

**NATIONAL WINNER
NSW YOUNG HISTORIAN**



SHANNI YEHUDA

SYDNEY GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL

**MEMORY IS POWER. THE USE OF PUBLIC
MEMORY IN THE USSR.**

Memory is power. The use of public memory in the USSR.

Memory is power; the process of recollecting the past constructs and legitimises reality and shapes the future. In pursuit of their utopia, the totalitarian Soviet regime exploited the power of public memory, appropriating and fabricating it as a weapon to control the people. In order to wholly pursue a new beginning for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, there was an urgent need to eradicate the debris of the past and to reconceive the notion of reality. This ‘debris¹’ resided within the memory of the public. Historian Paul Connerton identifies the ‘struggle of citizens against state power’ as one which involves a struggle against ‘forced forgetting²,’ illustrating the tendency of unbridled totalitarian power to control public recollection. The systematic deprivation of memory within the Soviet nation, including the erasure of figures and atrocities, has been referred to by historians as an ‘organised oblivion³’ and a ‘policy of national forgetting⁴.’ Such an act of forced forgetting was followed by the manufacturing of the Great Patriotic War myth, which sought to further legitimise the Soviet nation and perpetuate a heroic, martyrological conception of its origin. In the wake of this, the Memorial Movement emerged in an attempt to recall the buried Soviet past of persecutions, and was successful to a large extent. Thus, an examination of Soviet memory manipulation reveals the power possessed by our memory, and the consequent weakness which results from its deletion. The recollection of the past is what sculpts the future.

The control of public memory is a salient constituent of a totalitarian regime. Under an autocratic power, the ‘reality’ experienced by the people is actively moulded and distorted in order to manifest a utopian vision. Reality is merely, as Baranczak describes it, ‘the fact plus what “they” can do to it,’ with ‘they’ referring to the authority⁵. While there is still a capacity to distort reality within a democratic society, it is only to a certain extent due to freedom of speech⁶. Historians such as Baranczak argue that, in contrast to democratic systems, totalitarian manipulation knows no limit⁷. Such regimes possess a tangible capacity to completely deceive their people through the shaping of their memory. This deception is rooted in the will of dictators such as Stalin to forge a legitimate socialist society, one that ought to be hinged upon a heroic past⁸. The Soviet regime required the erasure of key figures and memories as well as the introduction of new, glorified memories to bridge the gap between a volatile past and a perfect reality. The fact in itself that memory is subjective and impalpable means that once an official memory is obliterated, the memory of the public is

¹ Stalin quoted in Amir Weiner, *Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1121.

² Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ Izabella Tabarovsky, “Preserving the Memory of Stalin’s Repressions, One Person at a Time,” Wilson Centre, available from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/preserving-the-memory-stalins-repressions-one-person-time>, accessed 27/7/19

⁵ Stanislaw Baranczak, *Memory: Lost, Retrieved, Abused, Defended* (Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Amir Weiner, *Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1126.

rendered invalid⁹ and thus the capacity to legitimise it is lost. Consequently, when a regime assumes absolute control over memory, it assumes absolute control over reality.

The primary way through which Stalin's government controlled public memory was the erasure of memories, both figures and events, deemed incompatible to the regime. In 1936, Stalin became increasingly apprehensive of an approaching war. The urge for Soviet purification intensified, and as did the paranoia that the nation would fall at the hands of internal enemies. This tension culminated in the Great Purge, a two-year period of virulent repression, brutal violence and memory deprivation. Anyone considered a threat to the regime was condemned to oblivion. Stalin employed a group of photo retouchers to blot figures out of photos¹⁰, and this was also accompanied by their physical disappearance. Figures such as Avel Enukidze, an elite member of the Communist's party, deemed an enemy of the nation and consequently incongruous to its historical narrative, were erased in order to mould public perception. Similarly, after his exile and attempted opposition to Stalin's leadership, all photographic traces of Leon Trotsky were eradicated¹¹. There was no room for threat or aberration within Stalin's perfect socialist regime, and this needed to be the public perception, as exemplified by the calculated removal of discordant memories and figures. This erasure was carried out on an industrial scale, with thousands of altered photos being uncovered by art historian Peter King¹². Such a manipulation of photos transcended the ability of the public to assert that, in fact, there was a different truth. Baranczak corroborates this, stating that the value of memory is 'nullified' the second a 'retouched photo appears in the morning paper¹³.' He also adds that the conscious 'sloppiness' of the photographic manipulation served not to seamlessly erase history, but rather to implicate that 'you are dead wrong in thinking that you have the right to ... remember on your own¹⁴.' Ultimately, the formation of a totalitarian state is contingent upon subduing the power of the public. The memory of the people harbours immense power, however this also concedes that once the public is dispossessed of memory, they are divested of that power.

What historian Isabella Tabarovsky regards as the 'policy of national forgetting¹⁵' refers to the failure of the Soviet state to address the morality of the repression, or identify any atrocities with Stalin. The memory of the inconceivably brutal period was essentially discarded by the state, further corroborating the government's will to alter history. As a result of this, the perpetuation of the memory of the purge relied completely on individuals, which is ironic in a state founded upon the erosion of individual power¹⁶. Individuals were

⁹ Baranczak, *Memory: Lost, Retrieved, Abused, Defended*, p. 104.

¹⁰ Erin Blackmore, "How Photos Became a Weapon in Stalin's Great Purge," available from <https://www.history.com/news/josef-stalin-great-purge-photo-retouching>, accessed 27/7/19

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Baranczak, *Memory: Lost, Retrieved, Abused, Defended*, p. 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105

¹⁵ Isabella Tabarovsky, "Preserving the Memory of Stalin's Repressions, One Person at a Time," Wilson Centre, available from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/preserving-the-memory-stalins-repressions-one-person-time>, accessed 27/7/19

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

forced to choose between passivity and silence, which the majority of Soviet citizens chose, or precarious remembering. Remembrance was potent however it jeopardised the individual, as the mere possession of photos of those killed by Stalin was dangerous¹⁷. Thus, the struggle against the totalitarian Soviet regime quickly became one of memories against ‘forced forgetting’¹⁸.

In addition to the erasure of memories, the ornamented myth of the Great Patriotic War was conceived in order to build the foundation for a more unified Soviet state. Immediately following World War II, the Communist Party sought to erase detailed memories of the war, as the collective recollection of it threatened to unmask buried truths regarding the role and actions of the Soviet Union¹⁹. The carnage of World War II devastated the Soviet Union, and the Soviet military was culpable to some extent. While there was considerable Stalinist propaganda following World War II, it was not until the 8th of May 1965 when the report of Leonid Brezhnev, first Secretary of the Central Council of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, constituted a major turning point in remembering the war²⁰. Brezhnev intrinsically reconceived the notion of World War II into ‘the great victory of the Soviet Nation’²¹. This engendered the formation of the mythologised ‘Great Patriotic War’ or ‘Great Victory’, an impetus to national coalescence and a source of legitimacy for the regime. A new, refined memory had now been introduced to the Soviet people, and it would become the history upon which the Soviet Nation would be predicated. Brezhnev spoke of the indomitability of the Soviet Union in the face of fascist threats, and of Soviet fraternal strength, proclaiming that the Soviets were ‘welded together by the unbreakable bonds’²². Every detail incompatible to the heroic tale, such as the Soviet defeat in the early days of the war²³, was omitted from this memory in order to mould public perception. Soviet authorities exploited this fabricated history as a tool through which to warp public memory.

The exploitation of the memory of the war²⁴ was utilised to underpin the Soviet identity and consciousness. Anthony D. Smith elucidates the stark power of this memory, asserting that ‘the myth of descent interprets present social changes ... in a manner that satisfies the drive for meaning by providing new identities that seem to be also very old’²⁵. The development of a noble future necessitates a past imbued with heroism and martyrdom²⁶. Thus, the cultivation of such a myth ensured a sense of both legitimacy and collective

¹⁷ Erin Blackmore, “How Photos Became a Weapon in Stalin’s Great Purge,” available from <https://www.history.com/news/josef-stalin-great-purge-photo-retouching>, accessed 27/7/19

¹⁸ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Julia Sweet, “Political Invasions into Collective Memories: Russia,” *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016), <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/4406/1781>, p. 4514.

²⁰ Yana Prymachenko, “The Soviet Foundations of Russia’s Great Patriotic War Myth,” Euromaidan Press, available from <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/09/the-soviet-foundations-of-russias-great-patriotic-war-myth/>, accessed 28/7/19

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “Remembering the Great Patriotic War was a political act,” *The Economist*, available at <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2017/07/20/remembering-the-great-patriotic-war-was-a-political-act>, accessed 27/7/19

²⁵ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 62.

²⁶ Weiner, *Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia*, p. 1126.

reverence for the Soviet regime. The plot of the one-dimensional myth can be dissected into four main parts²⁷. As James Wertsch describes, there is firstly an initial peace, which is then subdued by trouble or aggression from an alien force²⁸. Thirdly, there ensues a period of great suffering which is then overcome by the victory of the Russian people²⁹. This polished myth cemented itself within Soviet ideology and became a binding factor for the regime under which people remained passive. After the 1960s, 'memory policy'³⁰ was targeted more towards those who had not actually experienced the war. In this way, the distorted memory of the war became a means to shape the youth. Furthermore, as the remembering, commemoration, and veneration of the Great Patriotic War increased, a hierarchical construct of heroism³¹ materialised, resulting in the obliteration of certain veterans from history. Following a long history of anti-Semitism within the Soviet Union, there was no room for Jews within a purified Soviet nation. While there was an immense contribution from Jews at the Soviet front of World War II, not a word about the Jewish community was mentioned in Soviet media³². The myth of the Great Patriotic War sought to encapsulate all aspects of the Soviet nation, however only a nation intricately carved by its authorities. Such authorities vehemently neglected Jewish effort³³. This conscious deletion of historical fact was catalysed by the desire for Soviet purification and the quest for a socialist utopia. Public memory constitutes history, and thus if Soviet authorities were able to exclude certain minorities from memory, it was feasible to exclude them entirely from the historical narrative of Soviet identity.

While Soviet authorities largely subdued the power of individual memory, the dynamic Memorial Movement emerged in 1987 and sought to preserve the memory of persecution victims of 1930-1950. The unprecedented success of such a movement directly aligned with Mikhail Gorbachev's progressive reforms and the beginning of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Historian Dov B. Yaroshevski describes the significance of the movement, asserting that it 'succeeded in rousing' citizens 'from their passivity', leading them to 'struggle for a civil society'³⁴. The movement constructed a public-funded memorial in 1990, which included a crypt listing the names of each and every persecution victim³⁵, thereby exemplifying the strength which lay in recollection. Additionally, the Memorial aimed to dismantle fabricated myths of martyrdom and heroism and identified the mass persecutions with Stalin. The Memorial Movement instigated dynamism within the nation, and on its initiative in 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR instituted the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression, celebrated on the 30th October. The government did, however, perceive the Memorial Movement as a threat, due to its potential to undermine preconceived Soviet

²⁷ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pg. 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Joanna Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland*, trans. S. Lewis (Peter Lang AG, 2015), p. 220.

³¹ Weiner, *Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia*, p. 1150.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Dov B. Yaroshevski, "Political Participation and Public Memory: The Memorial Movement in the USSR, 1987-1989," *History and Memory Vol. 2, No. 2* (1990): p. 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

notions³⁶. Ultimately, through the reconceptualisation and recharacterisation of entrenched Soviet ideas, the Memorial Movement demonstrated the power of memory in the face of organised forgetting.

When the turbulent Soviet past was shaped into a one-dimensional, lacquered myth, what resulted was not a purified nation which authorities hoped for, but rather an incongruous past and present. As public memory was toyed with, there still linger societal discrepancies within Russia today. Russian society continues to live in ambiguity³⁷ regarding Stalin's repressions, due to the lack of discussion and legal framework surrounding it. Memory is pivotal to national identity, which is constructed by myths, recollection and the deprivation of such³⁸. Whilst it is crucial to national identity, memory also remains inextricable from the identity of an individual. However, its intangible nature accounts for the historic ease of its invalidation and consequent dispossession. Memory gives people power, and the answer is neither to exploit nor wield it, but to build upon and grow from it.

³⁶ Yaroshevski, "Political Participation and Public Memory," *History and Memory Vol. 2, No. 2*, p. 24.

³⁷ Izabella Tabarovsky, "Preserving the Memory of Stalin's Repressions, One Person at a Time," Wilson Centre, available from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/preserving-the-memory-stalins-repressions-one-person-time>, accessed 27/7/19

³⁸ Dejan Jović, "Official memories' in post-authoritarianism: an analytical framework," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans, Vol. 6, No. 2* (2004): p. 97.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baranczak, S., *Memory: Lost, Retrieved, Abused, Defended*, Columbia University Press, 1991

This journal article explains how the reality within a totalitarian regime is actively moulded by authorities, and explores the nullification of memory in a sincere tone. It is a close and thorough examination of the nature of reality within the Soviet regime, and proposes profound ideas regarding 'memory invalidation' which became the foundation for my essay.

Blackmore, E., *How Photos Became a Weapon in Stalin's Great Purge*, viewed 27 July, 2019, <<https://www.history.com/news/josef-stalin-great-purge-photo-retouching>>

This article provided me with a thorough insight into the way in which the USSR manipulated memory through photographs. The information was presented in a form that was easy to digest, thereby exemplifying the importance of popular history sources such as History.com. It detailed certain figures who had been subject to such erasure, and thus aided me in consolidating my argument about the erasure of memory. Additionally, the article illustrated the frightening ease of the banning of memory within the USSR, and clearly elucidated how this came to be.

Connerton, P., *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, 1989

This book enabled me to wholly grasp and understand the concept of the power possessed by memory. Connerton addressed philosophical concepts of memory and its power in a comprehensive manner. This was extremely helpful as it traced the power of memory throughout history with multiple examples, such as the French Revolution, and offered nuanced quotes and ideas, such as the 'struggle against forced forgetting.'

Conquest, R., *The Great Terror*, Oxford University Press, 1968

The sections of this book which I was able to access gave me a profound perspective of Stalin's repressions during the Great Purge. It helped me to gain a deep understanding of the nature of censorship and brutality within the USSR, fundamental knowledge through which I was able to frame my essay. I used some information regarding the Great Purge, which I found from this book, in order to corroborate my arguments.

Figes, O., *Explaining the Great Terror*, Orlando Figes, viewed on July 27, 2019, <http://www.orlandofiges.info/section12_TheGreatTerror/ExplainingtheGreatTerror.php>

This website provided me with the required contextual knowledge surrounding Stalin's reign of terror. It outlined the sentiments at play before, during, and after the Great Purge and consequently provided me with a deeper understanding of the background of USSR events that I had been focusing on. Ultimately, this source helped me to further understand the forces underpinning the Soviet control of memory.

Jović, D., 'Official memories in post- authoritarianism: an analytical framework' *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 97. 2004

This journal article provided me with eloquent and articulate interpretations of totalitarian control of memory. Additionally, the footnotes of this source directed me towards other sources, which later became of great use to me. I was able to use a quote from this source regarding the nature of authoritarian memory control, which was essential for my essay.

Koelle, P. B., ‘CHINGIZ AITMATOV: A Reflection on Soviet Rule Through Memory’
Russian Language Journal, vol. 54, no. 177, p. 139, 2000

This journal article espoused an interesting and insightful stance on the power of memory, and enabled me to further consider my own stance and argument. It proposed the idea that memory and honesty are inextricably linked, which aided in moulding and reinforcing my own point of view. I found that even though I did not completely agree with this source, it was the incongruity between our two arguments that further helped me realise my own.

McLoughlin, B. & McDermott, K., *Stalin’s Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, Springer, 2002

This book detailed the historical narrative of the mass repression within the USSR, extending my comprehension and interpretation of the events of the Great Purge. This source provided a close examination of Stalin’s systematic terror, through a focus on the politics of repression, mass repression and studies of victims. I was able to use this information to contextualise my argument as well as support my inspection of the politics of repression.

Prymachenko, Y., *The Soviet Foundations of Russia’s Great Patriotic War Myth*, Euromaidan Press, viewed 28 July, 2019, <<http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/09/the-soviet-foundations-of-russias-great-patriotic-war-myth/>>

This article was very useful as it chronicled the use of myths and the fabrication of memory to control the Soviet Union. It described how Leonid Brezhnev reconceived of the notion of World War II in order to consolidate totalitarian power, and it provided me with the primary source of his speech, which I was able to use as evidence of memory manipulation. This source thus provided me with numerous amounts of material with which to substantiate my case about the fabrication of myths.

“Remembering the Great Patriotic War was a political act” *The Economist*, viewed 27 July, 2019, <<https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2017/07/20/remembering-the-great-patriotic-war-was-a-political-act>>

This article from the Economist describes the precariousness of remembering the war in a way which differs from the ornamented myth. It provided me with an author’s account of the fear and stress encountered by individuals who dared to use the power of their memory. I found this very interesting and it helped me to further solidify the notion of the power of individual memory.

“Russian society "Memorial"” *Enrs*, viewed July 28, 2019, <<https://enrs.eu/en/news/1111-russian-society-memorial>>

This website described the effects and aims of the ‘Memorial’ movement which sought to combat the memory deprivation of the USSR. It detailed the impact of the movement, such as the fact that it founded an official day to remember forgotten victims of Stalin’s persecutions. I was able to use this example to demonstrate the success of the Memorial movement.

Smith, A. D., *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999

This book offered many profound ideas regarding the purpose and use of myths within the formation of a nation. It highlighted the need for an origin myth in order to lay the foundation for a unified nation. I used this notion within my argument about the use of myths as the binding factor of a regime.

Sweet, J., 'Political Invasions into Collective Memories: Russia,' *International Journal of Communication* 10, p. 4514. 2016.

This journal article outlined the history of Soviet memory control and manipulation, as well as the aims behind it. It detailed the rationale behind the propagation of the Great Patriotic War myth, and I was able to use this rationale to further illustrate the manufacturing of memory within the USSR and the purification it sought to achieve.

Tabarovsky, I., *Preserving the Memory of Stalin's Repressions, One Person at a Time*, Wilson Centre, viewed 27 July, 2019, <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/preserving-the-memory-stalins-repressions-one-person-time>>

This article traced the precarious nature of Soviet memory overtime, and described the current state of memory as a result of the past. It described Russian society in the present as one living in 'moral equivalency,' and I used this notion in my conclusion in order to show the entrenched and persistent ramifications, which stemmed from the control of memory in the USSR.

Wawrzyniak, J., *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland*, trans. S. Lewis, Peter Lang AG, 2015

This book discussed the politics of memory, and how the use of public memory manifested itself within a systematic context. It described such a phenomenon as 'memory policy', a quote that I was able to use to describe the manipulation of the memory of the war. Ultimately, this source provided me with an insight into the ways in which memory control permeated Soviet politics.

Weiner, A., *Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism*, Oxford University Press, 1999

This book outlines the Soviet desire for purification, illustrating this through Stalin's quotes and descriptions of the erasure of Jewish war effort. Interestingly, this source was written by a Jew, and thus tends to focus on atrocities faced by Jews. Nonetheless, this source was immensely useful in substantiating my argument regarding the erasure of memory.

Wertsch, J. V., *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

This book discussed the 'formula' behind the creation of an origin myth, dissecting it into four main parts. This analysis was very useful to me in both understanding the Great Patriotic War Myth as well as providing my analysis of its use. I used Wertsch's dissection of origin myths to frame my argument about the power of fabricated memories.

Yaroshevski, D. B., 'Political Participation and Public Memory: The Memorial Movement in the USSR, 1987-1989' *History and Memory* vol. 2, no. 2, p. 24. 1990

This journal article chronicled the emergence of the Memorial Movement, and traced its effect on Russian society. It provided me with numerous examples of both the aims of the movement as well as its projects, and I was able to use these examples to support my counterargument regarding those which acted in opposition to the memory manipulation with the Soviet Union.