

# Hegemonic representations of the past and digital agency: Giving meaning to “The Soviet Story” on social networking sites

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## Abstract

In 2008, Edvīns Šnore, the Latvian film director, released a shocking and provocative documentary, “The Soviet Story,” which explored some terrible episodes from the Soviet past as well as the collaboration between the Soviet and Nazi regimes. Scholars have argued that The Soviet Story is an effective Latvian response to Russian propaganda, but it also exemplifies the broader problems of post-communist memory politics. This article takes a step further in the discussion of The Soviet Story. It focuses on the idea of how memory work triggered by the documentary got started on social networking sites. In particular, the article deals with the video-sharing website *YouTube* and the Internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, both of which are crucial meaning-making sites with respect to history. The article demonstrates transnational memory work in *YouTube* and *Wikipedia* as a multidirectional enterprise that both reinforces and emancipates existing hegemonic representations of controversial past.

## Keywords

Reconciliatory discourse, remediation of history, social networking sites, social representations, transnational memory, victimhood nationalism

In 2008, Edvīns Šnore, the Latvian film director, released a shocking and provocative documentary, “The Soviet Story,” which explored some terrible episodes from the Soviet past (e.g. Katyn massacre, Holodomor in Ukraine, Gulag) as well as the collaboration between the Soviet and Nazi regimes. The premiere of The Soviet Story took place at the European Parliament, with the Union for Europe of the Nations supporting the production costs.<sup>1</sup> The documentary immediately received divergent reactions. On one hand, it was admired, particularly in the Baltic States and East Central Europe and received several international awards. On the other hand, harsh criticism came from Russia where politicians, historians, and the general public ardently condemned the documentary as an anti-Russian work. On 17 May 2008, the Russian pro-governmental youth organization Young Russia, expressing their anger about the film, even burned the effigy of Šnore in front of the

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Embassy of Latvia in Moscow. In other words, the way how The Soviet Story was produced and received makes this film a spectacular act of political communication.

Some scholars (Ījabs, 2008; Wezel, 2009) have argued that The Soviet Story was an effective Latvian response to ongoing Russian propaganda, but it also exemplified the problems of Latvian memory politics. Notably, the documentary also corresponded with the anti-Communist stances that were revived in the past decade by the political elites of Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, and so on. Yet on a more general level, The Soviet Story alluded to the reluctance of Western Europe to include the Soviet and Nazi atrocities into a common narrative of European history. The West in general and Western Europe in particular, as Timothy Snyder (2009, 2010) insists, has for a long time failed to realize that Eastern Europe was indeed the territory where Stalin and Hitler carried out the most violent politics toward civilians. Thus, by dwelling on what Mälksoo (2009, 2014) calls the “postnationalist aspirations” to impose “subaltern European past,” The Soviet Story has contributed to the discourse evolving in the past decade and tackling the idea of a common European memory (see Closa, 2010a; Judt, 2002; Leggewie, 2011; Prutsch, 2013). The recognition of the Holocaust and Stalinist crimes as morally and legally equal wrongdoing has been at the very heart of this transnational discourse.

This article takes a step further in the discussion of The Soviet Story by asking how memory work triggered by the documentary got started on social networking sites (SNS), the emerging platform of public storytelling and discussions. Namely, what kind of sentiments has the documentary elicited and how was its narrative contextualized within transnational bottom-up memory work that took place on SNS. To explore these questions, I am particularly interested in the video-sharing website *YouTube* and the Internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, both of which are crucial meaning-making sites. Memory work in *YouTube* and *Wikipedia*, as I shall demonstrate in this article, is a multidirectional enterprise that both reinforces and emancipates existing hegemonic representations of controversial past. Remarkably, post-Communist space, as Rutten and Zvereva (2013) suggests, is a particularly visible area on the digital map today, as post-Communist web users “create a new topography with special places of memory discussions, commemoration and fights” (p. 7). That is to say, the intensification of post-Communist memory conflicts in the 2000s has coincided with the revolution of Web 2.0, opening new avenues for memory wars as well as for transnational collaboration.

## The representation of the past in the age of SNS

The development of mass media has profoundly shaped the way we represent our past and create shared representations of it. The media, ranging from memoirs to Hollywood blockbusters, have advanced the remediation of history, seeing history as an eternal source of useful images and meanings. The increasing availability of media content amplifies the remediation of history, ensuring that “facts and memorable events are represented again and again, over the decades and centuries, in different media” (Erl, 2010: 392). In fact, a shared memory is hardly imaginable without such remediation because sharing the images of the past means repeating and re-representing them. Only can the premise that collective memory is filled with reused and reusable material, as Irwin-Zarecka (1994: 7) argues, entitle us to see the past as the terrain exposed to multiple possibilities of reinterpretation. Nowadays, though, SNS complicate the remediation of the past, that is, they generate new participatory patterns that can be more inclusive than the participation provided by traditional media.

The new participatory culture has tremendously changed media consumption, shifting “from individualized and personalized media consumption towards consumption as a networked practice” (Jenkins, 2006: 244). That certainly expands the understanding of the mediality of memory. As Hoskins (2009) notes, “the increasingly digitalized networking of memory not only functions in a continuous present but is also a distinctive shaper of a new mediatized age of memory” (p. 98).

A networked remembering unties the anthropocentric context of collective memory, creating new conditions which require “a new understanding of agency where minds and technics are intertwined” (Van Dijck, 2010: 403).

The remediation of accurate and truthful history is not the most decisive factor causing individuals to engage with historical topics, as storytelling and emphasis on narrative truth triggers a more genuine participation. De Bruyn’s (2010) analysis of the real and fake Facebook profiles of historical characters demonstrates that, along with factual references, performative effectiveness and imaginative profundity are equally important components because they endorse re-experiencing rather than repeating the historical narrative. By simulating real-life interactions, SNS have reduced various barriers, enabling greater participation in public discourse about a recent or distant event and have activated the remediation of history. Additionally, they have fostered the development of a new (trans)national communicative space where digital memories—knowledge and attitudes toward the past—can be exhibited and, in Thompson’s (1999) words (pp. 82–87), “discursively elaborated” (discussed, refined, and reinterpreted). One may even argue that SNS as a new framework for memory work increase the role of agency, thus expanding the Halbwachsian (1992) conception of collective memory where an individual has a rather marginal status. Yet, public discourses on SNS are far from perfect, and many scholars in the previous decade have already pointed to numerous issues. These problems are related to reflexivity, listening to others and working with difference, identity verification, processes of domination and exclusion, and the expansion of economic interests (Dahlberg, 2001: 623). Similar shortcomings arise within the remediation of history: daily discourse about history often is sporadic, superficial, fragmented, polemic, obtrusive, and anonymous.

To be sure, the users of SNS do represent or can be associated with specific offline mnemonic communities from which they have learned what and how to talk about a shared history. This inherited knowledge functions as the dynamic and transportable social representation of the past. By “social representation” here I mean a system of shared values, ideas, and practices that express the essential and generic properties of historical periods or events (see Liu, 2005; Liu and Hilton, 2005; Moscovici, 2000; Wagner and Hayes, 2005). The social representations of the past emerge when common people converse on a daily basis about the past as a social object which “startles us out of a passive state” (Moscovici, 1988: 235). In other words, people create a *consensual universe* where the social representations of the past can thrive. In this consensual universe, to use Moscovici’s (2000) perspective,

society is seen as a group of individuals who are equal and free, each entitled to speak in the name of the group and under its aegis. Thus, no one member is assumed to possess an exclusive competence, but each can acquire any competence which may be required. (p. 34)

A consensual universe is the prerequisite for social memory, that is, the bottom-up memory work (Assmann, 2004). At this level, individuals not only share the social representations of the past but also may transform them, by advocating polemical and perhaps more liberating or reconciliatory views of the past. Nonetheless, social representation, as Howarth (2006) points out, is not a quiet thing, there is constantly a fight between hegemonic and oppositional representations over the meaning of reality. Therefore, political actors are prone to treat the most controversial representations of the past as a political resource which can mobilize people and maximize political profit.

## Methodology

This article deals with two extremely popular global SNS: *YouTube* and *Wikipedia*. Because of the posting of private or public videos on *YouTube* and the collaboratively editing historical narratives

on *Wikipedia*, both Internet sites serve as daily platforms for remediation of history and its artifacts (documentaries, fictional historical films, novels, talk shows, etc.). But they are not just communication tools or knowledge repositories. *YouTube* and *Wikipedia* are already cultural systems in their own right and can be interpreted as transnational memory places that strengthen digital agency and promote democratic spirit in consensual universe (see Burgess and Green, 2009; Ferron and Massa, 2013; Knudsen and Stage, 2012; Pentzold, 2009). Although engagement in these SNS is relatively easy, it requires compliance with community guidelines that somewhat constrain memory work and representation of the past (see YouTube Community Guidelines, n.d. and Wikipedia: List of policies and guidelines n.d.).

The guidelines accompanied by everyday participation practices and shared communication style are a sufficient reason why YouTubers and Wikipedians can be defined as particular communities of practice whose members have a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. However, as Wenger (1998) argues, not only unity but also disagreements, challenges, and competition may be an essential component of such communities; therefore, “a community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island insulated from political and social relations” (p. 77). Apparently, such a community of practice can entail different *mnemonic communities* who are located in the same consensual universe, sticking together through shared negotiation practices, but who, concurrently, may advocate different social representations of the past.

In this article, the discourse created around The Soviet Story is interpreted as the emanation of certain social representations of the past (Nazi period, Stalinism). The research is based on several data sets: *YouTube* comments, the edit history of the English *Wikipedia* article The Soviet Story, as well as the comments posted on the *Talk page* of that article. These data convey the social representation of the past accepted by a particular user.

I have collected *YouTube* comments that were posted under two trailers of The Soviet Story. Both trailers appeared simultaneously in 2008. The first video was posted on 18 March (Trailer 1, see Soviet Story, n.d.), the second appeared on 24 March (Trailer 2, see “The Soviet Story” movie trailer, n.d.), but unlike the former, it is age restricted according to *YouTube* community guidelines (n.d.). The trailers are among the most watched videos available on *YouTube* about The Soviet Story.<sup>2</sup> Viewing and commenting activity reached their peak during the first 2 years (2008/2009). The majority of comments were written in English, making some of them rather incoherent. *YouTube* comments were thematically analyzed using the qualitative research software NVivo 8. The initial version of the *Wikipedia* article, in turn, was created on 23 May 2008 (see The Soviet Story, n.d.). Since then, the article has been edited more than 600 times, with the greatest activity in 2008 and 2009 (78% of all edits). I have used various external data collection tools to obtain quantitative information about the *Wikipedia*’s editors and revision history.<sup>3</sup> The collected data are analyzed on two levels: agentic and thematic. On the agent’s level, the most active YouTubers and Wikipedians are outlined. On the thematic level, the dominant themes of *YouTube* comments and the *Wikipedia* Talk page are explored.

## YouTubers and Wikipedians as memory agents

The agentic dimension in this article is extrapolated in order to better understand the group of rather determined memory agents who have discussed historical controversies and The Soviet Story. These online agents create the nodes of networked memory. Yet it should be noted that the anonymity of Wikipedians and YouTubers inevitably constrains the interpretation of data.

I start my analysis with the *Wikipedia* article The Soviet Story. The history of edits shows that a relatively small number of users have done the bulk of the editing: 9% of the editors (15 of 172) have made 57% of the edits.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the article has been edited from 66 IP addresses,

**Table 1.** The most active editors on the Wikipedia article “The Soviet Story”<sup>a</sup>.

Users	% Of total edits on the article	Location	Attitude toward the documentary
Andora I	10	NI <sup>b</sup>	B <sup>c</sup>
Vecrumba (also PēterisV)	6.6	USA	B
Russavia	6.4	Australia	C
Nug (also Martintg)	5.6	Related to Estonia	S
Ogomemnon	4.9	NI	C
Zalktis	4.2	Related to Latvia	S
ISasha	3.7	Russia	C
78.84.220.191	3.7	Latvia	B
129.173.66.208	2.4	Canada <sup>d</sup>	C
PasswordUsername	2.2	NI	C
206.186.8.130	1.5	Canada	B
Chegis	1.4	NI	B
Volunteer Marek	1.4	NI	B
24.5.186.1	1.4	USA	B
76.183.157.68	1.2	USA	B

<sup>a</sup>Data are generated in accordance with the version of the article as it was on 26 October 2012.

<sup>b</sup>Not identified.

<sup>c</sup>C = critical; S = supportive; B = balanced.

<sup>d</sup>It is very likely that anonymous editors from Canada and United States have accessed the article from elsewhere and their IP addresses only show the location of proxy servers.

indicating that either the same editor has used different identities or different editors have used the same IP address. Be that as it may, the data suggest we are dealing primarily with an interactive core of editors rather than a scattered group of occasional visitors. In the first 3 years, one can observe a considerable influence of commemorative anniversaries on the editing: the highest activity is registered either in March or June, the months when the victims of Stalinist deportations are officially commemorated in the Baltic States. That echoes with the pattern revealed by Ferron and Massa (2013: 16), suggesting that *Wikipedia* pages “with a high relative amount of edits occurred during anniversaries are more likely related to traumatic events.” Notably though, the amount of edits to the *Wikipedia* article has significantly increased also in September 2008 that might be explained by Wikipedians’ reaction to the Russian–Georgian war in August 2008. The war substantially raised anti-Russian feelings in the Baltic States and elsewhere, activating the narrative of Soviet occupation.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the fact that some users are anonymous or avoid revealing detailed information about their offline identities, we can still outline basic features of this active core. As Table 1 shows, the location of *Wikipedia* editors extends from Australia to North America to Latvia.<sup>6</sup> Some of the users in their profile information emphasize their ability to speak Latvian (Vecrumba, Zalktis) or Russian (Russavia, PasswordUsername). The most active editors have also edited other *Wikipedia* articles related to Soviet, East European, Russian, and Baltic issues and some of them evidently know each other as they have co-edited and interacted within other thematically related articles. By using *Editor Interaction Analyzer* (n.d.),<sup>7</sup> we can see that more than two users have also co-edited other *Wikipedia* articles, such as “Russophobia,” “Occupation of the Baltic States,” and “Mass killings under Communist regimes.” Furthermore, different perspectives on the Soviet Union that become salient within the article *The Soviet Story* can be observed more or less explicitly in other articles as well. For example, while Vecrumba and Nug highlight the dark side of the

**Table 2.** The most active YouTube commentators on Trailer 1 and Trailer 2<sup>a</sup>.

Username	Number of comments	Location	Age (years)	Attitude
Rexixxxx	141	Latvia	24	S
Neticigaistoms	89	Latvia	27	S
Proftl	59	Russia	27	C
StarcraftForever	58	Norway	28	S
Fedotof	55	Russia	30	C
GharbDB	33	Russia	26	C
Velen817	28	Russia	25	C
Ninelon	27	Russia	21	C
Ferdovit	26	—	—	S
Bratvakgb	26	Russia	—	B
Feastguy101 (25)	25	Portugal	26	S

<sup>a</sup>As of 1 August 2012.

Soviet Union, Russavia and PasswordUsername are inclined to neutralize its negative aspects. This interaction at times resembles edit wars, where parts of articles are intentionally deleted or renewed. On the whole, it can be fairly argued that a relatively small group of (inter)active *Wikipedia* editors who have constructed the discourse on The Soviet Story can be associated with knowledgeable memory agents who at best are able to maneuver through different social representations of 1940s history.

*Wikipedia* has for long time been a battlefield for the editors interested in Central and East European history. In 2007, for example, *Wikipedia* user Irpen submitted a claim for the Arbitration commission (AC) of English Wikipedia against the user Digwuren. Irpen accused a group of active Wikipedians in vandalism and blocking alternative views of the Baltic and East European history of the twentieth century. Many members of this group who took part in edit wars were allegedly working behind the University of Tartu firewall and were the members of East European mailing list (EEML). This well-coordinated group of *Wikipedia* editors, as it was argued, advocated anti-Russian, anti-communist, and nationalist views and “attacked” those who disagreed with such a perspective. AC decided to warn the involved editors that future attempts to use Wikipedia as a battleground, by making generalized accusations that persons of a particular national or ethnic group are engaged in Holocaust denial or harbor Nazi sympathies may result in the imposition of summary bans (for more details on this controversy, see Wikipedia:Arbitration). Noteworthy, several editors (e.g. Vecrumba, Nug, Volunteer Marek) of the article on The Soviet Story were also involved in the Digwuren case and EEML.

The structure of YouTubers who have posted their comments on both trailers differs. Table 2 outlines the identity of the 10 most active YouTubers. These users have posted around 20% of the comments. The most active appear to be Latvians who obviously appreciate The Soviet Story and who remediate the main facts/interpretations conveyed by the film. A number of visible opponents, in turn, admit to be Russians (also called *pro-Russian YouTubers* later in the text). The different hegemonic representations of the Soviet period (pro-Soviet vs. anti-Soviet) seem to be the main impetus for these memory agents. As a result, constant confrontation is the hallmark of their discourse on the documentary as well as on the Soviet past in general. Of course, The Soviet Story has largely supported such a dichotomy because the film’s narrative provides no room for a more emancipated or transcending representation that, for instance, would stress popular support for

Stalinism or some other challenging revisionist topics (see Cohen, 1985; Fitzpatrick, 1986). Although YouTubers attempt to communicate in English, usually it is not their mother tongue. That, in fact, exemplifies a high motivation to engage in transnational discourse and share their attitude internationally about history familiar to them.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, numerous users are seasoned discussants of Soviet topics. For example, RexIXXXX, Neticigaistoms, and Velen817 have commented on other YouTube videos about the Soviet past; they can also be found on other websites discussing The Soviet Story or Soviet past, Russian politics, ethnic relations, and so on.

The structure of both communities of practice—Wikipedians and YouTubers—shows how different SNS divide memory work. While Wikipedia's discourse on The Soviet Story to a large extent is centralized and based on "cold" expertise, the YouTube discourse is scattered and embedded in sporadic and "hot" debates. These variations emerge from diverse practices inherent to each community. If Wikipedians require accuracy and balanced representation and therefore attract more intellectually mature users, YouTubers' main goal is presumably to express emotionally loaded attitudes. YouTubers as the community of practice are less interested in a balanced perspective, and perhaps for that reason YouTube as a platform is more popular among younger users. Despite differences, there is, however, a common ground for this ostensibly unrelated memory work. As I shall demonstrate in the next two sections, a common disposition is formed by the social representations of the past.

## Organizing themes of *YouTube* discourse

*YouTube* discourse on The Soviet Story is highly contentious, as the confrontation evolves around the central narrative thread of the documentary: the Soviet Union (Communism) and Nazi Germany (Nazism) were equally inclined to commit crimes against humanity and even collaborated in doing so. Such comparison, of course, has a long scholarly history. Western political thinkers like Arendt (1962) and Aron (1969) have prominently demonstrated the homology between Communism and Nazism as culturally shaped manifestations of totalitarianism. Along the striking similarities, scholars have also pointed to considerable differences in terms of governance, constitution of society, and repressive policy (for the most recent discussion, see Geyer and Fitzpatrick, 2009; Snyder, 2010). For YouTubers, however, the likeness of both regimes is often just a thought-provoking impulse, which ultimately leads to much broader narratives about the history of the twentieth century as well as current geopolitical realities.

The history and geopolitics nexus is particularly salient when Russia appears in discussions. Arguably, the Russia's present memory politics toward the Soviet Union and WWII is a central battleground where YouTubers meet and discuss historical issues or insult ethnic groups and each other. One *camp* is formed by pro-Russian commentators, while another camp consists of YouTubers who identify with the Baltic States, Poland, and Georgia. Clearly, such a division reflects an offline international juxtaposition with Russia and its rather pro-Soviet representation of the 1940s on one side, and countries that see themselves as victims of the Soviet regime and its geopolitical interests on the other. The majority of *YouTube* comments shed light on miscellaneous ideological binaries (communism vs. capitalism, Nazism vs. Communism, Communism vs. the Soviet Union, and Stalinism vs. the Soviet Union) that provoke constant fighting over the meaning of the past.

Likewise, YouTubers discuss the way The Soviet Story represents historical events by either blaming the documentary in disseminating lies or praising it for telling the truth about Communism. As a matter of fact, the ongoing confrontations vividly display two competing social representations of the Soviet period: negative and positive representations. The former highlights communist atrocities and the totalitarian nature of the regime, whereas the latter emphasizes the progressive

nature of the Soviet Union. The negative representation has been dominating official rhetoric of the Baltic states and most of the other East Central European societies ever since the collapse of the Communist bloc. Conversely, the positive representation is more pronounced in current Russian memory politics as well as in a range of post-Soviet countries. In Central Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, at the bottom-up level of memory work, one may, however, notice complex relations with the past. That is, biographical experience and the memories of post-Stalinist social stability challenge the official historical narratives imposed by anti-Communist memory politics. This discrepancy between official and biographical discourse has fostered a pragmatic representation of the past, highlighting one's ability to accommodate to the Communist regime and achieve privately and/or socially significant goals. Pragmatic representation has been generating an alternative narrative about the past that stands apart from post-Communist nostalgia or a self-sufficient victimization narrative (see Jõesalu and Kõresaar, 2013; Kaprāns, 2012; Mark, 2010).

A tremendously confrontational mood of positive and negative representation may overshadow the traces of reconciliatory discourse that occasionally appear in *YouTube* comments. Reconciliation of historical controversies, of course, has always been a rather idealistic view. As Müller (2002) has argued, "democracy itself is a form of contained conflict—and as long as memories remain contested, there will be no simple forgetting or repression *tout court*" (p. 33). Nonetheless, it is expedient to understand the rhetorical places or *topoi* where arguments supporting reconciliation and coming to terms with the past become relevant and where an alternative and less confrontational social representation of the Soviet past can be introduced. I have delineated three such *topoi* in *YouTube* comments: agreement on absolute evil, mutual recognition of suffering, and differentiation of the Soviet period.

The first *topos* encompasses YouTubers' attempts to agree upon the minimal limits of an absolute evil that existed within the Soviet regime. Normally, the *evil* is associated with Soviet terror. But many YouTubers also blame Stalin who, in their opinion, is the main villain responsible for Communist atrocities. Occasionally, to stress individual guilt and responsibility, they disassociate Stalin from the Soviet people, the Russians, or Communism. Such separation may release a reconciliatory spirit, bringing into play the theme of universal suffering and victimhood, the themes that definitely expand the interpretative framework of The Soviet Story. In line with Stalin, it is repeatedly stressed that Soviet crimes, like Nazi crimes, resulted from the cruelty of an absolute evil without ethnicity or justification. Never, as some pro-Russian YouTubers suggest, had their grandfathers fought for Stalin; instead, their primary mission was to defend the Fatherland from the Nazis. The following three YouTube comments illustrate various layers of the first *topos*:

World is not black and white and the fact that Soviet Union saved the word from brown plague doesn't bring back victims of it's own terror. There were millions of them who had to suffer and die because of Stalin and not him alone./r0lf11/9

Okay, yes communism is an ideal belief I'm not disputing that, but sadly it has been twisted by the likes of Stalin, there has never been a communist country, just regimes masking behind communism, masking behind a deformed version of it. Soviet Russia wasn't communism it was Stalinism pure and simple./EndlessLaymon/

There are a few idiots that remember Stalin proudly, but far from all of us. Hate Soviet Communists, Hate Nazis, Hate Imperialists. But don't assume all Russians, or all Germans, or all of any other ethnic group agree with those ideologies./Yegorific/

The *topos* of absolute evil legitimates the second *topos*, which is based on the idea of Russians as victims rather than perpetrators of Soviet terror. Along the lines of the theory of social identity (see Tajfel and Turner, 1979), YouTubers' attempts to individualize and isolate absolute evil from the rest

of the group show social creativity that helps to bolster the group's positive identity. Thus, the topos of absolute evil, which is so characteristic of pro-Russian YouTubers, facilitates the redefinition of social identity, substituting a deviant perpetrator's identity for a socially acceptable victim's identity. However, *YouTube* comments also disclose the risk of entrapment in the *greatest-victim contention*. That is to say, such mathematical victim comparisons enforce the idea that Russians were the most victimized group under the Communist regime. Other nations, as some YouTubers argue, should avoid exploiting victimization narrative, or at least the Russian suffering should be placed on an equal footing with that of other nations. Such comparisons between two or more symbolic victim groups usually downplay any potential reconciliation and foster the exceptionality of one group's victimhood. Nevertheless, it does illuminate the necessity of recognizing the suffering of a symbolic wrongdoer because it may dismantle the traditional opposition between oppressors and victims. In radical pluralism, as is the case of *YouTube* discussions, recognition is a fundamental principle that might tear down rigid binaries and subsequently support the reconciliation discourse. Recognition is clearly a less pretentious and politically beneficial practice than judging one's representation of victimhood. As Bell (2008) suggests, saying that "identity-constitutive mythologies deserve to be acknowledged does not mean that they should all be judged in the same manner" (p. 160).

The third reconciliatory theme is an appeal for Russia to apologize for Soviet crimes. In *YouTube* comments, Russia is often compared with its historical adversary Germany, which has not hesitated to apologize for Nazi crimes. Rarely will you find situations where the call for an apology is mentioned together with a demand for material compensations that countries that suffered from the Soviet occupation might demand from Russia. Apologizing is contextualized as a mere symbolic necessity. However, the above-mentioned appeal to view the Russian nation as the victim of Communist crimes challenges one's rights to demand a symbolic apology from Russia, and such implications irritate some *YouTube* commentators. They see the reinterpretation of Russia as the perpetrator of Soviet crimes as escaping from responsibility. Thus, the demarcation of absolute evil and the necessity for an apology from the symbolic wrongdoer, the two themes that could possibly result in a deeper reconciliatory discourse, assume a confrontational character on *YouTube*:

I think it would be just respectfull to tell the truth and admit the crimes the Soviet Union did while it existed. Don't u think? I have a lot of respect toward germans, because they admit and say that what the nazis did was just a nightmare. I wish to hear that once from Russia. And I know that it wasn't just latvians, those were all the nationalities that suffered(not even mentioning the 7mil ukrainians), but at least they should ADMIT it. thats all/Semiimusic/

Few weeks ago, I read from newspaper how russia told Estonia to stop faking the history and that Soviet U. never occupied Estonia. It is still alive, no one has EVER apologised to those countries which were occupied. And all dear western people who could talk everything about what they wanted and who had food all this time when we suffered (from ww II to the 1990's). Please shut up. You have NO idea what was going on then. Soviet Union did the worst things during WW II./Fzzzlicious/

Again,why russia has to appologize???It was soviet leader consisting of jews,georgians,ukrainians,russians and many others who was undertaking those decisions,which influenced all nations of the USSR.Russian nation suffered not less,but even more than baltic states,so why russian people have to appologize???I just cant get it.Soviet Union had bloody system and my russian grand father was in labor camp for years,why the fuck then I have to appologize for what those crazy leaders were doing?/Dimonalmaty/

In the Baltic states, the theme of apology reappeared in the early 2000s during the first Putin's presidency when, after a period of uncertainty in the 1990s, the Russian Federation initiated aggressive memory politics that sought to increase pride in the Soviet era. By reframing the Soviet period, Russian memory politics also attempted to revise Stalin's image, highlighting his strategic thinking

and downplaying the inhumane character of Stalin's repressive policy toward civilians. Consequently, nostalgia for the Soviet period was legitimized and Stalinism was at least partly justified, whereas the commemoration of the victims of Stalinism was marginalized (see Adler, 2012; Etkind, 2009; Mendelson and Gerber, 2005; Miller, 2012). Hence, Putin's refusal to recognize the occupation of the Baltic states was a logical outcome of this politics (see Mälksoo, 2009; Muižnieks, 2011).

A differentiated attitude toward the Soviet period, simultaneously admitting negative and positive sides of the Soviet regime, is one more theme that can be contextualized within reconciliatory discourse. Some YouTubers contend that Soviet history is not just about a cruel Stalin and the Gulag, it is also about achievements in Soviet science and culture. Arguably, such an attitude stems from the alternative or pragmatic representation of the Soviet period that is neither distinctly negative (anti-Soviet) nor positive (pro-Soviet). Although it is not as salient as the previous themes of reconciliatory discourse, such differentiation of the Soviet era into positive and negative frames of reference reminds us that the absence of a phenomenon in the data is as useful as its presence. That is, the narrative of *The Soviet Story* defines a very narrow time frame (the 1930s and 1940s). Due to the narrative constraints imposed by the documentary, transformations after Stalin's death and remnants of the Soviet regime that continued for 35 more years are rarely reflected in *YouTube* comments. Had they been reflected, the repressive image of the Soviet regime might have been less conspicuous. Besides, by excluding alternative or perhaps more balanced perspectives on the Communist period per se, the anti-Soviet comments most likely reveal a place-specific discourse characteristic of the Baltic states, but not necessarily of other post-Communist societies. As research on popular attitude toward the Communist era (see Ekman and Linde, 2005; Евразийский монитор, 2009) has shown, East European societies demonstrate a considerably higher level of sympathies with regard to the Communist era than the Baltic states, which are also leaders of anti-Soviet attitude among the former Soviet republics.

Overall, *YouTube* discussions on the responsibility for Communist crimes echo the discourse of guilt vis-à-vis Nazi crimes that emerged in post-War Germany (see Berger, 2012; Olick, 2003). Jaspers (2000) has famously distinguished the four levels of German guilt: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. Discussing the limits of Russia's responsibility for Communist crimes, YouTubers largely tackle the issue of moral guilt, which "exists for all those who give room to conscience and repentance" (Jaspers, 2000: 57), leaving aside other forms of guilt. Thereby, YouTubers avoid considering the diversity of guilt that might eventually break the mythologized surface structure of *The Soviet Story* narrative and confront the idea of the one and only (symbolic or real) victimizer in terms of communist crimes.

Along with potential reconciliation topics, it is worthwhile to note that many YouTubers display empathy with their relatives or the nation who severely suffered from the Soviets. This empathy is used to reinforce their criticism of the cruelty of the Soviet regime. For example, a number of anti-Soviet YouTubers refer to their grandparents or even their parents, who were deprived of basic human rights, whose property was nationalized, and/or who were deported to Siberia or exterminated in the 1940s. By the same token, empathy is aroused at the collective level where the whole nation is victimized and where YouTubers identify themselves with a specific "We":

The damage done to us is enormous and although you can't measure that in terms of money- we want you to understand what you have done! We don't want to be told we are the evil ones that treat the russians with lack of respect, when in fact it is us,whos economy got destroyed,us,whos CULTURE GOT DESTROYED,us,whos land was taken and ancestors killed./Gaismaspils/

My mother is born in Siberia thanks to Soviet Union. Is this fact also anti-soviet propaganda? Who need historians when we have relatives who had to experience Stalins cruelty?/Vide let lacrima/

I don't get it, why doesn't the world accept this history??? Our relatives died back there! (i'm lithuanian)/  
Fuckyourselfslow/

These comments not just depict the interchangeability of the stories of collective or private suffering, but they also exemplify how the cultural trauma constructed after the fall of Communism is still a crucial template of self-presentation. Over the decades, the various mechanisms of historical justice have objectified the Communist era suffering in East European societies (see Closa, 2010b), and normally, it is not at the center of everyday discourse anymore. Nonetheless, the post-Communist “cultural trial” (Mark, 2010) undertaken by The Soviet Story and the transnational context of SNS may obviously raise confidence and desire to highlight what We have gone through. In particular, the youngest generation of former Communist societies is provided with new opportunities to present and strengthen their traumatic identity globally. The *YouTube* discourse on The Soviet Story, in fact, epitomizes the role of SNS as a relevant platform for fostering victimhood nationalism, which, following Lim’s (2010: 139–140) definition, emerges from hereditary victimhood that is transformed into historical culture and integrated in the national identity project. Victimhood nationalism, however, is pertinent not just to victims, but, as demonstrated, also to symbolic victimizers who, by highlighting their suffering, may reframe stigmatizing identity and evade responsibility with respect to symbolic victims. Therefore, the denial of suffering is often read as a threat by opposing online groups who identify or are identified with either a nominal victim or a victimizer.

Remarkably, YouTubers who support The Soviet Story are specifically interested in the enlightenment of *significant other*. The reference to *the world* or in particular to Western countries, as the implied audience of The Soviet Story, is a recurrent theme. YouTubers insist that this *significant other* will learn the truth about Soviet crimes after watching the film. Several YouTubers presume that even 20 years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, *the world* has false knowledge or no knowledge at all vis-à-vis Soviet atrocities. That brings us back to the missing recognition of victim’s identity as a crucial impetus for *YouTube* discourse and perhaps more generally also for victimhood nationalism. The opponents of the documentary, in turn, periodically allude to the Western world as the villain and The Soviet Story, in their opinion, reveals the intentions of Western propaganda. This kind of conspiracy theory resembles a traditional Soviet *cliché* about the evil West that is still alive in contemporary Russia and that has reaped in a new incarnation after the Euromaidan events in Ukraine in 2013/2014. At the same time, the opponents frequently address the Western countries as the primary target who should understand that The Soviet Story is mere misinformation. Rarely, however, is Europe or a common European community elicited as the ultimate goal of The Soviet Story. To some extent that is astonishing, especially if one considers that the documentary is associated with the European Parliament. A European dimension is more salient only when the opponents of the documentary emphasize how the Soviet Union liberated Europe from Nazism. The absence of Europe in *YouTube* comments is also a rhetorical result. Anti-Soviet YouTubers intend to globalize the awareness of Communist crimes at the utmost degree by referring to the (*Western*) *world* as more global and rhetorically powerful metaphor than Europe. The globalization of suffering results in the over-contextualization of one’s historical position that Lim (2010: 141) sees as the main strategy of victimhood nationalism in underprivileged nations.

## Edit wars on The Soviet Story

The Wikipedia editors can make minor changes, but they can also significantly modify the previous versions of articles. This section focuses on the most essential edit wars and discussions that have emerged among the leading editors of the *Wikipedia* article The Soviet Story.

The edit history reveals that one of the major controversies revolves around the conflicting interests of categorizing *The Soviet Story*. Editors who want to stress a rather critical context to the film intend to convince others that instead of calling it a documentary, it would be more appropriate to call it a propaganda film (see, for example, comments on *Wikipedia* Talk page of *The Soviet Story* posted by anonymous editor 129.173.66.208 and ISasha). By the way, the same issue of genre is extensively discussed in the Russian *Wikipedia* (Советская история (фильм, 2008)). In particular, the opponents in the English *Wikipedia* insist that the film overlooks opposing views and presents fake facts; therefore, it should be labeled a propaganda film. Meanwhile, advocates see “documentary” as the most appropriate genre because the film complies with the generic definition of a documentary:

Nice. Instead of writing answers to questions posted here someone has just locked the article writing Documentary with Large first letter. Indeed, it's a Great Documentary with lots of faked facts and pictures;) Speaking seriously, I think it was enough just to undo the change with propaganda on history page./24.222.199.65, 7 June 2008/

Whatever Izvestia or Novosti (“Russia Today” cable channel) would like to say about whether or not the film is “propaganda” can be cited with references. The film presents itself as a documentary, it was funded as a documentary, it is a documentary./PetersV, 12 June 2008/

In the same way, the proponents try to refute the criticism of false facts by claiming that they are true until convincing evidences prove otherwise. Along with this controversy, editors in different camps have also accused each other of vandalizing their texts, which depict the film as either propaganda or documentary. Ultimately, in the current version of the article, they have reached a certain consensus: the film is assigned to the documentary genre, but the article does include references to its *propagandistic* nature; this criticism, however, does not have a general character and is largely attributed to the opinion of Russian historians and politicians.

Another big controversy is related to the commentary of Alexander Dyukov, a politically active Russian historian who has severely criticized *The Soviet Story*. Dyukov (*The New Chronicles*, 2008) has admitted: “After watching two thirds of the film, I had only one wish: to kill its director and to burn down the Latvian Embassy.” He has also published a bilingual book (in English and Russian) in which he refutes and debunks many false facts and misrepresentations that, in his opinion, appear in the film (see Dyukov, 2008). Along with other critics and supporters, Dyukov is obviously the part of a public outcry, caused by *The Soviet Story* and shaping the reception of documentary in Russia and elsewhere. Similarly to the discussions about the proper definition of the genre of film, Dyukov is also exposed to identity questions. Editors who have criticized an extensive quotation from Dyukov in the article highlight the fact that he is far from being a professional historian and that he is polemicist whose opinions do not deserve to be represented in the *Wikipedia* article. Incidentally, the Republic of Latvia has added Dyukov to the list of *persona non grata* and he is prohibited from entering Latvia.

Dyukov’s advocates, in turn, argue that he holds an academic degree in history and is well known as an opinion leader concerning historical issues in the Russian media. The controversy around Dyukov has caused a heated debate among editors about *Wikipedia* content creation with respect to the rule of neutral point of view (NPOV).<sup>10</sup> Critics have argued that by giving undue weight to Dyukov’s opinions, some editors have violated the principle of NPOV, whereas opponents insist that NPOV and other related *Wikipedia* rules are violated by intentionally constraining and erasing Dyukov’s opinion from the article.<sup>11</sup> This controversy around Dyukov is vividly depicted by two following excerpts:

One might argue that Dyukov, as an historian, should be included in the “scholarly views” section; my answer to this is that from what I’ve seen of Dyukov [...] is that he is more engaged in *publitsistika*, than serious scholarship. Show me a reference to any article he has published in recent years in a reputable, peer-reviewed academic journal (e.g. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Cahiers du monde russe*, *Osteuropa*, or *Voprosy istorii*), and I might change my mind .../Zalktis 12 June 2008/

Vecrumba continues to revert an article, removing NPOV characteristic of Dyukov as “historian” (he’s holding an advanced degree in history) and adding lengthy description of his views as sacrilegious (clearly POV). Let’s discuss Dyukov’s views on WP page devoted to him (the page is one click away), as currently he enjoys the dubious distinction of being the only commentator of this propaganda piece who’s views are advertised./206.186.8.130, 22 July 2008/

Following Dyukov’s criticism of *The Soviet Story*, some Wikipedians strive to introduce new evidences which, allegedly, show how the film misrepresents particular moments in Soviet–Nazi relations. Apart from procedural disagreements, *Wikipedia* editors implicitly demonstrate that not only accuracy is at stake here. As a matter of fact, the division lines are much deeper when we look at how competing editors present each other. On one hand, we may notice an anti-Baltic group of editors, who concentrate on creating a somewhat negative context for the film and who draw attention to incorrect facts and interpretations that misrepresent the Soviet period. On the other hand, a significant part of active editors could be similarly qualified as advocates for the official Baltic perspective on the Soviet period that largely overlaps with the perspective that dominates in other Western (European, North American) historiographies. These obscurely diverging online identities may eventually lead to the same hegemonic representations of the past that intertwine *YouTube* comments.

## Conclusion

Since 2008, *The Soviet Story* has been remediating history by using a rigid and self-sufficient narrative that is characteristic of extremely normative discourse. This normativity, as I have suggested, emanates from the hegemonic anti-Soviet representation of Stalin’s dictatorship. The anti-Soviet representation that is so overtly manifested in the documentary is essential to memory politics in many post-communist countries, especially the Baltic states. Moscovici (1988: 221) has argued that hegemonic social representation is uniform and coercive by nature and prevails implicitly in all symbolic and affective practices. Since hegemonic representation is vital for one’s collective identity, the denial of anti-Soviet representation elicits various self-protection strategies. Moreover, hegemonic representation often *finds* its counterpart, a polemical representation of the past that, in turn, has crucial value for another (competing) collective identity.

Hegemonic representations constrain the potential of transnational SNS to be places of “cosmopolitan empathy” (Beck and Cronin, 2006). Yet, the case of *The Soviet Story* does outline a room for an emancipated digital agency that may avoid the effects of mutually exclusive rigid representations and that may advance the creation of the mutually beneficial historical representation. In each of the SNS analyzed in this article, the digital agency largely depends on the specifics of the community of practice. In *YouTube*, aggressive discourse surrounding *The Soviet Story* has provoked users to reflect on reconciliatory options. That is, although a belligerent attitude dominates *YouTube* comments, a range of commentators have looked for or have implicitly highlighted the *topoi* where reconciliation might take place. Reconciliation is never a ready-made or linear solution; it is always attainable merely within dialogical relations. Only through conversation, which emancipates the meaning of particular historical period, can the borders of

hegemonic representations of the Soviet period be shifted; only via sharp and sometimes humiliating wrangling can YouTubers expand their entrapped views by admitting that the condemnation of Stalinism and the recognition of transnational suffering from Stalinism are two key tenets of reconciliation. For Wikipedians, however, the emancipation of hegemonic representation results from procedural consensus. Ultimately, debates, which are an essential part of digital agency, and compliance with *Wikipedia* guidelines, allow editors to agree to a certain extent concerning a shared story about The Soviet Story.

In this article, I have also concentrated on how various institutionalized online practices and themes organize memory work of YouTubers and Wikipedians; how they advance or hamper the discursive elaboration of The Soviet Story and remediation of the history of the 1940s. I have observed two different communities of practice and accordingly two types of networked memory work as well. Figuratively speaking, *YouTube* resembles an Irish pub where everyone can quarrel about nearly anything and in any manner concerning an historical controversy, thus experiencing what Knudsen and Stage (2012) describe as “the messy and unfinished chaos of democratic and affective energies” (p. 14). In contrast, *Wikipedia* represents a Habermasian coffeehouse where clear and rational guidelines define discussions (Habermas, 1989). Nevertheless, with regard to The Soviet Story, each of communities more or less explicitly splits into conflicting mnemonic camps. A common feature of both SNS is a relatively small and somewhat experienced group of memory agents who participate in discourse about the documentary. These distinctive online memory agents seem to be geopolitically and nationally inclined individuals rather than disinterested enthusiasts of SNS.

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## Notes

1. A national conservative ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_conservatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_conservatism)) political group of the European Parliament active between 1999 and 2009.
2. By 1 October 2013, Trailer 1 was viewed 204,146 times, and it had received 1818 comments, but Trailer 2 was viewed 64,166 times and had received 744 comments.
3. In particular, I have used external tools created by *Wikipedia* users Duesentrieb and Snottywong; see, respectively, Contributors to *Wikipedia* page “The Soviet Story” (n.d.). Available at: <http://tiny.cc/hnkpmw> and User Contribution Search (n.d.) Available at: <http://tiny.cc/ktkpmw> (both accessed 3 November 2012).
4. 20.6% of all changes are qualified as minor edits.
5. The documentary was shown during the war by Georgian TV channels.
6. Of course, one should always keep in mind that particular user could have used proxy server and his real location is elsewhere.
7. Editor Interaction Analyzer (n.d.). Available at: <http://toolserver.org/~snottywong/editorinteract.html> (accessed 3 November 2012).
8. Along with the English comments that predominate, some Latvian and Russian YouTubers have also posted comments in Russian (Rexixxxx, Neticigaistoms, Prof1, and Fedotof).
9. All *YouTube* comments are left in their original transcription.
10. NPOV means representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources. See *Wikipedia: Neutral point of view* (n.d.). Available at: <http://tiny.cc/1hrsnw> (accessed 3 November 2012).
11. It is important to emphasize that sources or *external claims* are one of the main ways how Wikipedians establish authority and reach alignment between conflicting interpretations (Bender et al., 2011).

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