



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 2017-0040

Project manager: Andrej Kotljarchuk

Project title: Memory Politics in Far Right Europe: Celebrating Nazi Collaborationists in Post-1989 Belarus, Romania, Flanders and Denmark

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

This project examined the use of revisionist World War Two narratives within the far right in post-Soviet East and West. The dominant narrative, in both, remains one of united resistance against the Nazis. Those who fought with the Germans -Waffen-SS volunteers, collaborationist Home Defences and Legions - have been vilified. After the war, pro-Nazi veterans were forced into exile, underground, or into the fringe. But they kept their narratives of heroic resistance to Communism alive. The fall of the Communist block gave them new audiences. We have analysed how veterans' narratives were redeployed in both East and West in the online space, in movements to contest existing governments - not least by inspiring militant, far-right youth. Pro-veteran militants share an international revisionist discourse; the veterans' associations are themselves strongly transnational. We studied the use of these narratives and associations in four cases: two from the East (Belarus and Romania) and two cases from the West (Scandinavia (Sweden and Denmark) and Flanders). These span the East-West divide that traditionally informs provided the excellent possibility to study how a common discourse plays itself out in very different political situations.

The most important results of the project are: First, the project has shown that the online space has raised the visibility and success of organised intolerant groups and, consequently, it has magnified the societal impact of their memory work. Thanks to digital media, the memory work of the far right can compete on an equal footing with state-endorsed memory politics. Second, through manipulation of the historical narrative and thereby the perception and understanding of the past in civil societies, on websites, blogs, and social media, the far right has succeeded in overcoming its marginality and in normalising its messages of intolerance on a continental scale. Third, the research has highlighted the relevance of far-right memory entrepreneurship in compacting political communities around memory work



and in disguising organized intolerance as communities of remembrance aimed at whitewashing the crimes of ultra-nationalist palingenetic entities around far-right memory sites and in online apologetic accounts. The focus on cross-border mobilities of memory entrepreneurs and of narratives and practices of commemorations can explain the persistency of far-right cultural memory across space and time and between distinct political entities and generational groups with the advantage of avoiding the methodological nationalism of single-case studies and, at the same time, the synchronic pitfalls of comparative approaches.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The project explored the memory work performed by Western, Central and East European far-right actors in the online space. Situated at the crossroads between memory studies, far-right studies, and media studies, we showed how a wide range of far-right actors, from small movements to major parties, have exploited digital communication technologies in order to establish their plays with the past in the mainstream discourses of their respective national contexts. With a focus on the online memory work of the far right in Belarus, Romania, Scandinavia, and Flanders the project publications dissects the nexus between politics, media, and memory to show how digital communication have empowered the memory work of marginal but dangerous societal actors. Amongst other things, the research done led to: a) systematic classification of the pro-Nazi veteran memory work in the West during the Cold war and their memory travels to Eastern Europe after 1991; b) analysis of the veterans' and their younger sympathizers' approach to the Holocaust; c) interplay between commemoration rituals, processions, and violence in modern far-right online propaganda and digital posters distributed via social media.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Our research has pointed out that state borders, language, cultural barriers and even systemic changes are porous in respect to apologetic narratives in favour of fallen pro-Nazi military veterans, which skilful far-right memory entrepreneurs easily readapt to new temporal and spatial settings. Previous research had established that Eastern Europe has been an important laboratory for organized intolerance. With reference to the memory work of far-right actors, this research has posited that the context of transnational spaces of flows provides continental and global salience to local East European expressions of intolerance and that, at the same



time, the far right systematically turns times of change into windows of opportunities for actualizing its message of hate by hijacking mainstream societal discourses and by attempting to taint them with amnesic, self-absolutory, and self-victimizing contents. The previous research has shown that the freedom of expression during the digital era has turned into a terrain for far-right to undermine open societies. The subproject on Belarus shows that similar process is indicating in the authoritarian countries.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia are both connected in different ways, to the far right and to its online plays with identities. During the pandemic, the conspiracy theories have permeated the online space and circulated on a global level. The phenomenon is not new. With the pandemic, defending the online space from disinformation and misinformation became a priority for preserving the new normalcy. The COVID-19 pandemic has not led to a dramatic shift in the topics treated in our project. However, the suppression of peaceful democratic protests in Belarus in 2020 and especially the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine, which catalyzed the global attention on the region led to some reconsiderations of the results of the project on its final stage. Today, the European far-right groups are divided between pro-Ukrainian, pro-Belarusian and pro-Putin and pro-Lukashenka positions. How the ongoing military conflict and political crises in Eastern Europe have affected and will affect the memory work of far-right activists in the East and the West is a matter for further research. The results of our investigation will form the basis for continuing research in the rapidly evolving field of far-right memory studies, where we hope to collaborate with other experts in the field to expand the geographical and chronological focus beyond the Baltic Sea region.

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

List of Publications

Monographs

- Kotljarchuk, A. & Zavatti, F. (2023) *On the Digital Front-Line: Far-Right Memory Work in Baltic, Central, and East European Online Spaces* (Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia), 202 p. ISBN: 978-91-984509-7-2.



Per-reviewed articles

- Kotljarchuk A. & Zavatti, F. (2023). “Introduction: The Problem of the Online Memory Work of the Far Right”. In: *On the Digital Front-Line: Far-Right Memory Work in Baltic, Central, and East European Online Spaces*, edited by Andrej Kotljarchuk & Francesco Zavatti (Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia), p. 1–14. OA (forthcoming in DiVA).
- Kotljarchuk, A. “To Weaponize the Future: Digital Posters and Memory Works of Belarusian Far-Right”. In: *On the Digital Front-Line: Far-Right Memory Work in Baltic, Central, and East European Online Spaces*, edited by Andrej Kotljarchuk & Francesco Zavatti (Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia), p. 29–60.
- Kotljarchuk, A. “The Political Symbols and Concepts of Statehood in the Modern History of Belarus” (co-authored with A. Radaman and E. Sinitsyna. In: *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century. Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, ed. by Elena A. Korosteleva, I. Petrova, A. Kudlenko (Routledge, 2023), p. 3-16. ISBN 9781032318059.
- Kotljarchuk, A. “The Counter-Narrative of WWII and the Far Right-Identity”. In: *The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space: A Comparative Study of Far-Right Movements and Identity in the Region*, ed by Ninna Mörner, Södertörn Academic Studies, 2022, p. 61-75. OPEN ACCESS [OA].: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1642568/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- Kotljarchuk, A. “The Flag Revolution: Understanding the Political Symbols of Belarus”. In: *CBEES State of the Region Report 2020: Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past. A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region*, ed. Ninna Mörner (Stockholm: Elanders, 2021), p. 45–54. OA: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1525835/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Hurd M. & S. Werther, „Memory, Ritual, Violence: The Online Sphere of the Nordic Resistance Movement“ In: *On the Digital Front-Line: Far-Right Memory Work in Baltic, Central, and East European Online Spaces*, edited by Andrej Kotljarchuk & Francesco Zavatti (Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia), p. 87–108.
- Werther, S. ‘SS marschiert im Feindesland’? Germanische Waffen-SS Veteranen und ihre Gedenkorte im Osten [SS Marches in Enemy Land? Germanic Waffen-SS Veterans and their Memorials in the East]. In: Jan Schulte & Michael Wildt (ed.), *Die SS nach 1945. Entschuldungsnarrative, populäre Mythen, europäische Erinnerungsdiskurse*. Berichte und Studien des Hannah-Arendt Instituts, 2018.
- Werther, S. „Der Nordische Gedanke, das großgermanische Reich und die deutsche Minderheit in Nordschleswig [The Nordic Thought, the Greater Germanic Reich and the German Minority in Northern Schleswig]. In: Oliver Auge, Steen Bo Frandsen, Caroline Elisabeth Weber (ed.), *Grenz – Raum – Narrative. Die deutsch-dänische Grenzregion von 1920 bis heute*, Kieler Schriften zur Regionalgeschichte, Wachholtz Verlag, 2023.
- Werther, S. Unter der Flagge der Versöhnung. Revisionistischer Gedenktourismus europäischer Waffen-SS Veteranen im postsowjetischen Raum [Under the Flag of Reconciliation. Revisionist Memory Tourism of Waffen-SS Veterans in the Post-Soviet Space]. In: Jan-Hinnerk Antons & David Feest (ed.), *Zu Gast bei Feinden? Aussöhnung und Tourismus in Europa*, Reihe Moderne Europäische Geschichte Wallstein Verlag, forthcoming.
- Zavatti, F. (2022a). “Transnationalizing fascist martyrs: an entangled history of the memorialization of Ion Moța and Vasile Marin in Spain and Romania, 1937–41”. *Historical Research*, 95(268), 264–286. OA: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hisres/htab042>



- Zavatti, F. (2021a). “Making and Contesting Far Right Sites of Memory: A Case Study on Romania”. *Memory Studies*, 14(5), 949–970. OA: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020982054>
- Zavatti, F. (2021b). “The Legionary Movement from Cold War Exile to Post-Communist Romania, 1986–1993”. *Arhivele Totalitarismului*, 29(3–4), 104–119. OA: <https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1692692/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- Zavatti, F. (2023). “The Digital Lives of Dead Legionaries: The Infinite Archive and the Online Memory Work on Romanian Interwar Fascism”. In: *On the Digital Front-Line: Far-Right Memory Work in Baltic, Central, and East European Online Spaces*, edited by Andrej Kotljarchuk & Francesco Zavatti (Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia), p. 61-86.
- Zavatti, F. (2022b). “Far Right’s Engagement with National Identity Issues in Online Spaces”. In: *CBEES State of the Region Report: The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space: A Comparative Study of Far-Right Movements and Identity in the Region* (Huddinge: Centre for Baltic and East European Studies), pp. 23–32. OA: <https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1642227/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

Textbooks and popular scientific articles

- Kotljarchuk, A. “A Cinderella of Europe: Understanding the political history of Belarus”, *Baltic Rim Economies* 3/2020. OA: <https://sites.utu.fi/bre/a-cinderella-of-europe-understanding-the-political-history-of-belarus/>
- Zavatti, F. (2021c). “Far-Right Activism, Memory Politics & The Internet”. *Baltic Worlds*, 1–2(14), 148. OA: https://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BW-1%E2%80%932-2021_enkelsidor.pdf

Debates and interviews in media

- Kotljarchuk A. Participating in BBC World Service program “Belarus: The crossroads of Eastern Europe. History of Belarus from the Middle Ages to Lukashenka”, (producent Radek Boschetty). December 2022. OA: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct38tf>
- Kotljarchuk A. Polish Television Belsat (Siarhiey Pialiesia). Debates about the memory politics of World War II in today’s Belarus. 6 April 2021.
- Kotljarchuk A. Interview to Polish National Radio (Viktor Korbut) about the conflict around the political symbols in today’s Belarus. 1 April 2021.
- Kotljarchuk A. Interview to Austrian National Radio ORF-Ö1 (Hanna Ronzheimer) about my subproject on the Belarusian military collaborators with the Nazis. 23 October 2019.
- Kotljarchuk, A. “Belarusian military collaborators with the Nazis in the Cold War Western Exiles. The strategies of survival and memory work”, Interview to the Polish Radio. 26 April 2023.
- Zavatti, F. (2021d). “Far-Right Memory Politics in the Internet Era: Snapshots from a Workshop”. *Baltic Worlds*. OA: <https://balticworlds.com/far-right-memory-politics-in-the-internet-era/>

Five most important conferences (organized and papers presented)

- International Workshop “Far Right Memory Politics in the Internet Era”, at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, Södertörn University, 15–16 January 2020. Organized by



F. Zavatti and the project team with four papers were presented and discussed by the members of the project and seven more papers by international participants from six different countries.

- Panel “Celebrating Nazi Collaborationists in Post-1989 Eastern Europe” at CBEEES Annual Conference 2019 “Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2019: Orders and Freedoms”, Södertörn University & Uppsala University, 7-8 November 2019. Chair and organizer of the panel was A. Kotljarchuk.

- International workshop “New Nationalisms in the Baltic Sea Regions. Master Narratives and Counter Narratives in New Nationalism”, network for the History of International Relations (IRH), Stockholm University, February 3-4, 2020. Papers were presented by A. Kotljarchuk and S. Werther.

- Memory work of Scandinavian Waffen-SS veterans in Eastern Europe, IASS (The International Association for Scandinavian Studies) conference: Vilnius, 3-6 Aug. 2021. Paper was presented by Steffen Werther.

- Research seminar “The Holocaust and the Waffen-SS / BKA-veterans from Belarus in the Cold war’s West. Memory work as a strategy of survival” at the International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel. September 21, 2023. A. Kotljarchuk presented the project and discussed the results of his subproject.