


## Patriotic Histories in Global Perspective



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The spectre of "patriotism" continues to haunt countries around the world. In 2015, Patriot Park was opened in Kubinka, one hour's drive from Moscow. Combining the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces with entertainment centres and an exhibition venue hosting the world's biggest collection of armed vehicles, Patriot Park is supposed to strengthen Russia's "system of military-patriotic work with young people."<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the Chinese Ministry of Education called for "patriotic education" to be included in Chinese school curricula and university teaching. Chinese children and students should learn to "always follow the party" and "constantly enhance their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation."<sup>2</sup> In 2020, Donald Trump established the "1776 Commission" to support "patriotic education" and defend American history against liberal and leftist revisionism.<sup>3</sup> Further examples of a "patriotic" turn in memory politics abound.<sup>4</sup>

The state-mandated or state-encouraged "patriotic" histories that have recently emerged in so many places around the globe is a complex phenomenon. It can revolve around both affirmative interpretations of history and celebration of past achievements, and an explicitly denialist stance opposed to acknowledging responsibility for past atrocities, even to the extent of celebrating perpetrators. Whereas in some cases "patriotic" history takes the shape of a coherent doctrine, in others it remains limited to loosely connected narratives. Despite differences between the individual settings, there is little doubt that state-mandated or state-encouraged "patriotic" history is more confrontational and combative than a "feel good history" promoting positive sentiments for one's country,<sup>5</sup> and that it cannot be limited to the "illiberal memory" accompanying the recent rise of

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<sup>1</sup> Shaun Walker, "Vladimir Putin Opens Russian 'Military Disneyland' Patriot Park," *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Buckle, "China Says its Students, Even Those Abroad, Need More 'Patriotic Education'," *New York Times*, 1 February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Baker, "Trump Calls for 'Patriotic Education' to Defend American History from the Left," *New York Times*, 17 September 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Terence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 215–34; Bruce Haynes, ed., *Patriotism and Citizenship Education* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Jun-Hyeok Kwak and Koichiro Matsuda, eds., *Patriotism in East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2015); Enzo Traverso, *Les nouveaux visages du fascisme: Conversations avec Régis Meyran* (Paris: Editions Textuel, 2017); Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History after 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020); Joel Spring, *Today's Guide to Educational Policy: Pandemics, Disasters, Nationalism, Religion, and Global Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> James Lowen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (La Vergne: The New Press, 2018).

right-wing populism as it cuts across the political spectrum and can be observed in both democratic and authoritarian surroundings.<sup>6</sup> By combining nationalist and narcissist narratives and by disregarding or distorting historical evidence, “patriotic” history promotes mythified, monumental, and moralistic interpretations of the past that posit partisan and authoritarian essentialisms and exceptionalisms.

This special issue charts and traces this disturbing trend. The fifteen papers collected here demonstrate the pervasive extent of “patriotic histories.” Our authors cover countries and regions as different as the Balkans (Tamara Pavasović Trošt and Lea David), the Baltic states (Violeta Davoliūtė), China (Edward Vickers), France (Sébastien Ledoux), Germany (Sabine Volk), Hungary (Andrea Pető), India (Tanika Sarkar), Israel (Yifat Gutman), Italy (Mia Fuller), Poland (Kornelia Kończal), Russia (Nikolay Koposov), Turkey (Seda Altuğ), the Great Britain (Priya Satia), Ukraine (Georgiy Kasianov) and the US (Karl Jacoby and Jeff Ostler). It goes without saying that a single special issue cannot aspire to comprehensive global coverage of the phenomenon. The preponderance of articles on European cases points to the continent’s problem with right-wing populism and the imperative of its nation-states to negotiate varying Nazi, Stalinist and imperial pasts. What is more, we have not designed this forum to clinch the argument about the “patriotic” turn in memory politics but rather to venture theses, raise questions, and plea for further empirical work for a truly global history.

Of course, neither citizenship education instilling “patriotic” feelings nor the politics of memory more broadly are new phenomena. With the advent of nationalism in the nineteenth century, states became engaged in various efforts to shape a generally accepted view of major events in national history and forge the identification of their citizens with the country: turning “peasants into Frenchmen,” to use the famous phrase coined by Eugen Weber.<sup>7</sup> Nation-building proceeded in part by instituting compulsory primary school education, changing street signs, constructing new museums, and erecting new monuments and memorials in the place of others.<sup>8</sup> A similar process accompanied the de-colonization of Africa and Asia after 1945,<sup>9</sup> and the de-communization and de-Sovietization of Eurasia after 1989/1991.<sup>10</sup> Despite differences between these various contexts,

<sup>6</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory ‘Industry,’” *Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 1 (2009): 122–58; idem: “The Rise of Illiberal Memory,” *Memory Studies* (forthcoming); Michael Burleigh, *Populism: Before and After the Pandemic* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263–307; Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney, eds., *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Katherine Haldane Grenier and Amanda R. Mushal, eds., *Cultures of Memory in the Nineteenth Century: Consuming Commemoration* (Cham: Springer International, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Henry F. Makulu, *Education, Development and Nation-Building in Independent Africa: A Study of the New Trends and Recent Philosophy of Education* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1971); Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka, eds., *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford and Athens, OH: James Currey, Ohio Press University, 2004); Redie Bereke-teab, *State-Building in Post-Liberation Eritrea: Challenges, Achievements and Potentials* (London: Adonis and Abbey, 2009); Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon, eds., *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); Patrick Chabal, “Culture and the Study of Politics in Postcolonial Africa,” in *State and Culture in Postcolonial Africa: Enchantings*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan (Indiana, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 27–39; Carola Lentz and David Lowe, *Remembering Independence* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Catherine C. Wanner, *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Sigrid Rausing, *History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia: The End of a Collective*

the politics of memory pursued during these three waves of the nation-building process were conservative projects privileging comforting national myths over hard historical truths.

Usually, the appeal to “patriotic” feelings reshaped memory politics when a nation was at war.<sup>11</sup> However, apart from Russia, Ukraine, Israel and, until recently, China and India, all the other countries addressed in this issue are not currently involved in international armed conflicts over territory. And yet, their governments replicate some of the wartime patterns of weaponizing history for “patriotic” ends, both at home and abroad, by stigmatizing outsiders as enemies, by misrepresenting, omitting, and eliding nuanced academic debate and evidence in order to create black-and-white interpretations of the past, and by excluding uncomfortable issues from the public debate and overwriting them with a continuous history of national greatness. It is becoming increasingly plain that the rise of “patriotic” histories is a campaign waged by nationalists in the – real or imagined – culture wars.<sup>12</sup>

Why patriotic histories now, then? Answering this question requires a full treatment of the reasons for the global rise of populism that exceeds the remit of this special issue. Suffice it to say that neo-liberalism’s and globalization’s creation of stark income inequalities and other insecurities among precarious sections of the populations is clearly relevant to the appeal of what international relations scholars call “ontological security”: the security of state identity, usually articulated in terms of national identity that emphasizes continuity, historical legitimacy and rights.<sup>13</sup>

As this special issue shows, when comparing the current developments with earlier instances of a “patriotic” fervour, three aspects stand out: the ruthlessness of methods applied by many state authorities to impose certain interpretations of the past, the increasing discrepancy between professional and political approaches to collective memory, and the overall socio-political context in which post-truths gain ground easier than before. This specific constellation raises a number of fundamental questions about the public role of academics in general, and historians in particular.

First, “patriotic” histories are currently not only channelled through school books, public commemorations or monuments, memorials and museums. The range of methods that are applied to promote certain interpretations of history now includes much more radical tools. One of them is the legal governance of history via memory

*Farm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Timur Dadabaev, *Identity and Memory in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Uzbekistan’s Soviet Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov, eds., *When the Future Came: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Emergence of National Memory in Post-Soviet History Textbooks* (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Hubertus Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Matthew Hendley, *Organized Patriotism and the Crucible of War Popular Imperialism in Britain, 1914–1932* (Montreal: MQUP, 2012); Melissa Kirschke Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation: Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Roger Chapman and James Ciment, eds., *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices*, 3 vol. (London: Routledge, 2015); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York; London: The New Press, 2016); Tamir Bar-On, “The Alt-Right’s Continuation of the ‘Cultural War’ in Euro-American Societies,” *Thesis Eleven* 163, no. 1 (2021): 43–70.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70.

laws that incentivize or criminalize specific narratives about the past, thus limiting both the freedom of expression and the academic freedom.<sup>14</sup> Another new development is the creation of parallel academic communities combined with the vilification of researchers and persecution of institutions uncovering uncomfortable knowledge about the past. In Hungary, as Andrea Pető relates, the liberal Central European University was driven out (now in Vienna) and the Academy of Sciences brought under state control. Even more dramatically, as Seda Altuğ and Tanika Sarkar show, Turkish academics have been arrested or fled abroad, while in India universities are gradually succumbing to state influence, if not control, by the politicization of leadership appointments. Even in Germany, state education ministries interfere in professorial appointments if the candidates are suspected of supporting the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which the Federal parliament proscribed with a resolution in 2019, turning the persecution of Palestine advocacy into a state ideology. Both processes confront academics in many countries with the question of how to effectively resist legal, political, and institutional oppression.

Second, there is a sharp contrast between the sophisticated professional debates in memory studies and the fairy tales about the past shaping the “patriotic” imagination. Whereas the global debates in interdisciplinary memory studies revolve around concepts like cosmopolitan, global, multidirectional, relational, transcultural, and transnational memory, to mention but a few,<sup>15</sup> the actual socio-political uses of history remain strikingly nation-centred and one-dimensional. This is not to say that the conceptual progress in memory studies triggered the “patriotic” backlash in the politics of memory. It is rather to suggest that we might be well advised to rethink our visions of teaching and knowledge transfer so that postcolonial, relational, and transnational approaches to history cross the boundaries of small academic circles and challenge conventional thinking about the past.

Third, the extent to which “patriotic” uses of historical research are selective and distorted cannot be understood without considering the overall post-truth environment that devaluates expert opinions, promotes personal beliefs and appeals to collective emotions.<sup>16</sup> Whereas mnemonic discourses and practices of official political actors can

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<sup>14</sup> Milosz Matuschek, *Erinnerungsstrafrecht: Eine Neubegründung des Verbots der Holocaustleugnung auf rechtsvergleichender und sozialphilosophischer Grundlage* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012); Myriam Bienenstock, ed., *Devoir de mémoire? Les lois mémorielles et l'histoire* (Paris, Éditions de l'éclat, 2014); Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyska-Grabias, eds., *Law and Memory: Towards Legal Governance of History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nikolay Kopolov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Emanuela Fronza, *Memory and Punishment: Historical Denialism, Free Speech and the Limits of Criminal Law* (The Hague: Asser Press, Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer, 2018); *Les lois mémorielles en Europe*, ed. Sébastien Ledoux, special issue, *Parlement[s]: revue d'histoire politique* no. 15 (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Sue Campbell, *Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Rodanthi Tzanelli, *Cosmopolitan Memory in Europe's 'Backwaters': Rethinking Civility* (Florence: Routledge, 2011); Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, eds., *Transnational Memory Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, eds., *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Astrid Erll, “Homer: A Relational Mnemohistory,” ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, special issue, *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 274–86; Jenny Wüstenberg and Aline Sierp, eds., *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020); see also Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, “Memory Studies in a Moment of Danger: Fascism, Postfascism, and the Contemporary Political Imaginary,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 355–67.

<sup>16</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2017); Ignas Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The*

be relatively easily traced, it is much more difficult to identify and investigate the scarcely documented, usually diffuse, and often short-lived work undertaken by the unofficial, private, and popular creators of collective memories, let alone to counter them. It is uncertain whether presenting history the “way it really was” might lessen the appeal of post-truth history. As the emancipatory power of the old source criticism in the new guise of digital hermeneutics still remains limited, the solution might rather be to prompt critical self-reflection by asking difficult questions and exposing the mechanisms of “patriotic” manipulation.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributors

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