University of Groningen

Memory Politics beyond the Political Domain

Wijermars, Mariëlle

Published in:
Problems of Post-Communism

DOI:
[10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wijermars, M. (2016). Memory Politics beyond the Political Domain: Historical Legitimation of the Power Vertical in Contemporary Russian Television. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63(2), 84-93.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Memory Politics Beyond the Political Domain

Mariëlle Wijermars

To cite this article: Mariëlle Wijermars (2016): Memory Politics Beyond the Political Domain, Problems of Post-Communism, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1094719>

Published online: 14 Jan 2016.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 28

View related articles [↗](#)

View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Memory Politics Beyond the Political Domain

Historical Legitimation of the Power Vertical in Contemporary Russian Television

Mariëlle Wijermars

Department of European Literature and Culture, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

The article outlines the main trends in Russian memory politics of the period 2000–2012 and analyzes how it extends into the domain of television. Examining selected TV productions, it demonstrates how cultural memory is used to construct a historical legitimation for the power vertical and to frame political opposition as foreign agents. It argues that memory politics indeed extended onto the television screen; yet the actual shape the narratives took was not as strictly regulated as is often assumed. A measure of deviation from the official line was allowed, albeit within a constantly shifting bandwidth of what is deemed permissible.

*In order to revive national consciousness, we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.*¹

Vladimir Putin (2012a)

A key characteristic of Russian politics of the Vladimir Putin era is its frequent recourse to Russian history as a rhetorical toolbox for framing and justifying policy decisions (Laruelle 2009; Vázquez Liñán 2010). The historical narratives created and supported by the Putin government are overtly meant to establish political legitimacy in the present—to create a historical foundation for the regime’s emphasis on a strong state and centralized leadership. This strategy of memory politics promotes a continuous narrative of a “Great Russia” that is constantly under threat from domestic and foreign enemies. The Soviet past has become an integral part of the overarching narrative, and the Putin era is presented as the logical next episode. While ostensibly separated in time, the designated enemies and the way their actions are motivated demonstrate unambiguous parallels with present-day political developments.

In view of the declining freedom of the Russian media, including television, since 2000 (Hutchings and Rulyova

2009), it is imperative to explore how memory politics extends beyond the political domain. It is here, in television and cinema, that state efforts to control public opinion are most pronounced (much less so, for instance, in literature). Therefore, this article purposely extends its sources beyond official speeches, texts, and policies to avoid oversimplifying the means through which political regimes mediate their views. To gain strength, an interpretation of history has to be mediated on multiple levels of society. It is precisely the interplay between these levels, official and unofficial, that influences the potential and the effect of government-supported cultural memories. While television is often dismissed as being mere popular culture and therefore an inferior type of cultural production, or simply as the mouthpiece of the Russian government, its importance and societal influence are significant. Indeed, the “post-Soviet television genre [is] the supreme locus for the negotiation of control over cultural meaning” (ibid., 219–20). Moreover, aside from formal history education, television is one of the principal means through which people learn about history (Edgerton 2001) and on the basis of which they shape their understanding of its contemporary political relevance.

While it would be a mistake to ignore television in our analysis of memory politics, we should also take care not to overestimate the state’s control over its production. The dynamics of cultural memory incorporates a wide range of actors, both within and outside the government, each with their own interests and objectives, and each exercising a different measure of influence. The central government may indeed exercise a certain degree of hegemony on memory claims, yet cultural memory should not restrictively be seen as the

Address correspondence to Mariëlle Wijermars, Department of European Literature and Culture, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: m.w.wijermars@rug.nl.

product of manipulation and deception. Non-state actors may choose to act and express themselves in a state-supportive way motivated by a multitude of different considerations, ranging from actual support or the belief that there is no political alternative, to a desire to maintain societal status or achieve financial gain. The issue of self-censorship is also relevant (Amelina 2008; Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). The types of programs that are aired and the way their content is presented are the result of the professional and economic considerations of the people who are involved in their production and distribution, who attempt to sense viewer preferences and anticipate and respond to any changes. Even with a “big player” such as the state involved, as is the case with state-owned TV channels, it would be mistaken to assume direct or complete top-down control over television content. As several studies have shown, state control over the Russian media, and television in particular, is a very complex matter, aptly described by Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova as “remote control” (2009, 3).

Keeping these considerations in mind, this article aims to shed light on the cultural side of memory politics through an analysis of the political relevance of historical television productions. In what way do historical television productions reflect and resonate with current political affairs? To what extent do they establish implicit and explicit links between the present and the past as it is represented? In what ways are historical materials shaped to conform with or propagate particular views on governance and, more specifically, about the relation between state and opposition? To focus its analysis, the article employs a case study of Petr Stolypin (1862–1911), the pre-revolutionary prime minister whose memory has been drawn upon as a historical framing device in recent years, both within and outside of state politics. The case provides unique insight into contemporary memory politics since it is one of the few cultural memories that has been employed politically with a predominantly domestic, rather than foreign policy, orientation. Its political appropriation did not speak directly about the West or Russia’s position in world politics, nor was it used to influence opinions about Russia in other states (in contrast to the May 9 military parade celebrating the end of World War II, which among other things aimed to demonstrate Russia’s military prowess). The Stolypin memory does not involve transnational contestation or conflict concerning its contemporary meaning or the underlying factual, historical events. This allows us to largely eliminate external factors. Interestingly, as will become clear, it is also a case in which TV representation and the coupling of the memory with a particular set of political questions to a significant degree preceded the fully developed political employment of the memory.

The research is based on an analysis of selected television productions, contextual materials, and official political statements from the 2000–2012 period. Television journalism—such as news coverage—was excluded from the selection of primary sources. The content of journalistic coverage of

historical topics, for instance concerning exhibits or special events, or around commemorative dates, is controlled top-down to a fairly large extent. The relation between the Kremlin and national media outlets has been extensively covered in the literature (e.g., Oates 2006, Arutunyan 2009, Beumers et al. 2009, Hutchings and Rulyova 2009, Burrett 2011, Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). The importance of non-journalistic television, such as the TV series and documentary analyzed in this article, has been insufficiently addressed within the context of memory politics and tends to receive only anecdotal mentions in the research. Yet, the characteristics of these programs—longer playing time that allows for the development of an argument, rich associations of genre, extensive use of stylistic devices, an emotionally persuasive soundtrack to support the proposed interpretations of historical events, and so on—make them particularly adept at creating lasting memory images. At the same time, these exact characteristics can introduce ambiguities and make it difficult to control the precise meaning of the message. This merits in-depth examination.

Since this is a discussion of how memory politics extends into the domain of television, the first section will outline the main topics and characteristics of Russian memory politics itself. Subsequently, the case study puts forward an analysis of how the memory of Petr Stolypin has been used to express views on domestic threats to the stability of the state in the parallel spheres of official politics and selected television productions.

HISTORICIZING THE POWER VERTICAL

Russia is characterized by a tradition of a strong state.
Vladimir Putin (2012a)

The statement quoted above, confidently proclaimed by Vladimir Putin during his Address to the Federal Assembly in December 2012 as he embarked on his third presidential term, appears debatable when considered on its own. While, indeed, the political entities that controlled the geographical space that is now known as the Russian Federation in the past can be characterized as strong states, this by no means pre-determines the type of governance to be pursued in the twenty-first century. Quite to the contrary, many expected (or hoped) that Russia’s future following the dissolution of the Soviet Union would take a different path of political development than the one set forth by its predecessor states. In the twelve years leading up to Putin’s statement, the Russian government quite effectively and increasingly actively employed a strategy of memory politics to convince its electorate of the fact that a strong state is more than just necessary: it is traditional; that it corresponds to how Russia has been ruled throughout its history and is the only way the country can be governed successfully in the future, given Russia’s Eurasian identity and unique path of development.

To demonstrate both the (historical) necessity and the traditionally Russian character of what has come to be known as “managed democracy,” the “vertical of power,” and so on, various historical references have been used. Politically useful cultural memories² have been employed interchangeably, with different historical images or narrative frameworks being used to convey more or less the same political message. If we consider the period starting from 2000 up to 2012 as a whole, significant shifts in preference for certain cultural memories can nonetheless be discerned. Initially, cultural memory was mostly used to represent the idea that, under the new president, political order and stability had been restored following a period of intense political, economic, social, and spiritual turmoil. The promise of (continued) economic prosperity and the return of Russia as a great power in the international arena complemented this narrative of Russia’s rebirth from its ashes. The seventeenth-century Time of Troubles, or *Smuta* in Russian, was the primary narrative of choice: if the tumultuous 1990s could be portrayed as a Time of Troubles—a period of intense power struggles, foreign occupation, and near state collapse—then Putin’s presidency could be presented as its end. The linkage was quickly institutionalized: in 2004, the Russian government established the Day of National Unity to be celebrated on November 4, marking the ousting of the Polish occupation forces from Moscow in 1612. To a certain extent, the memory of the victory in World War II is used in a similar fashion; to portray how Russia came under attack from the west and only *just* managed to survive thanks to its people having united against the common enemy under the right leadership.³

While the memory of the World War II continues to capture Russian minds and occupy the political sphere in no lesser manner, the Day of National Unity failed to gain popularity. Vladimir Khotinenko’s big-budget historical blockbuster *1612: Chronicles of the Time of Troubles*, which premiered on November 1, 2007, just in time for the celebration of the holiday, failed to alter this situation.⁴ Referring to the 1990s by the term *smuta* has by now become common parlance; yet the national holiday celebrating its ending has increasingly become associated with the (ultra)nationalist Russian March that is organized on the same date.⁵ More recently, it can be noted that the memory of the Time of Troubles is used in combination with other cultural memories rather than on its own. Most notably, 1612 has been linked to 1812, signifying the victory over Napoleon. These were also the most important events commemorated during the Year of Russian History in 2012, making up the elegant numerical chain 1612–1812–2012 (the other events were the 1150th anniversary of Russian statehood and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Petr Stolypin). What this combination of victories represents, however, has changed little from the Time of Troubles’ initial significance as a memorial framework: it provides the historical foundation needed to substantiate the necessity

of centralized political leadership in order to be able to defend the Russian state from *foreign* enemies—located in particular in “the West”—and to secure future stability and prosperity.

In addition to these narratives of the defense of the “Motherland,” there has been an emphasis on creating a lineage of “great Russian reformers.” Here, the political parallel lies in the claim that President Putin has implemented far-reaching reforms with the aim of modernizing the Russian state. The purpose of the historical comparisons extends beyond demonstrating the success of this modernization project and that therefore Putin should remain in power. What appears to be more significant is that the great reformers of Russian history were hindered, obstructed, or even killed by (political) adversaries who failed to recognize that these visionary leaders were right. The lineage includes familiar faces, such as Peter the Great and Alexander II. A relative newcomer to be endorsed as an exemplary figure by the political elite, however, is Petr Stolypin, who served as minister of the interior and subsequently prime minister from 1906 until his assassination by a Socialist-Revolutionary and secret police agent in 1911. Putin has become a personal advocate for the memory of Stolypin, which has resulted in the erection of a statue of the “great reformer,” as he is referred to, near the House of Government in Moscow, and the organization of a state-sponsored Stolypin-Year in 2012. The choice of Stolypin, who battled chiefly with political enemies on the home front, rather than abroad, can be explained by the fact that Putin’s political rule had entered a new phase: following the consolidation of power, the emphasis shifted toward its preservation. Its greatest threat then lay in the increasingly vocal civil society and political opposition.

As a politician, Stolypin is first and foremost associated with the agrarian reforms he carried through and his efforts to suppress terrorist activities in the wake of the 1905 revolution. He was also noted for his rhetorical skills; Stolypin’s speeches before the Duma have produced several political one-liners. The phrases “They are in need of great upheavals, but we are in need of a Great Russia” and “Give the state twenty years of internal and external peace, and Russia will change beyond recognition,” in particular, continue to be frequently paraphrased today. In the Soviet Union, Stolypin was viewed in a negative light because of his repression of the revolutionaries and, more generally, his affiliation with the tsarist state. In the perestroika period, and even more strongly following the disintegration of the USSR, his legacy was re-evaluated. In certain political and historical circles, Stolypin was now viewed as “a farsighted statesman whose policies were precisely the ones Russia needed to develop into a prosperous, stable, and powerful country” (Ascher 2001, 5). This position was often accompanied by the belief that, had Stolypin not been assassinated, the complete implementation of his reforms would have averted the 1917 revolutions.

HISTORICAL FRAMING OF DOMESTIC ENEMIES ON SCREEN

A constantly recurring problem in Russian history is the pursuit by part of its elite of rupture, of revolution, instead of consistent development.

Vladimir Putin (2012b)

The dramatized historical series *Stolypin ... The Undrawn Lessons* (Stolypin ... nevyuchennye uroki), broadcast in 2006 by NTV, was the first fiction feature about Stolypin.⁶ Consisting of 14 episodes, the series covers the period from when Stolypin was still governor in Saratov up until his assassination in Kiev in 1911. The scenario was written by Eduard Volodarskii, who published a historical novel with the same title in 2007 to accompany the series. Drawing extensively on detective series' tropes, it depicts the constant struggle between, on the one hand, the Russian state that is attempting to accommodate the outcomes of the 1905 revolution and, on the other hand, the Socialist Revolutionaries who continue to assault the state's representatives with the aim of undermining the empire's stability. The state is not conceived of as a unitary actor, however, as will be discussed in more detail below. Rather, it is an intricate political maze of the conflicting interests of the tsar, the State Council, the Duma, and the *Okhrana* (secret police), through which Petr Stolypin struggles to find his way in order to implement his vision for Russia.

The timing of the series is significant. It aired in the wake of "color revolutions" that had ended in a number of regime changes, including in neighboring Georgia and Ukraine. The Kremlin took notice of the wave of peaceful protests sweeping across the former Soviet space and, fearing its repetition in Russia, responded accordingly. It initiated a "preventive counter-revolution" that consisted of the simultaneous repression of societal groups that could potentially form the support base for revolution (most notably, NGOs) and proactive mobilization, for example, of patriotically oriented youth movements (Horvath 2013, 5–7). The ideological underpinning of the campaign was formed by the idea that "Russia's sovereignty was menaced by Western efforts to foment a revolution and impose 'external rule'" (ibid., 6). In this narrative, opposition groups were branded as cat's-paws of foreign forces, seeking to undermine and destroy the Russian state. The TV series reflects elements of this discourse and in many ways it laid the ground for the thematic constructions that have since become associated with Stolypin's memory. The central aim of the narrative appears to be to demonstrate Stolypin's personal and political superiority and the tragedy of his untimely death. This, it is implied, furthermore had equally tragic consequences for Russia itself. According to the series' director, Iurii Kuzin, *Stolypin ... The Undrawn Lessons* is about "a person, who was killed by mistake" (Epanchina 2006). He explains: "Stolypin was killed by [Dmitrii] Bogrov, who

was the son of a Kievan petty bourgeois, a Jew by the way. But Stolypin [actually] defended the rights of minority groups, including Jews. Therefore, Bogrov was mistaken. He killed the wrong person" (ibid.).

The leitmotif of the series is that Stolypin was the single individual capable of leading Russia, preventing political and social crises and, ultimately, revolution; but he was blocked from implementing his reforms to their full extent by adversaries on multiple fronts. The argument is summarized well in the words of Empress Maria Fedorovna, the mother of the tsar, when she presses her son not to accept Stolypin's resignation. She argues that Stolypin is "genuine," while other high-ranking politicians (such as his predecessor, Sergei Witte) are "hypocritical." The empress warns her son: "If you lose Stolypin, revolution will break out in two years' time and all those who surround you now, will betray you." A few scenes later into the episode, Stolypin has an audience with the empress and she stresses her point once more: "Only you can save Russia from times of troubles and poverty, and set her on the right path." The series emphasizes the idea that, if Stolypin's political adversaries had not focused on their personal gains and ambitions, but, instead, had conceded that Stolypin's policy was correct, the state would not have collapsed. This is not to say that the series completely ignores the political and societal problems existing in late tsarist Russia. It acknowledges the existence of tensions between the governing elite and the majority of the agrarian population that culminated in the socialist revolution. Stolypin's reforms are nevertheless presented as the unacknowledged alternative to address these issues along more gradual lines; the golden mean between (extreme) conservatism and revolutionary tendencies.

In the depicted process of "democratization" following the 1905 revolution, toward a system where governmental powers are to a certain extent restricted by representative bodies, the government is still allowed to set aside the opinion of those bodies in order to directly implement reforms. The argument that justifies this (increased) level of autocracy is the pressing need to counter subversive actions by oppositional forces both within and outside the state apparatus, in order to preserve the condition of stability that has been achieved and to prevent the weakening of the state. The idea of implementing far-reaching reforms, but nevertheless maintaining political stability, is very attractive to the contemporary viewer and indeed sounds familiar. In fact, numerous elements of the series can be interpreted as parallels to Putin's Russia. First, the difficulty of cooperation with the Duma is attributed to the obstructiveness of the Duma and not the power lust of the prime minister. Secondly, a certain level of authoritarianism is justified by arguing that it is for the sake of reviving the country. The way that Stolypin addresses the Duma—with clear language, strong expression, and jokes at the expense of Duma members—is reminiscent of Putin's appearances

before parliament as well. Any direct comparison of the two periods, interpreting Stolypin as a representation of Putin, however, falls short because of the fact that Stolypin functioned as a prime minister subject to the will of the tsar, while Putin was president at the time the series aired. More generally speaking, it is to be doubted whether it is productive to search for such one-on-one analogies with the aim of understanding the political relevance of (fictional) television productions. A lack of direct comparison (being able to pinpoint which character has been shaped to resemble which contemporary politician) by no means forecloses the possibility of a historical narrative to put forth a message about governance. In this particular case, the incomplete analogy between Stolypin and Putin does not undo the fact that the leadership qualities that are put forward by the series can be transferred onto Russia of the twenty-first century.

The most important element here, however, is the representation of the terrorists. The Combat Organization (CO), the branch of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries involved in terrorist attacks against state officials, is presented as Stolypin's main opponent. One of the policies most associated with Stolypin in both Soviet times and today is indeed his harsh repression of revolutionary terrorists and the field courts-martial he established to try persons suspected of revolutionary activities more quickly. The series follows the CO extensively in the preparation and execution of several attacks, among others on Prime Minister Vyacheslav von Plehve, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, and Stolypin himself. They meet in smoke-filled, dimly lit drink cellars, private apartments, and luxury restaurants where they indulge in champagne and decadent suppers. The organization consists in large part of young, idealistic men, inspired by nihilist, socialist, or maximalist ideologies. They argue passionately about who should be assassinated next, but are far removed from the ordinary people whose interests they purportedly seek to defend. The series includes several episodes that argue that the revolutionaries are mostly opportunistic, and will not stand by their ideals when faced with resistance or when offered financial benefits. At the time, recruiting terrorists as informers was a customary practice in the fight against the revolutionary movement. The series includes several of such double agents, including one of the main characters, Evno Azef.⁷

The foreign financing that the CO receives and the frequent travels of the terrorists to Western Europe are instrumental for representing their activities as a threat to the Russian state. Indicators of the links existing between enemies abroad and domestic enemies (the revolutionaries) can be found in almost every episode. Azef frequently boards trains with their destinations explicitly shown and the live music played in the restaurants indicates which country they find themselves in. Berlin, Zurich, and Paris are favorite hideouts for planning future attacks beyond the reach of the *Okhrana*, so the series tells us. Finland is another case in

point. At the time, it was a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire and therefore enjoyed a considerable level of autonomy. In the series, the CO uses Finland as a safe haven for dynamite workshops and as a retreat to evade the hands of the police. Because of Finland's autonomous status, the imperial police forces were not allowed to perform their duties on Finnish territory. In response to successful attacks, the CO receives sizeable donations from (foreign) sympathizers of the struggle against the Russian monarchy. The series indicates two more sources of funding: attacks on money transports and funds received from Western Freemasons. The Freemasonry, a classic bogeyman in Russian culture, is not only involved in financing terrorist actions from the West. It turns out the organization threatens the state from inside its governmental apparatus as well. Indeed, Stolypin's starkest political adversaries are exposed as Freemasons.

If we place the series in the context of the year it was broadcast, it can be argued that for the Russian viewer the argument described above would bring to mind the law on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that was adopted on January 10, 2006. The law required the majority of NGOs active in Russia, both domestic and foreign organizations, to re-register. The process involved submitting extensive information about their activities, financial sources, and a list of organizations they cooperated with, thereby giving the state the opportunity to directly curtail the activities of human rights organizations, for example (Human Rights Watch 2008). In a similar fashion, the Freemasons and the revolutionaries are presented as a complex network of groups who seek to undermine the state that has permeated society and has to be brought under state control.

So what, then, are the undrawn lessons of Stolypin? The apparent need for effective governmental control over the entire territory of the empire to prevent subversive or secessionist movements, exemplified by Finland, finds overt parallels to contemporary Russia and the terrorist threat from within the country's territory. The two most telling lessons the series puts forward, however, are the following. The first is the characterization of visionary leadership, combined with a high level of authoritarianism, as essential for properly governing the new "democracy." The negative representation of the Duma as first and foremost an obstruction in implementing much needed reforms, instead of an indispensable representative of the interests of the people, further refutes the superiority of a democratic system for Russia. Second, the series reiterates the argument that domestic enemies of the state, either within or outside the government, are facilitated or even guided by enemies in the West who envy or fear the strength and potential of Russia. To counter these threats, the state is permitted to take strong measures. While it is difficult to prove that the representation of the CO in *Stolypin ... The Undrawn Lessons* was intentionally shaped in such a way that it corresponds to and consolidates the notion of foreign agents, it is fair to argue

that the portrayal of Stolypin's (and by extension, the Russian state's) enemies resonates with political issues dominating the public debate at the moment of broadcasting. Furthermore, it always is the result of a deliberate choice on the part of those involved in the production: other interpretations of the historical material are quite possible.

In a discussion program on Radio Svoboda commenting on the TV series, journalist and television critic Sergei Varshavchik concludes that its director had one single idea in mind, namely, "that the strengthening of the vertical of power is impossible without intelligent, talented reformers" (Kachkaeva 2006), an idea that was evidently aimed to parallel contemporary politics. This ties in with the genealogy of great Russian reformers that was introduced earlier. Historian Nikita Sokolov, also taking part in the discussion, adds in a similar vein that the modern style of language used in the series, not at all in congruence with the time period portrayed, was explicitly chosen to encourage the viewer to connect past and present:

I [...] believe that this [the simplification of the language in the dialogues, M.W.] was done completely intentionally in order to pull it together with the external situation as much as possible, and to embed a certain ideology in the mind of the viewer: that this represents a strong power, and that it should not be interfered with in any way but, rather, be allowed to operate. The TV series [...] appears to say that one should not interfere with a great reformer. Not interfere with a great man who assumes responsibility. (Kachkaeva 2006)

There is little need for clarification to understand to whom Varshavchik's immediate reply—"Even for a third term in office"—refers.

The TV series was broadcast on state television well before President Putin began to refer to Stolypin as an exemplary figure on a regular basis, starting from around 2008.⁸ While a significant number of the thematic constructions developed in the series continued to be associated with Stolypin's memory (as will become clear below), certain connotations did not. The more extreme conspiratorial elements, especially regarding the implication of the Freemasonry, did not carry over into subsequent TV portrayals or the official political discourse.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY TERRORISM AND THE 2011–2012 RUSSIAN PROTEST MOVEMENT

Dmitrii Medvedev succeeded Putin as president in 2008, with the latter taking up the post of prime minister. By then, the Kremlin's use of history as a political tool had intensified. After a gradual increase up to 2006, official memory politics reached new heights between 2007 and 2010, for example with the support for the 2007 textbook *History of*

Russia: 1945–2006, written by Aleksandr Danilov and Aleksandr Filippov—which, among other things, described Stalin as an "effective manager"—and Medvedev's signing of a decree to set up a Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History, in 2009 (Miller 2012). With a number of convenient memorial dates to draw from in 2012, and signs of brewing societal unrest becoming ever more evident, the Kremlin again turned to history to underpin its legitimacy. The official celebration of the Stolypin-Year as part of the Year of Russian History marked the institutionalization of the memory. During one of the meetings of the Stolypin-Year's organizing committee, Putin expounded on the contemporary relevance of the pre-revolutionary politician:

As a true patriot and wise politician, [Stolypin] understood that different kinds of radicalism are equally as dangerous for the country as standing still, [as] refusing reorganization [and] necessary reforms. [He understood] that only a strong, capable state power, supported by the private, civic initiative of millions of people, can provide for the development, [can] guarantee the order and stability of a vast, multinational power, [can] guarantee the inviolability of its borders. ("Putin predlozhit chlenam kabmina vnesti dengi" 2011)

During this period, and especially in response to the mass protests that took place in the streets of Moscow and other cities across Russia in 2011–2012, the level of propagandistic shows broadcast on state TV channels increased notably.

The documentary *Stolypin: A Shot at Russia* (Stolypin. Vystrel v Rossiю), which was broadcast in 2012 should be viewed in this context. Many of the themes introduced in the 2006 TV series reappear in the documentary. In this case, however, the references to contemporary political discussions are both implicit and explicit, a fact enabled partly by its nonfictional genre. The documentary is narrated and directed by Nikita Mikhalkov, a highly successful film director, producer, and actor, and one of the most influential cultural figures in Russia. He is also an avid supporter and personal friend of Putin. Within the cultural domain, Mikhalkov has been one of the main promoters of the memory of Stolypin. As early as 2001, he proposed to erect a statue of Stolypin on Lubyanka Square ("Kto dolzhen stoiat' na Lubianke?" 2011). In 2008, Mikhalkov was the personal advocate for Stolypin during the final phase of voting on the greatest Russian of all time in the television project *The Name Is Russia* (Imia - Rossiia).⁹ In his political manifesto propagating "enlightened conservatism," Mikhalkov explicitly mentions Stolypin as one of the politicians who abided by its principles (Mikhalkov 2010). The manifesto emphasizes the importance of a strong vertical of power, gradual and state-guided reform, and the centrality of tradition and the Orthodox faith in safeguarding the Russian nation.

The documentary was produced on the occasion of the Stolypin-Year and broadcast on April 14, Stolypin's

birthday. As can be expected of Mikhalkov, the documentary is aesthetically pleasing and carries an emotionally persuasive soundtrack. While the production was most likely initiated at an earlier time (the plans for the Stolypin-Year were first announced in 2010), the concurrence of its premiere with the Russian protest movement of 2011–2012 afforded it particular relevance. As will become clear below, Mikhalkov has in fact commented directly on the link between the protesters and the power struggles faced by the pre-revolutionary politician.

The documentary describes Stolypin's life from birth until death and comes close to presenting him as a martyr. It is argued that, after becoming minister of the interior, Stolypin sought to cooperate with the Duma but all attempts at collaboration were thwarted by the unwillingness of (several of) the representative parties. Mikhalkov personally acts out several of the prime minister's signature speeches in front of the Duma, in considerably abbreviated and edited versions. The presented image of Stolypin is an idealized one: apart from a political visionary, Stolypin is modest, economical, pious, generous, dedicated to his country and the tsar, and a loving family man to boot. Meanwhile, as Stolypin dedicates his life to reforming his country, his future assassin, Dmitrii Bogrov, is in Europe to pursue his studies. He eagerly reads anarchistic works and, as it turns out, he is not alone. According to Mikhalkov, places like Munich and Paris were inhabited by extensive groups of high-born Russians who enjoyed criticizing the state of Russian politics from a safe distance ("It was fashionable"). To provide Bogrov's character with some depth and explain why such a fortunate young man was capable of committing political murder, the viewer is informed that he was Jewish, liked to gamble, and had the slightly morbid hobby of collecting insects (Bogrov, played by an actor, is shown emotionlessly driving a pin through a beetle to attach it to a display board). Mikhalkov's reasoning is, at times, flawed and founded on hindsight, for instance when he explains why Bogrov chose to kill Stolypin instead of the tsar: "Because Stolypin was more dangerous than the emperor. Precisely because he represented what could have saved Russia from terrible revolution and bloody civil war."

Implicitly, but often quite explicitly as well, the documentary constructs the political opposition as an enemy of the state and, thereby potentially justifies a limitation of democratic rights or repressive measures. Members of the opposition are portrayed as materialists; selfish individuals who lack a real or viable vision for Russia, block the leadership's attempts at constructive reform, and steer toward a path that will result in bloody revolution (again viewed retrospectively, of course). But foremost—and this is also where direct parallels with the contemporary political discourse come to the fore—members of the opposition are depicted as "foreign agents," receiving funds from abroad and spending a lot of time in the West (in this sense, on a par with the fortunate Russian youngsters with anarchistic

inclinations educated in the West, such as Bogrov). Moreover, it is intimated that they are willing to leave the country behind as soon as they get the chance. In other words, all forms of opposition are equated with treason of the national cause.

Here we can discern a discursive overlap between historical and non-historical TV programming. There are clear analogies between the representation of early twentieth-century opposition and terrorist groups and the discursive strategies used to negatively depict the leaders of the Russian protest movement in the two documentaries NTV broadcast in 2012 under the name *Anatomy of a Protest* (*Anatomiia protesta*). Consider, for instance, the claim that Sergei Udaltsov received funding from Georgian state official Givi Targamadze, who allegedly also organized the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, to overthrow the current regime in Russia.

On multiple occasions, Mikhalkov has demonstrated that his interest in the memory of Stolypin is not so much historical as it is symbolic. According to Mikhalkov, the developments in contemporary Russia in many ways mirror those of Stolypin's time; if we fail to recognize and learn from the mistakes that were made a century ago, history might well repeat itself. In a small article advocating the contemporary relevance of Stolypin, Mikhalkov vividly sums up the condition the Russian state was in when "the great reformer" took up office as prime minister in 1906:¹⁰

Corroded by the poison of Nechaev's radicalism and liberal nihilism, Russian society was falling apart. It could and would not unite out of love for something. It united around hatred.

A weak power without authority that enabled a monstrous wave of terrorism. A state system eroded by corruption. The disgraceful defeat of the Russian army in the war with Japan. And even more disgraceful was the attitude of the Russian liberal intelligentsia toward this defeat, sending congratulatory telegrams to the Mikado.

An immense budgetary deficit, impending financial collapse, halting business, outflow of capital abroad. Authorities are begging Western governments and bankers for loans.

Separatism in the borderlands. Suppression of the peasants. Societal feelings of hopelessness and disbelief, spiritual crisis, mass alcoholism, a decreasing birth rate.

The tumultuous 1900s.... It rings familiar, doesn't it? (Mikhalkov 2012)

The choice of words in the final sentence makes it abundantly clear that the given characterization is meant to refer to the "tumultuous 1990s" (*likhie 90-e*) in equal measure. In Mikhalkov's subsequent praise for how the prime minister managed to "save the country" from this state of despair in a mere five years, the name of Stolypin appears to be interchangeable for that of Putin. Furthermore, what Stolypin

would have wanted for Russia in the twenty-first century is what Mikhalkov symbolically calls “the Russian cross”: “the organically connected vertical axis of state power and horizontal axis of cultural and civil society” (2012).¹¹

In this vision of Russia, inspired by the legacy of Stolypin, there is no place for independent opposition. At this point in the argument, Mikhalkov abandons the metaphorical intermediary of Stolypin and voices direct criticism of the Russian protest movement, to whose members he condescendingly refers as “mink fur collars” and “our satiated, glamorous ‘revolutionaries’” (Mikhalkov 2012):

The self-appointed leaders of our cashmere opposition employ the affronted sense of justice felt by ordinary people for their own PR. But, when they return from the raving rallies and get back behind the tall fences of their *Rublevskie* dachas¹² and London mansions, they are unlikely to ever give thought to how they themselves could help their not as loudmouthed and considerably less fortunate compatriots. (Mikhalkov 2012)

Paraphrasing one of Stolypin’s most famous quotes, Mikhalkov drives home the point of his dislike of persons such as Aleksei Navalny and Ksenia Sobchak: “Only they, who have somewhere else to go, are in need of great upheavals. But those who want to live here are in need of a great Russia” (Mikhalkov 2012).

The message that Mikhalkov seeks to put across to the viewer in his documentary deviates little from other statements he made around the same time about Stolypin and Russian politics in general, although he does attempt to stay close to the historical parable. In the final scene, he comes close to spelling out the contemporary political relevance of Stolypin’s legacy. We see Mikhalkov at the Pechersk Monastery, in Kiev, where Stolypin lies buried. He explains how, after Stolypin’s death, the Russian state collapsed and civil war ensued. Millions died and millions more fled into emigration, leaving everything behind. Mikhalkov asks rhetorically, “Did these people think about how terribly their lives would change, all because they failed to listen to the one person who knew what to do and was capable of stopping this destruction?” He cites examples of politicians who challenged Stolypin, only to die “in poverty” in exile, far from Russia. After a long, meaningful pause, Mikhalkov continues:

But it was too late. And now, when we look back at that time, the feeling arises that, maybe, today we need to remember Stolypin more than ever before. It makes sense to remember this situation where everything was on the brink [of collapse] but could still be saved. [...]. I believe it makes sense to think about this, and especially for those who disdainfully, ironically, spit upon their past, their present, without considering what the future might hold for them after that. It is time to learn how to learn [from the past].

The message here is unspoken, but clear: for Mikhalkov, learning from the past means that, as Stolypin’s contemporary counterpart, Putin’s position in power should not be challenged. The memory of Stolypin provides him with the narrative material he needs to shape and spread his view on proper Russian governance.

Given Mikhalkov’s longstanding admiration for Stolypin, his reputation, and his position in the industry as director of major production company (TriTe) and chairman of the Union of Cinematographers of the Russian Federation, it comes as no surprise that he was the person to give shape to the principal documentary on Russian television to mark the government-backed celebrations of the Stolypin-Year. The political message that is put forward through his interpretation of Stolypin’s policies and personal characteristics is first and foremost a propagation of Mikhalkov’s own political manifesto. And while his ideas about “enlightened conservatism” are, to a large extent, compatible with the government line and with the official interpretation of Stolypin as an exemplary political figure, they are not the same thing.

CONCLUSION

The memory of Stolypin became a regular part of Putin’s symbolic vocabulary during his term as prime minister and was institutionalized in 2012 with the celebration of the Stolypin-Year and the erection of a statue of the “great reformer” in Moscow. Already some years before, in the wake of the color revolutions, a dramatized TV series dedicated to the pre-revolutionary politician was broadcast on state television—a significant example of where television preceded official memory politics in the process of shaping a new political memory figure in response to current political challenges. Both of the TV productions analyzed in this article introduce arguments and associations that differ from the state-endorsed interpretation of the memory. The TV series *Stolypin ... The Undrawn Lessons* makes use of the popular tropes of conspiracy theories and the detective genre to keep its audience engaged. Mikhalkov’s documentary *Stolypin: A Shot at Russia* echoes his own political manifesto of “enlightened conservatism.” They nevertheless support and propagate its central tenets: the importance of strengthening the vertical of power and implementing top-down reform to maintain stability and prevent revolution, paired with a justification of the (temporary) suspension of certain civic rights. This article has demonstrated how, with regard to the period 2000–2012, memory politics indeed extended beyond the political domain and onto the television screen; yet the actual shape the narratives took was not as strictly regulated as is often assumed. A measure of deviation from the official line was allowed, albeit within a constantly shifting and largely implicit bandwidth of what is deemed permissible.

One of the aims of this paper has been to demonstrate how scholars who seek to understand political developments can benefit from including (popular) culture in their work. As has become clear from the analyses presented above, historical television productions can be regarded as a supportive and/or performative part of memory politics. Narratives about the Russian past prove to be a suitable means to express and contribute to the consolidation of political beliefs; while they are, of course, equally capable of putting forth more critical reflections on contemporary political developments or historical parallels that undermine the legitimacy of those in power. Memory politics is a highly complex and dynamic cultural process that involves many actors and various media, and that is constantly evolving. Historically framed political claims are continually remediated, rephrased, questioned, challenged, or replaced with new narratives. Taken together, these actors, media, and narratives influence and shape commonly held views about history and the lessons that can be drawn from it about national identity and proper state governance. As the analyses above have demonstrated, TV formats and genres influence the extent to which parallels to present-day political affairs are or can be made explicit. Such direct comparisons can be pointed out relatively easily in a documentary or discussion program, while this would require the introduction of a temporal leap into the narrative of a TV fiction production (prologue, epilogue, flash forward, and so forth). The implicitness of political references in fictional television productions in no way impedes their potential societal impact; yet it does emphasize the need to interpret them within the context of a wider selection of sources, taken from both the political and cultural domains.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented during the workshop “Bringing Humanities Back: Studying Politics and Foreign Policy Through Research in the Humanities and Popular Culture” hosted by the University of Cambridge on April 24–26, 2014. The author would like to thank the participants and audience of the workshop, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

NOTES

- 1 Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the author. The author would like to thank Hanna Stähle for her assistance on translation matters.
- 2 My understanding of the concept of cultural memory is based on the works of Jan and Aleida Assmann. See, e.g., Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Cultural Memory: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations) (Munich: Beck, 1992).
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the contemporary Russian remembrance of the Second World War, see, e.g., Ludmila Lutz-Auras, “*Auf Stalin,*

Sieg und Vaterland!”: Politisierung der kollektiven Erinnerung und den Zweiten Weltkrieg in Russland” (“For Stalin, Victory, and Fatherland”: Politicization of Collective Memory and the Second World War in Russia) (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012).

- 4 For an analysis of *1612: Chronicles of the Time of Troubles* and its production history, see Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).
- 5 For an analysis of the phenomenon of the Russian March, see Denis Zuev, 2013, “The Russian March: Investigating the Symbolic Dimension of Political Performance in Modern Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 1: 102–26.
- 6 In the years preceding 2006, several small television documentaries on this topic were broadcast and the figure of Stolypin made minor appearances in TV series, particularly in series about the *Okhrana* such as *Imperiia pod udarom* (Empire Under Attack), 2000. The 2006 TV series, however, was the first production in which Stolypin’s life was at the center stage and that was aimed at entertainment (and therefore potentially a much wider audience), instead of historical enquiry.
- 7 In the period that is covered by the series, Azef headed the CO and was deeply involved in the planning and execution of attacks, but he simultaneously leaked information on the CO to the *Okhrana*. The pay he received in return for his inside information allowed him to enjoy a lavish lifestyle. Furthermore, his links to the police enabled him to eliminate enemies within the CO and maintain his position.
- 8 Vladimir Putin incidentally referred to Stolypin before 2008, yet on these occasions the use of the image of Stolypin was principally connected to specific policy issues, rather than to his personal characteristics, a type of leadership that he represents, or an autocratic type of governance. For a detailed discussion of the political use of the memory of Stolypin, see Mariëlle Wijermars, 2015 “The Making of a Political Myth: Stability ‘Po-Stolypinski,’” *The Ideology and Politics Journal* 1: 37–56.
- 9 On the basis of several rounds of online- and televoting, Stolypin eventually came in second place behind Aleksandr Nevskii. For an analysis of the project, see Liubov’ Borusiak, “Proekt ‘Imia Rossiia’ kak novyi uchebnik istorii” (The “Name of Russia” Project as a New History Textbook), *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia*, 2008, no. 5: 58–66; Mikhail Morozov, “Istoriia v stile ‘pop’” (Pop History), *Iskusstvo kino*, 2009, no. 1, at <http://kinoart.ru/archive/2009/01/n1-article2>, accessed May 31, 2015.
- 10 Mikhalkov’s account largely corresponds to the opening of his speech in defense of Stolypin as the greatest Russian of all time during the live TV shows of the *Name is Russia* project in 2008.
- 11 For a more detailed account of Nikita Mikhalkov’s political views and the concept of “the Russian cross,” see his political manifesto: “Pravo i Pravda. Manifest Prosveshchennogo Konservatizma” (Right and Truth: Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism), October 26, 2010. Available online at www.polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest, accessed May 28, 2015.
- 12 Elite residential estates on Rublevskoe Shosse, Moscow.

REFERENCES

- Amelina, Anna. 2008. “Asymmetrie der Verhältnisse. Aktuelle Entwicklungen im Fernsehen der Russischen Föderation” (Asymmetric Relations: Current Trends in Television in the Russian Federation). *Publizistik* 53, no. 1: 25–47.
- Arutunyan, Anna. 2009. *The Media in Russia*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press.
- Ascher, Abraham. 2001. *P.A. Stolypin. The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Beumers, Birgit, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, eds. 2009. *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Burrett, Tina. 2011. *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*. London: Routledge.
- Edgerton, Gary R. 2001. "Introduction. Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether." In *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, 1–18.
- Edgerton, Gary R., and Peter C. Rollins, eds. 2001. *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Epanchina, Olga. 2006. "Serial 'Stolypin': Itogi s Iuriem Kuzinym" (TV Series "Stolypin": Taking Stock with Iurii Kuzin), at <http://isjuminka.narod.ru/fan2.html>, accessed December 20, 2012.
- Horvath, Robert. 2013. *Putin's Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. 2008. "Choking on Bureaucracy: State Curbs on Independent Civil Society Activism," at www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0208_1.pdf, accessed January 28, 2013.
- Hutchings, Stephen, and Natalia Rulyova. 2009. *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control*. London: Routledge.
- Kachkaeva, Anna. 2006. "Stolypin na NTV: uroki neokonchennogo seriala" (Stolypin on NTV: The Lessons of a Running TV Series). *Radio Svoboda* (July 31), at www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/259067.html, accessed April 16, 2014.
- "Kto dolzhen stoiat na Lubianke?" (Who Should Stand on Lubianka [Square?]). 2011. *Gazeta.ru* (May 25), at www.gazeta.ru/infographics/politics/pamyatnik_dzerzhinskomu.shtml, accessed May 28, 2015.
- Laruelle, Marlène. 2009. *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mikhalkov, Nikita. 2010. "Pravo i pravda" (Right and Truth). *Polit.ru* (October 26), at <http://polit.ru/article/2010/10/26/manifest/>, accessed May 28, 2015.
- Mikhalkov, Nikita. 2012. "Petr Stolypin protiv 'norkovyx vorotnichkov'" (Petr Stolypin Against "Mink Fur Collars") *Kultura*, no. 1, at http://culture.ru/ru/uploads/media/paper_archive/0001/08/00c22b52bf96a3b35a5cd74ba288223a1bb6bdc7.pdf, accessed April 16, 2014.
- Miller, Alexei. 2012. "The Turns of Russian Historical Politics, from Perestroika to 2011." In *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, eds. Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Oates, Sarah. 2006. *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia*. London and New York: Routledge.
- "Putin predlozhil chlenam kabmina vnesti dengi na pamiatnik Stolypinu" (Putin Suggested That the Members of the Cabinet Donate Money Toward the Statue of Stolypin). 2011. *RIA Novosti* (July 13), at <http://ria.ru/politics/20110713/401083427.html> accessed May 31, 2015.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2012a. "Address to the Federal Assembly," at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4739> (December 12), accessed April 16, 2014.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2012b. "Rossiia sosredotachivaetsia—vzovoy, na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit" (Russia Concentrates—The Challenges We Have to Address). *Izvestia* (January 16), at <http://izvestia.ru/news/511884>, accessed April 16, 2014.
- Schimpfoss, Elizabeth, and Ilya Yablokov. 2014. "Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self-Censorship Among Russian Media Personalities and Reporters in the 2010s." *Democratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 20, no. 2: 295–312.
- Vázquez Liñán, Miguel. 2010. "History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin's Russia." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2: 167–78.