focused on discourses and practices of public history, memory activism, and political journalism aimed at making these stories 'vocal'.

Reading materials:

Healey, D., Stella, Fr. (2021) "Sexual and gender dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet space," *Cahiers du monde russe*, vol. 62, no. 2/3, pp. 225–250.

Strukov, V. (2023) "Introduction: 'Different (Everyone is So)': conceptualisations of Russian and Russophone queer cinema in the twenty-first century," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, vol. 17, issue 3, pp. 140–153.

Week 10: Holiday in Germany

Week 11: "Web Memory Wars": History, Propaganda, and New Media (Lecture)

The lecture will focus on the transformations that historical culture is undergoing in the context of the spread of new social media. On the one hand, the transformation of the role and strategies of historians, authorities and other agents in this process will be discussed. On the other hand, it will analyze how new media (in particular, new social media) are reshaping historical narratives, arguments, and the course of discussions in the Russian-language Internet environment.

Reference materials:

Kolesnik, A., Savelieva, I., Stepanov, B. (2023) "Russian Public Historians in the New Media (The Case of Telegram)," In Bevernag B., Raphael L. (eds.) *Professional Historians in Public: Old and New Roles Revisited*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023, 245–270.

Makhortykh, M. (2020) "Remediating the past: YouTube and Second World War memory in Ukraine and Russia," *Memory Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 146–161.

Week 12: Remediating the traumatic and inconvenient past in Russian social media (Seminar)

Continuing the problematization of the previous lecture, this seminar will discuss forms of rethinking the traumatic and controversial past in contemporary Russian-language social media. As a case study, we will examine the figure of Joseph Stalin emerging in Russian-language TikTok, YouTube, etc.

Reading materials:

Khlevnyuk D. (2018) “Narrowcasting collective memory online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian social media,” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 41, issue 3, pp. 317–331.

Molotov, K., Khlevniuk, D. (2024) “‘Five Unknown Facts about...’ How Stalin Is Represented on Russian-Language TikTok,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 81–103.

Week 13: Post-Soviet nostalgia in Russian propaganda and grassroots projects (Lecture)

The lecture will focus on the problem of constructing the memory of the 1990s, which are often seen as one of the most turbulent and poorly understood periods in post-Soviet Russia, marked by severe economic and political upheaval. In the 2000s, Putin’s political narrative cemented the image of the “turbulent (or dashing) 1990s” as an era of chaos, replaced by the “stable 2000s” under his leadership. This narrative has been actively promoted for over two decades, reinforced by cultural mediators such as television, films, and social media, shaping the “collective memory” of the era. The lecture will examine both state-sponsored and grassroots ways of working with the memory of the 1990s.

Reference materials:

Malinova, O. (2021) “Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin’s Regime,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 68, no. 5, pp. 429–441.

Boele, O. (2022) “‘Perestroika and the 1990s—Those Were the Best Years of My Life!’ Nostalgia for the Post-Soviet Limbo,” In Boele, O., Noordenbos, B., Robbe, Ks. (eds.) *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire’s Legacies*. New York: Routledge, 203–223.

Week 14: Nostalgia for the 1990s and counter-narratives in Russian popular culture (Seminar)

The seminar will investigate contemporary Russian popular culture, especially popular music and new media, which represent efforts to shape memory and construct historical counter-narratives about the 1990s. It will propose to discuss the potential of popular culture and new media for more pluralistic memory landscapes despite increasing state control. In the seminar we will analyse several music videos of contemporary Russian musicians, both mainstream and underground, as well as current research on the topic.

Reading materials:

Makhortykh M. (2023) “We Were Hungry, but We Were Also Free: Narratives of Russia’s First Post-Soviet Decade on Instagram,” In Robbe K. (ed.) *Remembering Transitions*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 205–232.

Zavadski A. (2023) “Remembering the 1990s in Russia as a Form of Political Protest: Mnemonic Counterpublics,” In Robbe K. (ed.) *Remembering Transitions*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 183–204.