

# H-Diplo|ISSF Conference Report

## “History and Memory in International Relations: The Twelfth Edition of Genealogies of Memory”

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October 26-28, 2022 marked the twelfth year in which the European Network Remembering and Solidarity (ENRS) hosted its flagship academic conference, Genealogies of Memory. Since its inception in 2011, the annual conference has developed into a leading international forum for contemplating memory politics in Europe. The theme of this year’s conference, history, and memory in international relations, was a nod to the growing interest among political scientists, and particularly International Relations (IR) scholars, in memory as an analytical frame. At the same time, Genealogies of Memory played a critical role in highlighting the difficulties that IR researchers encounter when attempting to co-opt memory studies.<sup>1</sup>

Georges Mink (College of Europe Natolin) presented the opening keynote address in which he discussed the geopolitics of history and memory games. In the spirit of Pierre Nora,<sup>2</sup> Mink raised the notion of memory deposits: different collective memories can be activated at different times for different purposes. While one memory may be operationalised by different social actors, others remain dormant in the collective psyche. In this way, modern technology and its usage are critical for considering how different actors have facilitated an increased interest in interacting with foreign publics and how this has reshaped the ways in which memory games are played on international as well as intra-national stages. As Mink eloquently proposed, politicians are like dogs searching for mushrooms: the good ones know how to determine which memory narratives will have emotional purchase in certain political and temporal contexts.<sup>3</sup>

This keynote fittingly matched the first panel of the conference, which focused on theory and methodology. In addressing the statement that studying memory is like trying to grasp a wet bar of soap, this panel focused on the deficiencies of memory studies when used as an analytical frame in international politics. Bartosz Dzięwanowski-Stefańczyk (ENRS) emphasised that theoretical perspectives on how memory influences foreign policy have been lacking. While there has been more discussion on memory and identity at a domestic level, it is only recently that the field of IR has begun to consider how memories might first be active in an

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<sup>1</sup> Recordings of all conference panels, keynotes, and roundtables can be found online at <https://vimeo.com/user/3971424/folder/13503469>

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, vol. 26, (1989), 7-24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>; Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Conflicts and Division* (Lawrence Kritzman, trans.) vol. 1 (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> More research can also be conducted on ineffective memory narratives and tools as well as the overall impact these processes have on democratic or autocratic legitimacy.

international space and then remediated to domestic contexts.<sup>4</sup> Douglas Becker (University of Southern California) also praised the initiation of a Historical International Relations Section in the International Studies Association, but wondered all the same whether memory would soon be an equally worthy subfield to warrant a similar subsection.

In keeping with the practice-oriented focus of the ENRS, the second panel considered different actors conducting praxis at the memory-history nexus. Rafal Rogulski (ENRS) presented the work of the ENRS as a unique actor in Europe able to utilise academic expertise for positive social initiatives through education, dialogue, and reflection. Gábor Danyi (OSA/OSUN / ENRS) presented on Radio Free Europe's transnational broadcasts to Hungary during the Cold War and RFE/RL's ability to maintain and activate memories of the 1956 revolution. Gruiă Bădescu (University of Konstanz) contemplated the role of urban reconstruction by local and international actors and the impact this had on making and remaking memories solidified in public space.

Day two of the conference shifted to a meta-discussion of the role of history and memory in IR as a discipline. The first panel discussed different frames for studying memory as a form of power in international politics. Paula Rhein-Fischer (University of Cologne) argued that the increased privatisation of memory governance poses a challenge to existing mnemonic legal orders and is likely to challenge the existing mnemonic scenery in Europe. Marek Cichoński (College of Europe Natolin) presented different narratives that have shaped how politics of the end of the Cold War have been discussed over the past 30 years, highlighting the power these narratives have in solidifying memories and thus, in envisioning permissible policy options in times of crisis. A critical comment from the audience pointed to the need to consider who has the power to establish narratives and memory laws, and how to properly analyse this when looking at different actors and levels of decision-making.

The second panel largely covered case studies from the post-Soviet space. Aijan Sharshenova (OSCE Academy in Bishkek) analysed the relationship of space and memory in Bishkek and the way in which the Russian state attempted to instrumentalise Russian-speaking communities and public places, such as the Russian drama theatre, for soft-power goals. The reflection on valid and invalid memory tools promoted a consideration of memory politics that fail rather than only looking at strategies that succeed. Tamar Karaia (Tbilisi State University) outlined the different memory narratives President Saakashvili used after the Rose Revolution to justify reform efforts in Georgia. Karaia also emphasized the need for these memory templates to have traction in European countries to validate the new foreign policy of Georgia's leaders in their pursuit of membership in the European family.

The final panel of day two focused on memory wars and Ukrainian perspectives on the topic. Jade McGlynn (Middlebury Institute of International Studies) outlined the differences and similarities between memory wars and memory diplomacy, as well as memory as a strategic struggle for power. Tina Peresunko (M.S. Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) expertly elucidated Ukrainian singing diplomacy in the 1910s and 1920s, which was used to spread knowledge of Ukrainian independence struggles. Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych's song, "Shchedryk," which was featured by a Ukrainian traveling choir, was so popular that it became reappropriated as the famous Western Christmas song, *Carol of the Bells*. As such, it slowly lost its signifier of Ukrainian independence, until this heritage was recently recalled to motivate international support for Ukraine's ongoing war against Russian aggression. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported a large art exhibition utilizing *Carol of the Bells* in Chicago during the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies annual convention, exhibiting the different forms of state-supported memory politics in times of crisis.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> <https://artonthemart.com/shchedryk/>

The final day of the conference opened with a keynote from Zheng Wang on the role of memory in Chinese-Taiwanese relations. In keeping with his seminal work, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable*,<sup>6</sup> Wang argued that memory is one of the strongest factors inhibiting Chinese power. In his opinion, collective memory is considered the ‘raw material’ for constructing national identity, and thus, constructing national interests. In this regard, memory is often future-oriented in that it helps sustain dreams of the future. Considering the policy implications of his research, Wang asserted that deterrence does not work when it comes to identity; it may only defer the dream further into the future. In Wang’s view, policymakers are often mistaken about the source of conflict in international relations – it is not a democracy-autocracy divide, but is rather inherently an identity-based conflict.

The next panel covered German and Polish memory and history politics. Eric Langenbacher (Georgetown University) focused on whether the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point (*Zeitenwende*) in German security policy as well as memory politics. Félix Krawatzek (ZOIS Berlin) then offered a provocative challenge to memory studies in IR, arguing that in addition to research on elite narratives, additional work on how societies internalize these narratives is necessary. As such, Krawatzek presented a study co-authored with Piotr Goldstein (ZOIS Berlin) on Polish youth attitudes towards the past and how the narratives they use compare with historical narratives perpetuated by the state. During the panel discussion period, audience members debated the eternal conundrum of memory studies: whether historical memory as a causal factor is a conscious influence that can be uncovered in interviews, or if it is something unconscious that shapes the everyday lives of interviewees without them knowing.

The closing roundtable of the conference nicely tied together the predominant debates of the week. Łukasz Kamiński (Ossolinski National Institute/ University of Wrocław) opened with a consideration of the role memory plays not only as a form of conflict, but also in creating a forum for international dialogue. For example, memories of Polish refugees in the Second World War were evoked to create empathy and mobilise international and domestic support in the spring of 2022 for the influx of Ukrainian refugees. Jie-Hyun Lim (Sogang University/University of Warsaw) offered a comparative perspective, highlighting that the European Union plays a major role in facilitating practical frameworks (institutions, funding, etc.) to support a truly transnational discussion of memory, whereas in East Asia, such systems are much more national and thus, often perpetuate themselves. From a more realist perspective, Maria Mälksoo (University of Copenhagen) then considered how defence ministries look at these issues, arguing that they tend to utilise memory in a more strategic contestation of remembrance in order to defend or maintain their place in an international hierarchy of memory.

In echoing the Memory Studies Association conference of 2022, Lim then opened a debate on the need for transnational memory culture that is not necessarily defined by European memory templates. For example, the Holocaust template does not work so well for researching, commemorating, or overcoming colonial genocides, and may have disproportional power in shaping international memory culture due to its seminal place in European memory.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, Kathrin Bachleitner (University of Oxford) picked up the discussion of normatively assessing memory cultures, arguing that memory as we talk about it today is inextricably tied up with liberalism and that as researchers we should try to disentangle or at least critically question the analytical implications of this relationship. Memory and victimhood have become competitive, and societies are increasingly and selectively forgetting their colonial pasts or complicity.

In closing out the roundtable and conference, Lim expanded Eric Hobsbawm’s argument that historians are more dangerous than nuclear physicists,<sup>8</sup> arguing it now seems that memory studies scholars are more

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<sup>6</sup> Zheng Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict Historical Memory as a Variable* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Malgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth, eds., *A European Memory?: Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

dangerous to the historical memories of the state. In this regard and following the seminal shifts in international relations brought on by 24 February 2022, the field now faces an open-ending question. How will the unravelling of the liberal world order (post-1945) influence the existing international memory order, if in fact a singular memory order can ever be said to have existed in the first place?

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