

Research Article

Memories About the Great Patriotic War Based on the Memoirs of Kalevala District Residents

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Abstract. This article describes the features of the collective memory of Kalevala District residents about the traumatic events of World War II. The source material for the analysis was testimonies of the participants of the Great Patriotic War published in the 1960s - 1970s and oral memoirs of our contemporaries. The stories of the respondents were collected in 2020 and provide information about both personal participation in the events ("children of war") and stories of the deceased participants of the war preserved in the family. Factors that have had a significant impact on the authors of these recollections include: the decades that have passed since the war; the very "image of the enemy" in the situation where the adversary was Karelian's kin; the historical turns in the relationships between Russia and Finland; international and cross-border cooperation; and the role of the memory of the war in Russia's historical and political discourse. The article presents the characteristic features of the collected body of modern war memoirs: symbiosis of official and individual discourses; the ethnographic nature; the presence of unique private facts that can form the basis for historical research; and "difficult" moments of personal history which often contradict the moral imperatives of the informants. The recollections contain a combination of heroic and traumatic narratives deepened by the cultural proximity of the war opponents: Karelians and Finns. The authors use the concept of "identity" to separate historical research and historical memory, focusing on the latter. An individual's historical memory of the war, a person's reflections on what they remember and what they know from the official version of history, allow us to address the issue of the influence of the "war" factor on shaping the person's identity.

Keywords: memory, oral history, World War II, Karelia, published memoirs, the past and the present

The interest of modern Russian historical science in memory studies is explained, primarily, by the general anthropological focus of the research. Reflecting on the nature of collective memory, Jan Assman identified two types of it: 1) cultural memory is specific for each culture norm of transferring and modernizing cultural meanings. It is often

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formed artificially by special institutions or through rituals. 2) communicative memory is formed in interaction, from general communications concerning the past. [3: 95]

The heroic past, great people, glory <...> – this is the main capital on which the national idea is based. An introduction to the study of the concept of identity is a watershed between historical research and the study of historical memory. [2: 39]

French historian F. Aries [1] highlighted how commemorative worship of socially significant personalities, events (monuments, ceremonies, rituals) consolidated official views of memorial images. Through rituals, a group of people forms beliefs about certain events of the past, develops the unity of these beliefs, and selects a certain verbal form for their articulation. Such rituals associated with the military past exist in the everyday life of the Kalevala people, but the recording of their recollections made it possible to concentrate on a person's identity and see other images.

For the modern Russian society, the study of traumatic experience - the memory of the war - acquires special significance, since according to opinion polls, most Russian citizens consider the Great Patriotic War to be the most important event of the previous century. Since memory adapts to the present and "the image of the bygone is never frozen," and the past in our memory is not completed, exploration of the peculiarities of the historical interpretation of significant past events continues to be a relevant objective.

War memories were collected within the framework of the international project "Ordinary Man in a Great War" (the lead partner is the Karelian Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences) in 2020 in the form of video recordings. The choice of the format was associated with plans to use the videos in a museum exhibition dedicated to the fates of Kalevala District inhabitants during the war.

When dealing with the chosen topic, one faces the problem of studying the forms and representations of memory. This is an attempt to read the history of the war from the standpoint of social history. The focal point of the study is a man in the extreme war circumstances. The task was to identify the regional specifics of the memory of the war, how residents of the Kalevala District inscribe the stories they heard in the families of participants and eyewitnesses of military events into the history of their own lives.

Video filming affected the nature of the recollections due to the presence of a camera. At the same time, this also gave us advantage in analyzing the emotional side of the statements. The methodology of oral history involves not only analyzing the semantic and linguistic content of the oral story, but also taking into account certain extreme emotional disturbance. In memory studies, it is important to record the emotion and moments of connection between the past and the present. One has to learn to record

the image in the memory, not the evidence, especially if it is associated with a traumatic experience.

During the recording, the reflections of the respondents on the topic "memory of the war" were essential. To some extent, researchers already knew what the informant could tell from the preliminary interviews. This determined the strategy for recording the video story as well as the main topics.

There was hardly any hope that we would be able to record the testimonies of those who participated in the war events. There were no such people left in the Kalevala District in 2020. The only eyewitnesses were "children of war".

Among the interview participants there were children and grandchildren of people who participated in military operations and the partisan movement in the Ukhta direction. In this case, these were already the memories of memories, which had a certain effect on the collected material. Among our interlocutors there were also those who talked about building the memory of the war among their pupils (for example, in kindergartens, schools, or their own children).

We expected that the real life and survival of people during the war, their hardships, worries, sufferings, and pain would often be presented using the ubiquitous textbook phrase "people endured, lived through, suffered".

But it was important for us to find out more. How do they remember the war, what are the emphases in the recollections, what influences such an emphasis?

As a result of this work, 24 stories were recorded, each about 40-60 minutes long. Let us characterize the features of the material obtained during the interviews.

As the material was collected focusing on a particular area, the stories were similar. This made it possible to create a collective image, for example, of those evacuated from Ukhta. The similarity made it possible to identify stereotypical images, clichés, which were often clearly borrowed in nature (for example, a sewing machine that saved the owners from starving, etc.).

The attitude towards collecting local information about the war also contributed to the fact that the details extracted from the memory characterized the local situation, its unique features. An example is the story of sea animal hunting (beluga whales, fur seals) in Pomor area during the war. Animal skins were used to sew boots for partisans because they were waterproof and made little noise when walking. Beluga whale fat was used for medicinal purposes and put the wounded back on their feet swiftly.

The local material often included stories from different respondents about the same events and people. Comparison of the stories makes the description more comprehensive on the one hand, and enables a comparison between the emphases placed by the informants on the other. In most cases, accentuation was associated with present-day circumstances. [2: 35] For example, the emphasized and persistent reference to using the Karelian language in the story about the participation of various family members in the war is easily linked to the respondent's employment as teacher of the Karelian language.

The established tradition of narrating about the war is also connected with the present time. Fragments of interviews really make it possible to reconstruct a number of typical motives, symbolic images, among which a heroic deed, or an act of bravery, occupies the main place. The observation made by researchers that "in cultural memory the past folds into symbolic figures" [6], often heroic, was corroborated by the project interviews.

The story of a heroic deed was often accompanied by the descendant storyteller's note that veterans did not like to talk about the war. Informants often assumed the role of "vehicles of the family memory" without whom historical evidence would be lost forever.

Careful reading of some stories, however, suggests there were other reasons for "oblivion" or "silence". One of the reasons is that the moral choices made during the war are not readily apparent in times of peace. Here is the story of one of our informants:

Example: He did, however, tell me about one occasion. When they were after him once again. He says: "I'm in a cabin, a knock on the door, a woman comes in, a freezing woman. - May I come in to get warm? - Yes, please. She sat down on a chock, there is a fireplace. Well, everyone smokes in the war, right? She pulls out a cigarette and asks father "Onko tikku" (Do you have any matches?). Father takes it, does not show, but he understands everything, intelligence service and all, some minor things do betray that something is not right here. He picks up and throws a box of matches to the woman. And she is like sitting and at once, moves her legs together and to catch them. This was the last thing she did in her life. It was clear, it was immediately clear. If it were in fact a woman, she would have spread her legs apart, to catch <them> in the skirt. It was clear that it was a disguised spy who was chasing him, and he automatically pressed his legs together." [11]

Oral testimonies also exhibit the wish to draw a line under the past and, if possible, erase it from memory. Oblivion is necessary for those seeking reconciliation and forgiveness with all the time that has passed.

Deep penetration into family history and detailed conversations lay the foundation for a historical investigation. In a number of fragments we hear the information already known to us, that Karelians were involved in sabotage activities due to their knowledge of the enemy's language, but we also hear specific names preserved in family memory, which can give impetus to historical research.

We come across some difficult topics in recollections that are often presented cursorily, as a side narrative. [5: 5] Stories about the inhabitants of Karelia who fled to Finland during the war can serve as an example.

In the interviews, where such difficult moments that do not fit into the generally accepted concept of the history of the war are encountered, informants emphasize: "It used to be impossible to talk about it before."

The same group of stories includes anecdotes about injustices during the war years. For example, one of the female informants shared that she and her children was sent to evacuation for some misdeeds of her husband, although most people stayed in the village, which was never occupied by Finns. Family memories entrusted to descendants included women's stories about the violence committed, about being prosecuted for absence from the military unit. There is a story about the director of a fishing collective farm who was transferred to serve as a hospital aide because he wasn't wearing his military uniform in the near-front zone, as the orders demanded. Many of these stories have already become part of the family memory and can influence the perception of the history by family members, forming a complex picture of the historical.

Memories throw light upon the question of the attitude towards Finns in the Kalevala District after the war. Interestingly, this story is also a sort of a legend. It was reflected in other interviews, not in the same words but the main idea persisted.

Example: It was quite a long time ago, probably 15 years ago (around 2005). I was there often with him (the owner of the hotel) at the hotel. And he always told all his guests, war veterans about me. That here's a son of the legendary intelligence officer Mikko Nykkenen (M. Nikutyev). <...> And then he (the veteran guest) comes up to me, limping on one leg, so tall, so able-bodied. "Terve - terve" (Hello - Hello). And then he says in Finnish that my father was a REAL SOLDIER and asks to shake hands with his son. Indeed, when the ENEMY SAYS that his opponent was a real soldier, IT MEANS SOMETHING. [11]

In addition to collecting video interviews, some work in the project was devoted to recollections of partisans and front-line soldiers, residents of the Kalevala District. These memoirs are stored in the Scientific Archives of the Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences [8] and were published in 1967 and 1974. A "retrospective

image of the war” was created throughout the country in the 1960s - 1970s based on such memoirs, including the events of the Great Patriotic War in the North of Karelia, in our republic [9].

Records by the aforementioned intelligence officer M.A. Nikutyev (1913 - 1982), a native of the Village Babya Guba (Akonlaksha) can perhaps be called the most informative from the point of view of the military-anthropological approach to these events. Starting July 1941, he fought in a partisan detachment, and then in the ranks of the active army, and at the beginning of the war already he was awarded with the Orders of the Red Banner and the Red Star, and later with the 3rd degree Order of Glory and medals. Nikutyev’s memoirs ”Explosions behind enemy lines” and the testimonies of his comrades-in-arms which were published in the volume ”Unforgettable” were assessed by his son V.M. Nikutyev in an interview given in 2020 as quite trustworthy:

“There, people write in the first person, in their own name. In principle, everything essential is there” [11].

Thrilling details from this recent interview with the son of an intelligence officer shed light on many things that had no chance of appearing on the pages of the memoirs stored in the archival collection. However, even the published story of M.A. Nikutiev about the daily life of the intelligence group, which in July 1941 was ordered to move from the village of Voknavolok to the border and monitor the movement of Finnish troops, contains, for example, evidence of how the ”sustenance” of partisans was organized.

”We only took food for five days, but the trip lasted 14 days, so during eight of them we had to eat only fish and berries.” [10: 197]

I.P. Gerasimov from Kirozero Village, Kalevala District, served in division intelligence together with the legendary Pyotr Remshuyev, who was posthumously awarded the Order of the Red Banner. He left recollections about this man, who, being wounded, blew himself up together with the enemy, covering up the withdrawal of his comrades-in-arms and saving their lives at the cost of his own.

Historical memory is often personified, and ”through the assessment of the activities of specific historical figures impressions, judgments, opinions are formed about what is of particular value for the consciousness and behavior of a person in the given period of time.” [7: 16] Gerasimov’s memoirs mention the burial ceremony of the remains of Peter Remshuev at the Ukhta military cemetery in the presence of his sister Olga in September 1943. [10: 82] Since then, the legendary image of the hero began to take shape, which is recorded in the ”Song of Remshuev” in the collection of Soviet-time folklore published in 1947.

As well as the versions of narratives about the events of the Civil War, recorded in early Soviet times and inspired by official indoctrination, the testimony of Bruno Lahti, the commander of the “Battle Banner” partisan detachment formed in Ukhta, about the defeat of the Finnish garrison in Ladvozero Village creates a comic effect. The author uses the method of hyperbole and exaggeration. While the tradition of storytelling about victories over the “white Finns” during the Civil War often features a motive of the flight of the enemy, who jumped out through the window in panic wearing a window frame around the neck, the story of B. Lahti about the events of 1941 echoes this tradition:

“There was full-blown panic among the Finns, they jumped out of houses through windows with nothing on but underwear and tried to escape, but partisan bullets reached them everywhere. The garrison was destroyed, the headquarters and warehouses were burned” [10: 179].

This is where the effect of partisans’ reminiscences on the listener and reader is more like the effect of the “patriotic” role of laughter in fairy tales and epic tales, where enemies and villain robbers were “destroyed” by caustic satire.

The study of diverse materials about the events of the Great Patriotic War in the North of Karelia opens up the prospects for recording the subjective knowledge of individuals about the time in question, enables museification of the testimonies of the actual participants of historical events, “ordinary people” who most often appear in official sources only as statistical units.

Conclusions

The testimonies of the Great Patriotic War participants published in the 1960s - 1970s demonstrate the diversity of human experience and confirm that a war has a human dimension. Comparing them with recordings of the video interviews with villagers from the Kalevala District provides an opportunity to see the ways in which the military past is represented in the stories told by our contemporaries about the fate of an “ordinary man” in the war, to detect the priority topics and plots, to reveal the correlation between the official nationwide collective memory discourse and an individual’s image of the past.

Despite certain limitations, recollections are valuable to the historian. They help derive meaningful plots from details. In addition, they make it possible to discern patterns in the functioning of the memory of our contemporaries. A video camera, despite some discomfort caused at the beginning of the interviews, did not interfere with the process. Owing to the importance of the discussed topic, its significance for the new generations

we were able to record informative stories and create a "snapshot" of the memory of our contemporaries about the war.

Collective historical memory is selective. Interviews show how the official version of history or other people's testimonies are woven into individual memory, editing it, albeit at the family level. M. Halbwachs' observation that "collective memories are superimposed on individual memories, providing us with much more convenient and reliable control over the latter" [4: 13], has become a significant paradigm of the recorded interviews.

The collective memory of the Kalevala people is interlinked with the official historical discourse. According to J. Assman's terminology, we would call this segment of memory cultural. Pain and pride, love for the homeland and bitterness for the lost loved ones coexist in it. However, these memories also indicate the forgiveness of former adversaries, from whom the respondents are divided by the national border, but with whom they are united by close culture and language, grief for the dead and hope for a better future. These other memories, sometimes contradictory in how they are evaluated, can be called communicative memory, emphasizing the form of its origin and relevance for intergenerational family ties.

Oblivion is fraught with the danger of repeating the tragedy (not learning the lessons from the past). Our respondents understand this well and often formulate this idea using convenient clichés from the official discourse. But maintaining the memory of how one group persecuted another (in our case we are talking about Karelians and Finns on the opposite sides of the front line) can give rise to negative stereotypes and make the descendants of the "persecutors" held liable. This dilemma is quite traumatic but requires an explanation, given the twists and turns associated with the history of relations between Russia and Finland, international and cross-border cooperation.

Using negative stereotypes in the construction of identity, forgetting the trauma can create a situation where it will be difficult for subsequent generations to get rid of the unexplained "difficult" moments of the past. Trauma, unlike heroic narrative, does not mobilize or consolidate a nation, but instead disrupts or even destroys its identity.

In the case of Kalevala residents' recollections, the reflections on their identity contain both heroic and traumatic aspects, which, right in the course of the video interviews, either got reconciled or remained unexplained.

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