

Battle for the North: Russian Cyberconflict over Commemorating the Red Army's Liberation of Northern Norway

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Меньше всяким «братьям» верить надо. Истреблять и загонять в резервации коренные народы, как американцы делали. Так и надо было делать. А сейчас эти ссу*енные только плевать в спину могут (Vkontakte-user in @InoSMI 2018)¹

THIS online comment is a reaction to the news that Norway would not invite Russia's head of state, President Putin, to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Eastern Finnmark by the Red Army in 2019. An expression of gratitude for the sacrifice made by Soviet troops in the Norwegian Arctic during WWII would be central to the commemorations in the border town of Kirkenes. Authorities in Finnmark explicitly called for the Russian president to be invited, seeing it as a crucial step towards reducing bilateral tensions after Norway's condemnation of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. They emphasized the importance of local cooperation in the Barents region as well as the close contacts at the people-to-people level, irrespective of the cooling in relations between Oslo and Moscow (Strøm & Novikova 2019). The central Norwegian government, however, demanded that Putin "earn" his invitation to the commemora-

¹ "We need to put less trust in all these 'brothers'. Exterminate and drive the natives into reservations, like the Americans did. That's what should have been done. But now these b*tches can just spit at our backs."

tions in Kirkenes by “recognizing international law” (Skårderud 2018).² Conflicting notions of how the present-day relationship with Russia should play into official commemoration of the past, then, became a potent political issue on the Norwegian side of the Arctic border.

The issue of how current conflict affects the memory of Soviet liberation of Northern Norway also became highly apparent on the Russian-language Internet (Runet), specifically in the user-driven realms of comment-sections and social media. As illustrated by the quoted comment, online users engaged in heated debates about how Norway remembers—or forgets—the war in the North. These battles in the field of digital memory, conceptualized by Rutten and colleagues (2013) as *web wars*, are the focus of the present study. Starting from the premise that the liberation serves as a significant semiotic resource for making sense of the Russo-Norwegian relationship, the chapter explores how this past is used on the Runet in the context of present-day political friction between Russia and Norway, as well as the West more broadly. Through a multi-sited, discourse-centred online ethnographic study (Marcus 1995; Androustopoulos 2008) of user-generated debate surrounding the 75th anniversary in Kirkenes, the chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How does contemporary conflict play into Russian online commemoration of the Soviet liberation of Northern Norway? Correspondingly, how does the memory of war affect digitally mediated understandings of ongoing tensions between the two countries? Drawing on the Norwegian context, where debate about Russia’s role in the anniversary appeared as a clash between the central-official and the regional, i.e. Northern, memory, the study also asks whether a similar clash emerges on the Runet: Is the framing of Norwegian commemoration through the prism of bilateral conflict contested by a regional perspective, where the memory of war serves as a symbol of cross-border connection rather than division? Identifying two distinct clusters of discourse on the Norwegian liberation anniversary, one surrounding the Kremlin-aligned platform review-

2 It merits a mention that the president of Russia had never previously taken part in the Norwegian liberation anniversary. Inviting Putin would have represented a significant shift in Norwegian tradition. The minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, took part in the 2019 event as he had done during the 70th anniversary five years prior. At the official level, then, there was nothing to show that increasing tensions between the countries had impacted the commemoration. For a news article discussing Lavrov’s visits, see Nilsen 2019.

ing foreign media, InoSMI, and one unfolding on a large online community for people in Russia's high North, the Vkontakte-site Murmansk, the study explores how different lines of conflict—past and present, historical and political, local, national and international—intersect in Russian online debate about the 2019 commemorations in Kirkenes.

Some caveats before proceeding: The format of a chapter does not allow the discussion of many crucial and sensitive questions of WWII in the Russo-Norwegian Arctic, forcing the author instead to focus on those select aspects of historical background appearing most relevant to the research questions and material at hand.³ Tentatively positioning itself within the field of *digital memory war studies*, the chapter does not look at the history of Soviet liberation of Northern Norway as such, but at *how this history gains meaning for users of Russian online media* against the background of current tensions between the two countries. Drawing on the notion that events from the Soviet past—especially tied to the war—are frequently used to assert national identity and legitimize present-day political conflict, the study explores how memory of liberation is constructed, contested and circulated in Russian cyberspace (Blacker et al., 2013; Rutten et al., 2013; Fedor et al., 2017; Zvereva 2019).

A conceptual clarification is also needed at this point: The primary focus of this chapter is the Soviet liberation of Northern Norway, referring to the final leg of the Petsamo-Kirkenes operation which unfolded on Norwegian soil in October and November 1944 (Kiselev 1995, 175–86). The operation marked the end of what in Russian historiography is often called “the war in the High North” (*Voina na severe/v Zapoliar'e*), referring to resistance against Germany's attack on the Soviet Arctic, notably Murmansk, from 1941, but also to the Winter war with Finland starting in 1939 (Kiselev 1995). Accordingly, the liberation of Northern Norway was only a marginal (in many ways) part of the Great Patriotic War—the Russian denomination for WWII. When debating Norway's liberation, this patchwork of history is reflected in complex, often contradictory, conceptualizations by Russian online commenters: Lines between different elements of the war might be blurred, events entangled, spatiality and

3 This means disregarding a main player in the Arctic theatre of war—Finland. While Finnish war history in many ways connects to that of both Norway and Russia, this chapter will not address it in its own right. The same, sadly, goes for the history of the Sámi, whose core habitat was ravaged in the war.

chronology somewhat stripped of meaning. In the material at hand, then, memories of Soviet intervention in Northern Norway merge with memories from completely different battlegrounds, and with memories of the war as such. The title of this study, “Battle for the North” is intentionally vague, hoping to capture the plasticity in users’ own definitions: Rather than ascribing a specific frame of reference to the commenters, i.e. Soviet activities in Finnmark in 1944, it is open to the meanings placed in it by different commenters.

Background

Germany’s attack on the Soviet High North in 1941 was spearheaded by an army corps poignantly named “Norway” (Kiselev 1995, 34). What was expected to be a swift takeover of Murmansk, prepping the ground for a northern invasion of the Russian heartlands, instead became a drawn-out and bloody affair in the brutal Arctic conditions, claiming 100,000 lives over three years (Jaklin 2017, 34). As Germany gradually lost ground against the Allies over the course of the war, Stalin ordered a final series of offensives to completely rid Soviet territories of Nazi forces. The Petsamo-Kirkenes operation was the very last of these offensives, known as “Stalin’s tenth strike” (*Desiatyi stalinskii udar*) (Chapenko 2020, 80).⁴ Launched in Petsamo, present-day Pechenga, on October 7, 1944, the operation quickly pushed the Germans back onto Norwegian territory. As the order from Stalin entailed annihilating the enemy completely (*polnyi razгром vraga*), Soviet forces followed. As a consequence of tactical developments rather than a dedicated liberation mission, then, the Red Army entered Norway (Jaklin 2017, 37–40).

When Soviet troops captured Kirkenes on October 25, 1944, the town was in ruins. The occupation of Northern Norway had been crucial to Germany’s war strategy, securing access to iron ore and nickel—essential resources in the war machinery—from Swedish and Finnish mines. Following the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, it also served as a launch pad for the offensive against Murmansk (Kivimäki 2020, 33). Its strategic significance exposed Northern Norway to more brutality than

4 Launched by Stalin himself, this term anchored the official commemorative framework for the final year of battles on Soviet soil. While actively used in Stalin-era press and literature, the term was discarded by Krushchev as a remnant of his predecessor’s cult of personality. Since Putin came to power in the new millennium, the term has experienced a renaissance. See Sidorchik 2019.

any other part of the country: Kirkenes alone suffered over 300 aerial attacks during the war, as compared to Oslo's two (Hafsten 1991, 242, 306). Even more brutal than the bombings were perhaps the Nazi's scorched earth tactics. As the Germans were forced to retreat from the steadily advancing Red Army troops, they burned much of Finnmark to the ground. The population was forcibly evacuated while their homes and all other essential infrastructure were destroyed by the Nazis. When Soviet forces arrived, they found thousands of people quite literally hiding underground, crammed together in mines to escape the carnage. The soldiers were met with celebrations and an overwhelming gratitude for their sacrifice (Jaklin 2017, 51–52): More than 2,000 of them had lost their lives in the battles to liberate Finnmark (Kiselev 1995, 184).

The population on the Soviet side of the border also suffered immensely during the war. Murmansk, “the logistical artery” for the Red Army's warfare (Kivimäki 2020, 33), was bombed over 700 times—a ravage allegedly second only to that of Stalingrad.⁵ As more and more of the city burned, people lived in increasingly crowded conditions, at times having to seek shelter in earth lodges (Kiselev 2005, 272). The Germans were not the only source of fear, however: The НКВД (later КГБ) intensified its hunt for “enemies of the people” in the region, conducting arbitrary arrests and persecuting anyone suspected of standing in the way of victory (Kiselev 2005, 42–43). The vast majority of Murmansk's young men were sent to the front, while the remaining population worked on the military supply line. No area of life was left untouched by the militarization of the Soviet Arctic, and residents were expected to sacrifice everything in support of the war. The slogan *всё для фронта и победы над врагом!*⁶ consumed life in the High North. Still, many became severely disillusioned by the fact that the ostensibly all-powerful Red Army could not immediately defeat the Nazis (Kiselev 2005, 19).

Northerners on opposite sides of the border were not only connected by the common fate of having their home regions laid in ruins: In many cases, their lives were quite materially intertwined. Some Norwegian families fled across the border to escape Nazi occupation in 1940 and

5 From official messaging about Murmansk as one of Russia's Hero Cities (*gorodageroi*) by the Organizing Committee on Preparation and Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the Victory (2020).

6 “All for the front and victory over the enemy!”

settled in the Murmansk region. Many men from these families went on to fight alongside the Soviets (Kiselev 2005, 494). So did Norwegian partisans, who were trained by the Soviet Union to conduct intelligence and sabotage operations against Germans in Northern Norway (Huitfeldt 1997). Meanwhile, many Norwegians risked their lives to provide aid to the around 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war and forcibly displaced civilians suffering at the hands of the occupying forces. Placed in concentration camps and used as forced labour on huge German infrastructure projects—notably in Northern Norway—thousands of Soviet citizens lost their lives this way (Haugland 2008). Many of the elements of war history connecting people across the border were eventually marginalized in the memory cultures of both countries. Remembrance of a shared past became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the political realities of the Cold War. The border in the North came to separate not only Norway and Russia but competing ideologies. People who were seen to have collaborated with “the other” during the war, partisans and POWs alike, faced entrenched suspicion in their home countries (Naumov 1996; Huitfeldt 1997).

The first liberation anniversary with participation at the highest political level by both countries took place in 2014. Crucial in terms of providing an official acknowledgment of the common past, the event was nonetheless marked by tension: Norway had just imposed sanctions against Russia over the situation in Ukraine, and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg used the occasion to openly condemn the Russian government (Skårdalsmo 2014). Five years later, tensions had hardly decreased: Only a few months before the 2019 anniversary, a former commissioner of Norway’s Arctic border with Russia and prominent advocate for bilateral friendship, Frode Berg, became the first Norwegian in history to be convicted of espionage against Russia. Berg was accused of stealing information about the Northern Fleet—crucially involved in the 1944 liberation—not only on behalf of Norwegian intelligence services but the American CIA (Digaeva 2018). Tensions peaked when Norway in turn arrested an employee of the Russian Federation Council on similar suspicions during a visit to the Norwegian parliament. The Russian side condemned the arrest as a blatant provocation in the wake of sustained “anti-Russian” statements by the Norwegian authorities (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Norway 2019). Another source of friction was the

unfolding of the largest military exercises on both sides of the border since the Cold War—NATO's Trident Juncture and Russia's Vostok-18 (McLeary 2018). A final factor to note in connection with the 75th anniversary was the sudden appearance mere weeks before the celebrations of alleged observations of Russian special forces on Norwegian soil. While sparking outrage on both sides of the border, the rumours were eventually discarded as “fake news.” Still, Russian authorities framed the incident as [...] часть ведущейся в Норвегии определенными кругами системной работы по насаждению образа врага в лице России (Kogalov 2019). The theme of animosity and antagonism at the bilateral level, then, provided a sinister backdrop to the liberation anniversary.

Theorizing Russo-Norwegian memory conflict online

Moving on to constructing an explanatory framework for heated Russian online debates on Norwegian commemorations of war, the concept of a *memory divide* between the countries appears central: In the post-socialist space, Russia included, memory was long suppressed and contorted by the authoritarian state. Mourning and remembrance diverging from the official history told by the regime were subject to violent persecution. Blacker and Etkind (2013, 5) call the memory development in this region tortured, convoluted and even explosive, distinct from what they perceive as a more “public and consistent narrative” in the West. Assmann (2013) in turn goes a long way in tracing this divide precisely to World War II: While in Western Europe a “negative memory” built on *regret* for the war crimes, specifically the Holocaust, is central to memory culture, in Russia positive emphasis on victory and the war hero displaces recognition of Stalinist terror and its victims. Remembrance of Soviet repression has instead, Assmann claims, entered the realm of memory wars between Russia and other post-Soviet states: For Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union to embrace the negative memory of state violence would be an “[...] unpatriotic endeavour” (Assmann 2013, 35). The positive memory of the Great Patriotic War is so deeply woven into the fabric of post-Soviet Russia in the form of a “usable past” serving as a crucial source of legitimacy both for the government, and for the making of post-Soviet national identity as such (Fedor, Lewis et al. 2017; see also Malinova 2017; Malinova 2019).

Within the explosive terrain that makes up Eastern European and Russian memory culture, digital media forms what Rutten and Zvereva (2013, 2) call a “pivotal discursive territory,” where negotiations of past and present, politics and history merge and amplify one another. This territory, according to Rutten and Zvereva (2013, 5), becomes “disproportionately politicized,” leading to a situation where digitally mediated memories of the Soviet past intertwine with, and even act as, drivers for online debate on contemporary politics. The discussion of historical events on the Russian-language Internet, then, is in large part determined by their perceived “political value.” As Rutten and Zvereva put it:

[I]n post-socialist countries, social-media discourse is influenced by old conflicts, whose memories are actualized and politically exploited in the present. Myriad groups with their own truths and ideological preferences try to establish their voices in society, and to legitimize themselves in digital space (Rutten & Zvereva 2013, 5).

In these digitally mediated discourses of the past, memory is constantly changing: History is not simply a linear, chronologically ordered phenomenon, but something to be continuously reconfigured and reproduced in the present—and future. It is also something to be deconstructed—singular elements of the past can be “extracted from their contexts” to generate new meaning. A crucial feature of these user-driven processes is their *emotionality*. The concept of web wars denotes that history in these online discussions is never neutral, but always black and white, inherently antagonistic to other versions. Accordingly, the notion of “defeating” mnemonic adversaries in these digital spaces might be more valuable than arriving at some form of historical “truth” (Rutten & Zvereva 2013, 6).

In their study of what they label Russian *hyperconnected memory culture*, Kalinina and Menke (2016) find that official narratives permeate and dominate such social media negotiations of the past. They warn against notions that online platforms can contest the state’s influence over memory and provide alternative histories to the Russian public. The concept of hyperconnected memories, in turn, provides a fruitful backdrop to the present study as well: In contrast to mass media, where communication on memory is (broadly speaking) a linear, one-to-many

process, the hyperconnectivity afforded by digital media facilitates interactive and open negotiation of memory (Kalinina & Menke 2016, 60–61). Kalinina and Menke emphasize the connectedness of contemporary memory discourses: They are fluid and permeable, made up of multiple media contexts and interrelated histories, what Feindt and colleagues (2014) call *entangled memories*.

Methods and materials

To accommodate the hyperconnected, entangled nature of digital memory conflict, as conceptualized above, the study takes a *multi-sited ethnographic approach*: Designed to investigate research objects that are multiply situated, discontinuous and dispersed, this approach is interested, as Marcus (1995, 102) puts it, in “logics of relationship, translation and association.” In the present case, this means exploring how Russian online discourse on the liberation anniversary unfolds across different sites, media platforms and user segments through the principle of *following the conflict* (Marcus 1995, 109–110): Making the very contestation of an issue the object of study, the trajectory of debate is what defines the space of research. This space is then analysed through discourse-centred systematic observation of meaning-making practices and communicative dynamics, asking, in line with Androutsopoulos (2008, 6), “[w]hat are the semiotic (including linguistic) resources recurrently deployed in this field, what characteristic clusters do they form, and how do different environments, participants, and genres differ in their use of these resources?”

Having mapped where user-driven online debate—specifically conflict—on the Norwegian liberation anniversary took place on the Russian Internet,⁷ two different discourse clusters took shape: One crystallized around Kremlin-tied news outlets focusing on foreign media, primarily InoSMI, while the other took place on online communities for or about the Russian North, such as the VKontakte-group Murmansk. These two clusters were observed in more detail to establish similarities and differences in the themes, strategies and shapes of mnemonic conflict. A subset of around 20 discussions where the conflict level appeared particularly

7 This was done through keyword searches on Yandex and various social media platforms (derivations of *osvobozhdenie Norvegii/Finnmarka*), as well as following sharing and linking patterns between different sites mentioning the liberation anniversary.

high was selected for more granular discourse analysis.⁸ To protect discourse participants and reduce traceability, all examples are anonymized.

A fundamental challenge such a study faces is distinguishing one conflict from another, i.e. defining the actual research space. As mentioned, Russian online memory conflicts on the topic of the Norwegian liberation anniversary are intrinsically entangled: Different histories, memories and discourses merge, sometimes making discussions of the Great Patriotic War, or the Soviet past as such, indistinguishable from discussion of Norwegian liberation. While the study attempts to disentangle the different conflicts, the discourse itself resists such disentanglement: The memories of one are ingrained in the memory of the other. Dividing the different memory conflicts, then, is not always possible, and perhaps not always meaningful: The interconnectedness of the memories, one could argue, is crucial to the process of making sense of them.

Lost in translation? The case of InoSMI

The comment in the opening quotation, denouncing the false Norwegian brothers and lamenting the lost opportunity of restraining them in reservations, is illustrative of the discourse cluster observed in association with InoSMI. Selectively translating and carefully curating international news coverage of Russia, this digitally native outlet promises to show readers [к]ак иностранные СМИ изображают Россию.⁹ While InoSMI has been accused by Western authorities of serving as a cog in the Kremlin propaganda machinery (EUvsDisinfo 2019), scholarly work on the platform is still lacking. A notable exception comes from Spiessens and van Poucke (2016): They argue that while the platform should not be understood as “purely propagandistic,” its use of reframing techniques promotes an *ideological square*¹⁰ pinning positive representations of *us* (i.e. Russia) against negative representations of *them* (i.e. the West). As

8 The qualitative research design means the study cannot boast statistical findings to underpin observed patterns, or make strong claims relating to the representativeness of individual comments. What it does enable, however, is situated insight into the concrete exchanges between users, exposing nuances and complexities in how commenters make sense of the liberation anniversary in the context of contemporary Russo-Norwegian relations.

9 “How foreign media depict Russia.”

10 Coined by van Dijk (2009), the concept applies to discursive strategies in news media perpetuating polarization in the context of social conflict.

such, InoSMI is in close alignment with official Kremlin narration on Russo-Western relations (Spiessens and Van Poucke 2016, 323, 334–36). Radina (2016), in turn, has studied how web users interact with this messaging in her analysis of communicative strategies in InoSMI-comment sections. Her findings show that the most frequent strategy of commenters was to consolidate their own world view, in a way mirroring the platform's practice of promoting an ideological square. Radina also found that every fifth post in InoSMI's comment sections was *manipulative* in character, including insults, intimidation, threats and discreditation (Radina 2016).

The notion that InoSMI not only serves as a reframing platform tailoring foreign media discourse to the Kremlin's schemata for representing Russia's relationship with the West, but that its users reproduce, reinforce and radicalize these reframing strategies is apparent also in discourse on the Norwegian liberation anniversary. Central to this dynamic was, as previously mentioned, InoSMI's coverage of President Putin not being invited to the anniversary. Particularly influential was the publication provokingly titled *Норвежское правительство лишено морали, оно хочет праздновать освобождение Финмарка без участия освободителей* (InoSMI 2018).¹¹ Becoming one of the most widely discussed in the history of InoSMI's Norway-coverage,¹² commenters perpetuated the notion of a morally devoid Norway by foregrounding the country's ostensibly fascist past—and present:

В гитлеровском ЕС больше других поддерживали Германию [...] Норвегия—это исторический факт. Во все более фашиствующей Европе оправдание своих «делишек» только набирает обороты. Норвеги воевать умели, это верно, другое дело—на чьей стороне. (User 1 in InoSMI 2018)¹³

11 “The Norwegian government is devoid of morality, it wants to celebrate the liberation of Finnmark without the liberators.”

12 Based on a review of the category “Most discussed” (*Samye obsuzhdaemye*) on InoSMI's site in June 2020.

13 “In the Hitlerist EU, Germany was supported by [...] Norway more than anyone else—that is a historic fact. In increasingly fascist Europe, justification of their ‘little deeds’ is only gaining momentum. The Norsemen could fight, that's true, but on whose side—that's another story.”

The post draws Norway as the Nazis' principal ally, purporting that the country was not occupied by Germany, but its co-belligerent. This fascist history, however, apparently never ended: The commenter specifically uses the term *EU* to refer to war-time Europe, collapsing the barrier between authorities of the past and present, linking the atrocities of the 1940's to contemporary politics. In this view, the *EU* does not represent a break with the violent European past, but a continuation—even reinforcement—of it. Norway, represented as the historic supporter of this growing European fascism,¹⁴ is then cast in this comment not only as Russia's *other*, but as its *enemy*. Another commenter (User 2 in InoSMI 2018) builds on this notion to theorize that for such intrinsically fascist, ss-aligned Norwegians (*esesovtsy-norvezhtsy*) the Soviet intervention in 1944 is precisely *not seen as a liberation, but a defeat*: The Red Army brutally awoke Norwegians from their fascist dreams. Other commenters jump on this theory as an explanation for why present-day Norway seems so hostile to their Eastern neighbours: Норвежцы—недобитые фашисты и они на генетическом уровне ненавидят Россию (User 3 in InoSMI 2018).¹⁵ The Norwegian government, labelled by commenters as “the Quislings” (*Kvislingovtsy*), fears and loathes Russia as the ultimate fighter in the war on fascism.¹⁶ Commenters also post pictures to push their point across—notably German propaganda posters calling for Norwegians to fight with the Nazis against the Soviets (see figure 1). These pictures function as rhetorical devices to underpin the argument that Norway's entrenched animosity towards Russia—as manifested in the rejection of Putin's participation in the commemorations in Kirkenes—emerges from the country's fascist past.

Across their social media platforms, InoSMI shared the story of the president's absence from the Kirkenes celebrations under the tagline Похоже, Норвегия забыла, что 75 лет назад ее освободила Россия (@InoSMI 2018).¹⁷ The notion that Norway has forgotten about Russia's military prowess and might even need to be reminded, angered commenters in several ways:

14 While Norway is not an *EU*-member state, commenters often conflate the Union with European countries as such.

15 “Norwegians are diehard fascists who hate Russia at the genetic level.”

16 Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2015) argues that the alleged revival of fascism in Europe is at the heart of Russian efforts to control its near-abroad, primarily Ukraine.

17 “It seems like Norway forgot that 75 years ago she was liberated by Russia.”



FIGURE 1: German propaganda poster shared by a user of InoSMI's VKontakte-site, as a contribution to the discussion of Norway's fascist roots.

User 1: Надо повторить, а то забыли.

User 2: Надо [но] повторялка уже не та.

User 3: Сегодня не та, а завтра будет та самая.

User 4: Зато забывалка все шире и глубже.

User 5: Будьте умнее, «повторялки!» Что вы хотите повторить? То горе, которое длилось 4 года? [...] Будьте умнее и не повторяйте ошибки (@InoSMI 2018)¹⁸

At first glance, the discussion of a “need to repeat” a past foreign intervention creates an ominous sense of threat. Looking closer, however, the exchange is highly ambivalent, reflecting how conflicting notions of past, present and future merge when Russian online commenters engage with the memory of war. On the one hand, as expressed by User 2, there is a sense that contemporary Russia is hardly able to repeat the glorious achievements of the past: A repetition (*povtorenie*) of military operations

¹⁸ “It needs to be repeated, otherwise it is forgotten.”/“It needs to [but] a little repetition isn’t the same.”/“Today it won’t, but tomorrow it will be the very same.”/“But the little forgetfulness is even broader and deeper.”/“Be smart, ‘little repetitions’! What is it you want to repeat? That sorrow that lasted 4 years? [...] Don’t repeat the mistakes.”

in Norway today would not be the same, but small and silly, best captured by the child-like diminutive *povtorialka*. User 3, in turn, expresses optimism for the future: Even if today's Russia would not be able to recreate the victories of the past, *the nation of tomorrow* surely will. User 4's comment seems to hint that the current situation is even more serious than that of the past: Norway's little forgetfulness, again expressed by the child-like diminutive, is so entrenched that a repetition of previous acts of war might not suffice. The exchange, nevertheless, is profoundly ambiguous: What is to be repeated, exactly? Occupation or liberation? The ending of war, or war itself? The ambiguity is reinforced by the mix of mischievous playfulness with sombre gravity, mockery with threat. User 5 confronts this ambiguity directly, asking what the commenters are really playing at. In this commenter's view, the notion of repeating the past is deeply troubling. For him, memory of war is not one of glory, victory or military mastery: It is one of tremendous grief for the mistakes that were made.

While much of the debate on Norway's liberation anniversary across InoSMI's platforms frames Norwegian memory in antagonistic terms, as forgetful or even fascist, this is not all-pervading. A substantial segment of InoSMI-tied debate on the event praises Norway for properly commemorating and appreciating Soviet liberation. This praise, however, primarily functions to emphasize what commenters perceive to be a far more serious memory conflict, namely that between Russia and the post-Socialist countries. Norway is frequently cast as role model for countries like Ukraine, showing what the war memory *should have been like* in the former Soviet republics. An illustrative comment on InoSMI's story about how Russian and Norwegian veterans celebrated the 75th anniversary by drinking vodka together, states: Ну вот—есть же адекватное отношение к тому, что тогда происходило, а не та пропаганда и искажения, которые имеют место в Прибалтике, Польше... (User 1 in @InoSMI 2019b).¹⁹ Commenters' use of the Norwegian celebration of Soviet intervention to contest contemporary memory practices in Eastern Europe, however, is itself contested. On a story about how Norwegian authorities

19 "Look at that—there do after all exist an adequate attitude to what happened back then, and not the kind of propaganda and distortions taking place in the Baltics, in Poland..."

are considering giving formal decorations to Soviet veterans (@InoSMI 2019a), users engage in the following discussion:

User 1: Полякам стоит поучиться, за её освобождение отдали жизнь 600 тысяч советских солдат.

User 2: Освободить, это подарить *свободу*.

User 3, answering User 1: Поучились поляки под Катинью²⁰ в людоедов.

User 1, answering User 2: Я думаю одна жизнь бесценна а помножить на 600 тысяч поляки должны сапоги целовать вечность их сыновьям и внукам.

User 4, answering User 1: Если бы в 1940 году советская армия нанесла удар Норвегии в спину так же, как она сделала это в 1939 году в Польше у норвежцев, безусловно, было бы такое же отношение к России, как и у поляков. (@InoSMI 2019a)²¹

In some commenters' view, while Norway was liberated, the countries in the socialist bloc were *not*: Here, the Soviets remained, depriving Poland and other countries of the freedom given to Norwegians. In a sense, then, one occupying force, Nazi Germany, was simply replaced by another—the Soviet Union. The cultural memory remains drenched in the blood from atrocities committed by this force, such as the Katyn massacre. Norway's experience with the Soviet Union does not include such profound trauma. Had it, the relationship would be very different.

The narratives of fascism, the “need to repeat” and post-socialist ingratitude in InoSMI-tied discussions of the liberation anniversary are at times challenged by accusations that the discussions are infested by a brigade of online trolls linked to the Kremlin. Calling out the perceived similarities between official discourse and the one unfolding among

20 The Katyn massacre—the killings by the НКВД in 1940 of thousands of Polish military and intellectuals after the Soviet invasion of Poland.

21 “The Poles had better learn, 600,000 Soviet soldiers gave their lives for [Poland's] liberation.”/“To liberate means to give freedom.” [Emphasis my own.]/“The Poles learned under Katyn [going] to the cannibals.”/“I think one life is invaluable and multiplying by 600,000 means the Poles should kiss the boots of [the Soviet soldiers'] sons and grandchildren for eternity.”/“If the Soviet army had given Norway the kind of stab in the back in 1940 that they gave Poland in 1939, Norwegians would undoubtedly have the same attitude to Russia as the Poles do.”

commenters, one user explodes: *маргинал и пропутинский тролль купленный ФСБнаследницейОпричнины [...]!!! как я его дЭмокура-тишно раскрыл! [sic.]* (User 4 in InoSMI 2018).²² The notion that debate on the Norwegian liberation anniversary could be infiltrated by Russian secret services, plotting to disrupt, contort or entirely undermine democratic debate, might be expected to elicit user-discussion in its own right. More often than not, however, accusations of trolling are ignored or condemned, thus appearing as unwelcome or even destructive elements in the discussion. Commenters launching such accusations often actively play into this notion of being disruptive outsiders by making emotive and blatantly provocative statements, taunting other commenters and subverting language norms—as illustrated by User 4 above. Users behind trolling-accusations in InoSMI-discussions, then, in a way seem themselves to take on the role of trolls.²³

Borderline memories in Murmansk

A cluster of Russian online discourse on the Norwegian liberation anniversary far removed from the debates centering on InoSMI²⁴ is the V Kontakte-site Murmansk. Boasting almost 350,000 followers (November 2020), it is described as a place for locals to *[б]удь в курсе жизни своего города!*²⁵ Accounting for the large number and geographic diversity of users and materials posted, the site should be seen more as a platform for the region as such.

The most interesting finding in discourse on the liberation anniversary on Murmansk, is perhaps what is missing: Putin's absence from the Kirkenes commemorations, such a crucial part of discussions linked to InoSMI, is not present here. Indeed, not a single post is dedicated to the

22 “[You] marginal and pro-Putin troll bought by the FSBHeirtotheOprichnina [...]!!! How dEmicuratikally I exposed him!” Established by Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century, the notoriously brutal Oprichnina was Russia's first political police. The commenter is likely referencing the so-called Kozlovskii-case, where a Russian hacker who allegedly interfered in the 2016 US elections accused the FSB of orchestrating his operations. See Iapparova & Sotnikov 2017.

23 The appropriation of “trolling tactics” in the fight against perceived pro-Kremlin propagandists is sometimes referred to by users themselves as antitrolling.

24 No InoSMI-material on the Norwegian liberation anniversary has been shared or mentioned on the site, emphasizing the observation that these are two distinct discourse clusters.

25 “Stay updated on the life of your city!”

(missing) representation of Russian officials at the event. At first glance, the focus of discussions on the site is not political but *cultural aspects of the commemorations*, specifically the first performance by the Northern Fleet's musical ensemble in Kirkenes since the war (@Murmansk 2019c). This was labelled a historic event for residents of Russia *and* Norway, and the ensemble was joined by Norwegian military musicians to perform Russian classical and folk music as well as both countries' national anthems (Government of Murmansk Oblast' 2019). Several users of Murmansk were present at the event in Kirkenes, posting about their impressions and sharing video clips from the performance—sometimes accompanied by both Russian and Norwegian flag-emojis (figure 2).

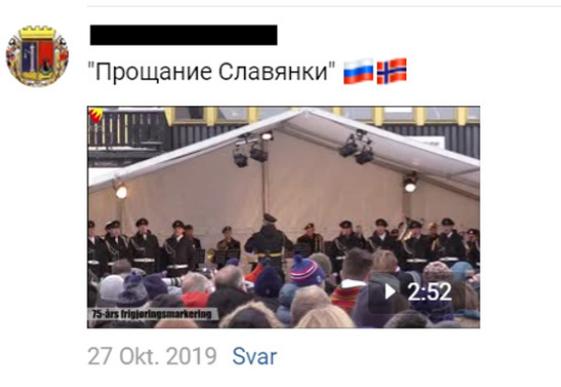


FIGURE 2: Screenshot of a videoclip from the Northern Fleet's performance in Kirkenes, shared by a user of the Murmansk group.

In addition to warm feelings and a sense of community, discussion of the Russo-Norwegian military concert exposes several different lines of conflict—primarily the perceived difference in the treatment of veterans in Russia and Norway:

User 1: Смотришь на их стариков и испытываешь уважение к их старости. Да они старые, больные, но они окружены заботой и вниманием [...] А на наших стариков смотришь и испытываешь ощущение конечно гордости, как к воинам освободителям, но и вместе с тем жалость, безысходность 😞

User 2: На западе принято платить такую зарплату, чтобы была возможность и жить достойно и долго, и на пенсию себе отложить. И родителям если нужно помочь. Да, на дворцы и лимузины не хватает, а [...] *на человеческую жизнь* в родной стране им—вполне.

User 3: Да, видела их пенсионеров, да сразу стыдно за нашу страну становится (@Murmansk 2019c)²⁶

Despite the heroic combatant being such a crucial figure in the Russian memory of war, the commenters perceive the liberation anniversary in Norway to expose how the combatant has actually been let down by Russian society. The coming together of veterans from both sides of the border highlights, in the eyes of commenters, how radically different post-war history has treated people in the two countries. The term *chelovecheskaia zhizn'* is crucial in this regard: While Norwegians are able to live like *human beings* in their own country, Russians, in contrast, apparently are not. For these commenters, then, the liberation anniversary in Kirkenes is not a source of national pride, but rather of national shame.

An element of the liberation anniversary absent from the InoSMI-debates but significant for Murmansk-users, was the cross-border Victory March (*Marsh pobedy*). A collaboration between twin-municipalities, Sør-Varanger and Pechenga, and sponsored by the main supporter of Russo-Norwegian cooperation in the North, the Barents Secretariat, the project gathered youth from both countries to travel the historic path of the Petsamo-Kirkenes operation. The purpose of the march was to increase knowledge of the war in the North, but also to form ties between the new generations living on opposite sides of the border (The Norwegian Barents Secretariat n.d.). On the Murmansk Vkontakte-site, the march was framed as a symbol of укреплени[e] добрососедских от-

26 “You look at their elders and feel the respect for their old age. Yes, they are old, sick, but they are surrounded by care and attention [...]! Looking at our elders, however, you feel a sense of pride, of course, for the warrior-liberators, but also pity, despair.” “In the West they pay the kind of wages that make it possible to live in dignity and for a long time and set money aside for retirement. And for [one’s] parents if they need help. Sure, there is not enough for castles and limousines, but [...] for a *human life* in their own country—absolutely.” Emphasis my own./“Yes, I saw their pensioners, and [you] immediately feel ashamed of our country.”

ношений между Россией и Норвегией (@Murmansk 2019b).²⁷ In addition to eliciting positive reactions and acclaim for its importance in keeping memory alive on both sides of the border, some users illustrate the sometimes futile endeavour of distinguishing one country from another in this region, disagreeing whether pictures from the march depict Pechenga or Kirkenes. Users' comments on the event, nonetheless, also touch on bilateral tensions. A group of users explicitly addresses the most visible manifestation of this—the militarization of the border region:

User 1: Уберите натовское оружие, направленное на Россию.

User 2: Пусть лучше уберут ракету с ядерным двигателем со дна Баренцева моря.

User 3: Уберите *мурманское* оружие, направленное на *Финмарк!* 😊
 (@Murmansk 2019a)²⁸

While the notion that both sides have arms aimed directly at each other seems a morose one, the exchange also somewhat playfully exposes the paradoxical nature of contemporary conflict in the Russo-Norwegian border zone: Each party demands the other demilitarize, while simultaneously refusing to do so themselves. Caught in between the geopolitical powerplay, however, as User 2 points to, is perhaps the region itself. Nuclear waste, most recently linked to the much-discussed—and officially denied—loss of a Russian nuclear-powered missile during a 2017-military exercise in the Barents, poses a threat to Arctic nature, wildlife and citizens (Kireeva 2018). In a subtle subversion of User 1's frame of great power tensions, where NATO is posed against Russia, User 3 instead talks about *Murmansk and Finnmark*. She exposes the regional dimension of geopolitics: This is not simply a story about one military bloc against the other, but about two neighbouring regions.

Another regional issue triggering debate on the Murmansk site, is the controversial case of Basis Nord. Part of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, this was a secret German naval base in the Murmansk area (Philbin 1994). A silenced topic in the memory of war, the mere existence

27 "A strengthening of the neighbourly relations between Russia and Norway."

28 "Remove the NATO weapons aimed at Russia."/"Let them remove the nuclear-powered rocket from the bottom of the Barents sea instead."/"Remove the *Murmansk* weapons, aimed at *Finnmark!*" Emphasis my own.

of Basis Nord was long rejected by both Soviet and Russian authorities (Voronov 2020). A comment on a post about the Kirkenes celebrations claiming that the German attack on Northern Norway ultimately was launched from Murmansk (User 1 in @Murmansk 2019c)²⁹ evokes strong feelings:

User 2: В Мурманском порту никогда не было немецких кораблей, что за бред Вы написали.

User 1: Вы можете думать, что вам угодно. Но историю не переписать. Мы были союзниками Германии, даже в момент нападения на нас [...].

User 2: [...] Откуда Вы взяли такую информацию. Я ни разу не слышала, что в Мурманске были немецкие корабли.

User 1: Мы многое слышим, что нам выгодно. [...] Я ни откуда не взял. Это правда. Правда она такая, она не вкусная.

User 3: Мы русские пишем часто много, так как слышим. И что? Это помешало нам создать все чем владеет весь мир?) Херню не неси.

User 1: [...] Это преподают в Норвегии детям, без выводов, по факту, как было. Поэтому ваше мнение, это ваше. А по факту так.

User 4: И про холодомор тоже нужно прочесть.

User 5 to User 1: Вы русские? А. Ну ок, что уж теперь. И не поспоришь (@Murmansk 2019c)³⁰

29 According to Philbin (1994), no warships used in the invasion of Norway were in the end supplied by Basis Nord.

30 "There were never German ships in Murmansk's port, what kind of nonsense are you writing."/"You can think what you like. But [you] can't rewrite history. We were allies of Germany, even at the moment they attacked us."/"Where did you get that information from. Not once have I heard that there were German ships in Murmansk."/"We hear a lot that benefits us. I didn't get it from anywhere. It is the truth. The truth is like that, it doesn't taste good."/"We Russians often write a lot the way we hear it. And so? Did that prevent us from creating all that the world has? :-). Cut the crap."/"This is what they teach Norwegian children in school, no presumptions, according to the facts, how it was. That's why your opinion is yours. But the facts are like this."/"You also need to read about the Kholodomor." [The great Ukrainian famine, responsible for millions of deaths in 1932—33. By Ukraine labelled a genocide at the hands of the Soviet authorities.]/"Are you Russian? Well ok, then. And you can't argue."

While the first two users argue over what the *true* history of war is, i.e. whether Murmansk really allowed the Nazis to use their ports, Users 3 and 5 imply that the question of truth does not really matter: Addressing User 1's claim that people sometimes hear what they want, explaining why the history of German ships in Murmansk might be unknown to other commenters, User 3 seems to say that this is simply what Russians *do*: They perpetuate the stories they have been told. For him, though, this is not a problem. After all, Russians are ostensibly behind everything of value in this world. User 5 also alludes to what it means to be Russian: Rhetorically asking the user arguing the existence of Basis Nord if he is indeed Russian, she tells him to stop arguing. Implicit is the notion that *true Russians* would not contest the story of war that has been—and continues to be—told to them. In the midst of all this, the issue of memory wars with the other post-Soviet countries re-emerges. The question of Ukraine's perhaps greatest national trauma and mnemonic conflict with Russia, the Kholodomor, might seem utterly unrelated to a discussion of warships in the Arctic. In the eyes of User 4, however, it is not. Issues that don't "fit" the narrative of a glorious, noble and heroic past, be it a man-made famine or naval cooperation with the Nazis, are silenced in Russian official memory. The discussion of Basis Nord, then, is for the commenter a discussion of the inconvenient parts of Soviet history as such.

Conclusion

The memory war unfolding in user-driven Russian online debate on the Norwegian liberation anniversary has several battlefronts. One line of conflict might be captured by notions of an East-West memory divide: Users perceive Norwegian commemoration as fundamentally insufficient, marked by forgetfulness rather than remembrance. The monumental role the war holds in Russian cultural memory as an unparalleled source of national pride is not reflected in the Kirkenes commemoration. This mnemonic discrepancy is explained, in part, by entrenched Norwegian (and European) fascism: Norway does not want to celebrate the Soviet victory because in their eyes, it was truly a defeat. In a related line of conflict, Norway's celebrations, here framed positively, are used to contest "negative" memories in post-socialist countries: Norway is grateful to Russia in a way Poland, Ukraine and others are not. These battles against perceived mnemonic adversaries of Russia, however, are them-

selves contested: Users actively challenge memories anchored in notions of a glorious Soviet past by foregrounding trauma and suffering. In doing so, they frequently collapse barriers between different dimensions of the war, juxtaposing aspects of Soviet history far apart in both time and space. Memory wars surrounding the Norwegian liberation anniversary, then, do not only highlight divisions between Russia and Norway/the West: Rather, they expose the potent, pervasive and intrinsically entangled nature of mnemonic conflict within the post-socialist space.

While the above-mentioned mnemonic tensions to a certain degree permeate both main sites of online discourse on the Norwegian liberation anniversary, news outlet InoSMI and social media platform Murmansk, there are still crucial differences between the two. While discussion associated with InoSMI inevitably is shaped by the outlet's own Kremlin-affirming discursive practices, debate on Murmansk primarily emerges from a form of border identity: The liberation anniversary is not only Norwegian, it belongs to the *region*. Debates about Norwegian memory of the war as something distinct from the Russian one, then, are not as present. Rather than mnemonic divisions *across* the border, discussion of war in the North brings forth conflicts *within* Russian memory culture as such. Questions of Murmansk's own war history, especially Basis Nord and its role in the attack on Northern Norway, are explosive in nature. The same can be said of issues relating to the differences in post-war experiences of people divided by the border: The proximity to Norway highlights the Soviet Union's—and Russia's—perceived betrayal of its citizens in the aftermath of war for many Murmansk-users.

Returning to the question of how current political tensions (mutual spy accusations, sanctions, war games etc.) affect Russian Internet debate on the Norwegian liberation anniversary: For Russian online commenters, the memory of war in the North is so entangled in issues of Soviet history, internal memory-political tensions and mnemonic conflict with other post-socialist countries that the perceived bilateral "crises" forming the backdrop to the 2019 Kirkenes event appear marginal. While underlying tensions with Norway certainly manifest themselves in the debates, specific incidents such as the Frode Berg-case is not usually utilized in these web wars.

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