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## Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia Television, cinema and the state Introduction

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# 1 Introduction

In the Alexander Gardens in Moscow, next to the Kremlin walls, stands a granite memorial obelisk. It was erected in 1914 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, but its intended eternal endurance proved short-lived. In 1918, as the Civil War raged across the territory of the former Russian Empire, the obelisk received a makeover. It was refashioned to correspond to the idols of the fledgling socialist state: the Imperial double-headed eagle at its crown was removed, and the inscribed names of the Romanov tsars were replaced with those of socialist revolutionaries and philosophers. Then, in 1966, it was relocated to the centre of the gardens to make room for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – a symbolic affirmation of the then emerging myth of the Soviet victory in the Second World War. And thus the obelisk stood, as the politically and socially revered idols of the Soviet state ceased to be worshipped and eventually that very state ceased to exist. By then, the names inscribed on the obelisk sounded foreign to the average person's ear; indeed, many belonged to Western European thinkers and proponents of the socialist cause.<sup>1</sup>

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in 2013 – a manifestly artificial anniversary that was nonetheless extensively marked – the obelisk was restored to its original state.<sup>2</sup> On 4 November, the Day of National Unity, the monument was unveiled and blessed by the patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill (Gundiaev). In his speech, the patriarch emphasised the symbolic significance of the restoration for the consolidation of national unity and, by extension, the future existence of the Russian state:

We cannot live divorced from our history, we cannot think that our state is little more than 80 years old or, as is sometimes said, little more than 20 years. We are heirs to a thousand-year history, and if we acknowledge this linkage to history, to times past, if we acknowledge our connection with the heroes of the past, then we are imbued with national consciousness and a sense of dignity, without which a nation [*narod*] cannot exist.

(Samsonova 2013)

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A similar sentiment was expressed by Sergei Ivanov, chief of staff of the presidential administration. He commented: ‘In commemorating this date today, and in unveiling this stele, we pay tribute to the Romanov dynasty and return to our roots ... . It is the continuity of history’ (Mel’nikov & Mal’tsev 2013).

The history of the obelisk and the significance attributed to its restoration in the statements quoted here is one of countless examples of how, in contemporary Russia, the state has sought to turn the past into a powerful symbolic resource. In the period since Vladimir Putin first became president in 2000, the Russian central government has increasingly actively engaged in such memory politics<sup>3</sup>: employing cultural memory to claim the political legitimacy of those in power, as well as discredit all forms of political opposition (e.g. Laruelle 2009; Miller 2012; Sherlock 2007; Sherlock 2011; Vázquez Liñán 2010). The rhetorical use of the past has since become a defining characteristic of Russian politics.<sup>4</sup> The government’s strategy of memory politics has aimed to create a continuous narrative of a Great Russia (*velikaia Rossiia*) that has been under constant threat from domestic and foreign enemies. Drawing upon both the recent and distant past, it aimed to create a historical foundation for the regime’s emphasis on a strong state and centralised leadership. The Soviet past has become an integral part of this overarching narrative, in which the Putin era is presented as the logical next episode.

### Memory politics beyond the Kremlin walls

Yet the Russian government is not the only one who has used cultural memory to spread its ideas about how the Russian state ‘traditionally’ should be governed. Various societal, cultural and religious groups and organisations have put forward their own historically framed visions on Russian statehood. This book examines this societal dynamics of memory politics in contemporary Russia in the period 2000–2012. I analyse a wide range of actors, from the central government and the Russian Orthodox Church we already came across above, to filmmaker and cultural heavyweight Nikita Mikhalkov and radical thinkers such as Aleksandr Dugin. In addition, in view of the steady decline in media freedom since 2000 (Hutchings & Tolz 2015), I critically examine the role of cinema and television in shaping and spreading these narratives. Thus, this book aims to, on the one hand, gain a better understanding of the various means through which the Russian government practises its memory politics (e.g. the role of state-aligned media) and, on the other hand, sufficiently value the existence of alternative and critical voices that existing studies tend to overlook.

In this book I aim to answer the following set of interrelated research questions:

- 1 In what way have various actors in Russian society, as well as the state, mobilised cultural memory to legitimise, question or challenge the political regime?

- 2 Which cultural memories have been employed, by whom and to what end?
- 3 How have these actors drawn upon existing interpretations and representations of the respective cultural memories to shape their contributions to the debate on history and political legitimacy?

The way that scholars typically approach Russian memory politics – that is, through analysis of how the state employs references to history to support its legitimacy and frame its political course – suggests that the state is a proactive and dominant player in these ‘memory games’ (Mink & Neumayer 2013). These studies allow the impression to persist that there has been no societal, political or cultural resistance to the regime’s claims. However, in every society, state and non-state actors at various levels contest with one another in efforts to provide that society with meaning in the present through representations of the past, and thus, with guidance to determine its political and ideological orientation towards the future. The same applies to twenty-first-century Russia. The state does not act in isolation. It is part of a complex socio-political process of negotiating the contemporary meaning of history and the political implications resulting from that meaning. The role played by non-state actors at the national level, both as accomplices in and as opponents to official memory politics, has thus far been insufficiently addressed. The differentiation between state and non-state actors in today’s Russia is notoriously murky: within the intricate maze of interactions between state officials, state-sponsored and ‘state-aligned’ persons and organisations, drawing a definite line between these two spheres is a near impossible task. In my usage of the terms, state actor should therefore be understood in its most concrete sense as referring to the actions and statements of the Russian government, state officials and so on. Non-state actor, then, refers to the grey zone beyond the state’s official structures and ranges from the ‘state-loyal’ to the outspokenly oppositional. It is the complexity of this grey zone and its manifold connections to and interactions with the state that I aim to explore.

In view of the decline since 2000 in the freedom granted to the media – including television (Hutchings & Rulyova 2009; Hutchings & Tolz 2015) – it is imperative to also examine how memory politics extends into the domain of mass media and popular culture. It is here, in television and cinema, that state efforts to control public opinion are most pronounced; they have been much less stringent, for instance, in relation to literature. To avoid oversimplifying the means through which (authoritarian) political regimes mediate their views, it is essential to critically examine cultural productions about history aimed at a mass audience. To gain strength, an interpretation of history has to be mediated at multiple levels of society. It is precisely the interplay between these levels, official and unofficial, that influences the potential effect of government-supported cultural memories. In this study I seek to address these gaps. My analysis covers the years 2000 through 2012, a turning point after which the state’s memory politics changed substantially (as I will

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elaborate on shortly), and refers to earlier and subsequent developments wherever relevant.

To accommodate the inclusion of non-governmental actors and the sphere of popular culture, I develop an alternative approach to memory politics. Here, I define the latter concept as the mobilisation of cultural memory to put forward political claims and, in particular, to propagate historically informed visions of what constitutes ‘traditional Russian’ state governance. Memory politics is thus conceived as not just a political but also a *social* process of negotiating the meaning of the past – a process in which the state, one must add, has a disproportionately large stake. I seek to move away from static conceptualisations of memory politics – such as those guiding studies that chronicle acts of memory politics and explain their meanings – towards a dynamic model: a conceptualisation that includes other societal and cultural actors operating at the national level and that can shed light on the dynamic development of memory politics over time and across the political and socio-cultural spectrum. I offer an alternative approach that, looking beyond the Russian state’s apparent hegemony on memory in the public domain, can uncover divergent or competing voices in the national public discourse.

On the basis of four extensive thematic case studies and one smaller case study, I demonstrate, first, how the state has relied on memories with rich histories of cultural representation and political instrumentalisation to portray itself as traditional. Yet the accumulated meanings of these constellations of memory greatly increase their subversive potential by providing access points for the formulation of a historically framed political critique. Second, I argue that non-state actors have played a highly significant role in memory politics during this period. Moreover, the behaviour of the government in this respect should in some cases be characterised as reactive rather than proactive and shows clear signs of continuous re-evaluation and adaptation.

The history of the memorial obelisk and the framing of its recent renovation exemplify the three aspects of contemporary Russian memory politics that are central to my argument in this study. The first aspect is the emphasis on the *continuity of Russian history*. In direct response to the definite break with the past favoured by Boris Yeltsin’s regime during the 1990s, to which I will return shortly, Putin’s memory politics in the new millennium has sought to reintegrate the Russian Federation into an extended historical narrative. Second, the memorial obelisk illustrates the *palimpsestic layering* of this memory politics – how contemporary memory culture (implicitly and explicitly) engages with and builds upon previous symbolic practices and their visual, narrative and material traces. In this particular case, the act of restoration was actually presented as an ‘un-layering’ of memory, as a correction of the (supposedly unrighteous) Soviet appropriation of the monument. In the words of Patriarch Kirill, by restoring the names of the Russian tsars to the obelisk, ‘the most historically unjust action [was] corrected’ (Samsonova 2013). The patriarch’s phrasing brings me to the third aspect, namely that, in contemporary Russia, memory politics goes beyond claiming

the existence of a state-oriented tradition to legitimise the current political regime. It is equally preoccupied with *reclaiming lost traditions of remembrance*. By framing essentially new symbolic acts as the continuation of commemorative practices that were forcibly abolished in Soviet and post-Soviet times, the state pretends to undo past damages rather than impose its own memory regime.

Two important media domains fall beyond the scope of my investigation. With regard to television, I have chosen to exclude television journalism. Journalistic coverage of historical topics, for instance concerning exhibits or special events, or around commemorative dates, is controlled from the top down to a fairly large extent. Therefore, I only note when coverage deviates in important ways from the state-supported narrative. Moreover, the relation between the Kremlin and national media outlets during this period is extensively covered in the literature (e.g. Oates 2006; Arutunyan 2009; Beumers et al. 2009; Hutchings & Rulyova 2009; Burrett 2011; Schimpfossel & Yablokov 2014; Hutchings & Tolz 2015). The role of non-journalistic television in memory politics, such as the television series and documentaries analysed in this study, has largely been neglected. Yet these programmes' characteristics – their longer playing time, which allows for the development of an argument, their rich associations of genre, their extensive use of stylistic devices and an emotionally persuasive soundtrack to support particular interpretations of historical events, and so on – make them particularly adept at creating lasting memory images. At the same time, these precise characteristics can introduce ambiguities and make it difficult to control the exact meaning of their messages. This merits in-depth examination. Second, my analysis of online memory discourses is limited. I use online forums to (retrospectively) assess audience reception of the cinema and TV productions that I am analysing. Yet since my research is focused on the competition between the state and the various non-state actors that operate at the national level – the political and cultural elite, if you will – rather than with local or grassroots developments, a comprehensive examination of these online memory discourses lies beyond the scope of this study.

In what follows I will first sketch the development of memory politics as the Russian state has practised it since 1991. This brief discussion of the main trends in governmental policy serves as a necessary introduction and background to the multi-actor analyses in the case studies. Then, I will summarise the most important trends in historical programming for both the big and small screens, as well as key developments in state policy regarding television and film production. The final section describes this study's methodology and outlines the book's structure.

## **Governmental memory politics in post-Soviet Russia**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union made suddenly obsolete the Communist meta-narrative that had previously guided all aspects of political, economic,

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cultural and personal life. State collapse created a rupture between the Soviet past and the still unknown path to the future. The historic events that the population had commemorated and the Soviet myths that had guided their interpretation of the world and themselves were rejected, but the search for viable substitutes proved a complicated process. For many Russians, their newly acquired democratic freedoms were scant consolation for the loss of state-sponsored services, overall stability and societal solidarity. Having lost its Soviet empire, Russia found itself still at the beginning of the process of building a nation. That the Communist meta-narrative was essentially a historical narrative, based on the assumption that communism was the final stage of historical development, intensified the cultural impact of its being disavowed (Yurchak 2006). The loss of Communist teleology occasioned an acute search 'for its substitute, for another convincing plot of Russian development that will help make sense of the chaotic present' (Boym 2001: 59). During the 1990s, political and cultural elites proved unable to fill this void with new coherent narratives of national identity (Tolz 2001; Smith 2002). The regime of Yeltsin, in fact, based its political legitimacy on historical discontinuity by rejecting the Soviet period in its entirety. With a lack of historical examples to draw on (the autocratic tradition represented by tsarist Russia was thought to be as unsuitable as Soviet communism), the government framed the extensive reforms of the 1990s within a narrative of Western ideals of capitalism and democracy.

Only in response to the increasing popularity of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which actively mobilised the Soviet past in its campaigns, did the state reluctantly become involved in memory politics. The 50th anniversary of the victory in World War II was publicly commemorated in 1995, albeit modestly in comparison to similar celebrations staged more recently.<sup>5</sup> Following Yeltsin's re-election in 1996, the government took more concrete steps. Acknowledging that social cohesion needed a 'national idea' to compensate for a lack of ideology, the government established a commission to formulate an 'idea for Russia'. The initiative, which was unable to produce a viable result, is indicative of the overall failure of the state to coherently and effectively engage history to its advantage (Smith 2002: 178).

As Kathleen Smith notes, 'toward the end of his second term [...] Yeltsin wanted to promote stability and reconciliation, but without encouraging historical amnesia' (idem: 179). His successor, Vladimir Putin, held on to the former of these elements, but took a far more permissive stance towards the latter. Cherry-picking his way through recent and distant history alike, he set as the main goal of governmental memory politics the restoration of national pride. Tapping into, on the one hand, persistent popular sentiments of uncertainty and national inferiority (Oushakine 2009) and, on the other, increasing nostalgic tendencies with regard to both Soviet and imperial pasts, the regime now showed itself to be acutely aware of the political usefulness of historical symbolism. Within Putin's first year in office, he settled all the major disputes over state symbolism, which had dragged on for most of the

1990s. Most significantly, the Soviet national anthem was reinstated. Its new lyrics were written by Sergei Mikhalkov, who also composed the original lines dating to the 1940s, as well as their de-Stalinised version from the 1970s. This symbolic act set the tone: rather than harking back to one particular period in history, the various and seemingly incompatible stages of the development of Russian statehood – tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet – were reconceived as integral parts of its history. As Marlène Laruelle rightly points out,

[w]hile the desire to regain the geopolitical power lost in 1991 is obvious, these symbols have not been restored purely and simply for their ideological value – communism itself has not been rehabilitated – but because they are part of a cultural background common to the entire population and are seen as an indication of normalcy.

(Laruelle 2009: 155)

In other words, the recognisability of the constitutive elements of state symbolism is key.

Memory politics intensified especially around 2005 (Horvath 2013; Miller 2012). This was part of the state's response to the colour revolutions that ended in several regime changes in and beyond the post-Soviet region, including in neighbouring Georgia and Ukraine. The Kremlin took notice as a wave of peaceful protest swept across the former Soviet space and, fearing that something similar would happen in Russia, responded accordingly. It initiated a 'preventive counter-revolution' that repressed societal groups that could potentially form a support base for revolution (most notably, non-governmental organisations) and, at the same time, engaged in proactive mobilisation – for instance, by means of patriotically oriented youth movements (Horvath 2013: 5–7).<sup>6</sup> The campaign's ideological underpinning was the idea that 'Russia's sovereignty was menaced by Western efforts to foment a revolution and impose 'external rule'' (idem: 6). In this narrative, opposition groups were branded as cat's paws of foreign forces seeking to undermine and destroy the Russian state. The intensity of this wave of official memory politics peaked between 2007 and 2010. Among other measures, the government supported the 2007 textbook *History of Russia: 1945–2006* written by Aleksandr Danilov and Aleksandr Filippov, which caused an international scandal for referring to Stalin as an 'effective manager', and, in 2009, Medvedev signed a decree to set up a Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History (Miller 2012; Sherlock 2016). This commission was dissolved in early 2012. During this period, conflicts concerning the interpretation of history regularly flared up between Russia and neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Nikolay Kuposov correctly points out that, as relations with the West improved, 'aggressive memory politics [became] inappropriate' (Kuposov 2011b). President Medvedev now 'unambiguously condemned Stalin's crimes, declared the memory of the repressions to be as "sacred" as that of the heroic



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exploits during the Second World War, and attempted to liberate the story of the war from the taint of neo-Stalinism' (ibid.). The repositioning with regard to Stalin did not mean, however, that there was an abandonment of memory politics. Quite the contrary. The 2010 Victory Day Parade in Moscow, marking the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II, was the largest parade held in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While the format of the parade changes somewhat from year to year,<sup>8</sup> it has since retained its symbolic importance as (one of) the principle patriotic events of the year (Lutz-Auras 2012; Malinova 2017). In addition, with several 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, as I will address in chapters 3 and 5.

Although this study covers the years 2000–2012, it should be emphasised that the intensity of memory politics has not abated since then. On the contrary, the state has stepped up its mobilisation of history, in particular the memory of the Second World War, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Putin's return to the presidential office in 2012 also signalled a shift towards a more ethnonationalist interpretation of Russian national identity. The Russian government started to 'deliberately blur the boundaries between the civic *rossiiskii* and the ethnic *russkii* identities. The civic identity has become more explicitly Russian, with the Kremlin holding up the Russian language, culture and traditional values as the core of this identity' (Blakkisrud 2016: 267. Italics in original). This marked departure in the state's identity politics and mobilisation of memory substantiates my decision to view the start of Putin's third presidential term as a turning point in the development of memory politics and to limit my analysis to the years 2000–2012.

If we look more closely at which narrative frameworks have been employed, it becomes clear that a variety of historical references have been used 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. To some extent, politically useful cultural memories have been employed interchangeably; different historical images or narrative frameworks were employed to deliver more or less the same political message. Still, as will become clear from the case studies (in particular, those of chapters 3 and 5), one can discern significant shifts in preference for certain cultural memories. Moreover, the state's use of history can be categorised according to two (at times interconnected) core ideas. The first constellation of narratives aimed to promote the concept 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.

A second group of narratives established a lineage of 'great Russian reformers'. This lineage includes familiar faces such as Peter the Great and Aleksandr II, but also newcomers such as the prerevolutionary prime minister Petr

Stolypin (see chapter 3). Connected to the latter trend is the much wider debate concerning ‘Russian’ models for modernisation. The paradoxical central claim of the state’s memory politics can thus be summarised as modernisation through restoration and preservation. Despite the apparent simplicity and appeal of such an aim, it is by no means self-evident what it actually means to reform and modernise the state in a way true to Russia’s ‘natural’ predisposition to a certain type of governance. However much the Kremlin would prefer it to be otherwise, it has not been the only one to put forward its views on how Russia can be modernised ‘in a Russian way’. Competing views abound, albeit with differing measures of sophistication, leverage and general political and societal impact (see chapter 4 and, in particular, chapter 6).

The understandings of the development of Russian history underlying official memory politics on the one hand and oppositional narratives about the (predestined) nature of governance in Russia on the other are predicated on different dichotomies. While the state interprets the dramatic turns in history to be alternations of periods of chaos and order, its opponents view them as cycles of relative freedom (e.g. the Thaw, Perestroika) and repression (e.g. Stalinism, Stagnation and, by extension, ‘Putinism’).<sup>9</sup> The tension resulting from these diametrically opposed interpretations of historical development lies at the heart of the debates I discuss in the case studies: order and repression appear to be two sides of the same coin. The fragile balance between the two is what is at stake in virtually all discussions about current and future Russian politics.

### **History on the small and big screens**

As was already noted, from the beginning of Putin’s first presidential term, the state has steadily expanded its control over the media (Beumers et al. 2009; Hutchings & Tolz 2015). While journalism remains the primary target of such restrictive measures, historical fiction and nonfiction have also been affected as the state’s efforts to promote patriotism have intensified. Indeed, as Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz argue,

One of the Kremlin’s key motivations for imposing its grip on television broadcasting was to promote its own vision of a powerful Russian state with a unity of patriotic purpose and an enviable cultural history spanning the imperial and the Soviet periods.

(Hutchings & Tolz 2015: 73)

The reason why television in particular was chosen to serve ‘as the propaganda tool of a powerful, centralizing state’ (idem: 73) is self-evident: for an overwhelming majority of Russians, television continues to be the main source of information. According to polls conducted by the Levada Centre, 71 per cent of respondents listed state TV channels as their primary news source in 2012, while an additional 7 per cent relied on private TV channels,

including NTV, a channel loyal to the state (Levada Centre 2015: 123).<sup>10</sup> When respondents were permitted to mention multiple sources of information, the percentage is even higher: 94 per cent mentioned television among their primary sources in 2009 (Levada Centre 2016: 166). This figure has since decreased somewhat yet remains high at 86 per cent in December 2016 (Volkov & Goncharov 2017). During the period covered by this study, the influence of the Internet was still limited. In 2011, only 6 per cent of respondents listed the internet as their primary source of information, a share that increased to 15 per cent by 2012 (Levada Centre 2015: 123). Although state efforts to influence film production have long tended to be more covert and indirect, a marked tendency towards establishing far-reaching control over the industry can be observed (I will return to this point shortly).

State-aligned TV channels and the Russian film industry have been prolific suppliers of historical narratives.<sup>11</sup> Driven by the popularity of historically themed productions with the Russian audience, this development was facilitated by increasing budgets – in part attributable to advertising revenue – and the rapid professionalisation of the industry. Various formats and genres have been used to delve into the Russian past: from blockbusters and art house films, documentaries and docudramas to TV series, documentary series and talk shows. While a significant portion of these productions concern the Soviet period, other periods of Russian history have been far from neglected. With regard to television, the genre of the historical documentary series deserves specific mention. Some of these series ran for several years. *Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze (Istoricheskie khroniki c Nikolaem Svanidze, 2003–2013)*, for instance, was broadcast by the Rossiia channel for over a decade. Each episode was dedicated to one year in Russian history, covering the years 1900–1993. The historical investigation series *The Searchers (Iskatel'i)* has been running weekly episodes on the Kul'tura channel since 2010. Until he was dismissed from NTV, the journalist Leonid Parfenov produced a popular and influential documentary series called *The Other Day 1961–2003: Our Era (Namedni 1961–2003: Nasha era, 1997–2003)*. Finally, the historical talk shows *The Trial of Time (Sud vremeni, 2010)* and its successor *The Historical Trial (Istoricheskii protsess, 2011–2012)* were as controversial as they were popular (and, for that reason, will be discussed in chapter 6 and, as a case in their own right, chapter 7).

Opinion polls conducted by the Levada Centre give us insights into the popularity of the different genres of history television and film in the years 2000–2012, and their potential impact on popular opinion. Respondents were asked what types of shows they watched 'often/most often'. Comparing the results from, respectively, 2002 and 2011, 81 (61) per cent of Russian viewers often watched TV films;<sup>12</sup> 68 (37) per cent regularly tuned into Russian-produced TV series; and 24 (14) per cent of viewers frequently watched shows about history (Levada Centre 2012: 262).<sup>13</sup> Among the Russian TV series, historical topics were quite popular: in 2011, 17 per cent of respondents enjoyed watching 'historical/historical-action/costume melodrama', 15 per

cent regularly watched melodramas set in the recent Soviet past, while another 12 per cent turned on their televisions for historical series about Russian history, historical events and personalities. TV series set in the past were still surpassed in popularity, though, by police detective shows (32%), contemporary melodramas (21%) and criminal dramas (20%) (Levada Centre 2012: 264). Regarding film, in 2009 and 2011 respectively, 20 (21) per cent of respondents indicated a preference for historical and costume films, 9 (7) per cent enjoyed films about heroes and important individuals, while 9 (10) per cent indicated that they watched scholarly/educational films about history, culture or art. By comparison, 35 (36) per cent of respondents expressed their liking for detective movies and action films, 32 (34) per cent for romantic films or melodramas, while 37 (33) per cent mentioned comedy among their favourites (Levada Centre 2012: 252).

The ways the state has tried to promote the output of historical film and television productions, as well as to influence the particular interpretations of the historical events they depict, roughly fall into two categories: measures aimed to stimulate and measures aimed to restrict. For both strategies, controlling the flow of funds is the most evident and efficient means to achieve their aims. Yet changes to the institutional conditions of production (e.g. measures that impact distribution and broadcasting) can also greatly influence the types of projects that make it onto the big screen. Jasmijn van Gorp has analysed the correlation between the government's film policy, which includes state subsidies, and the production of 'national' films – that is, films that contribute to nation-building – between 1991 and 2005 (Van Gorp 2011). She demonstrates that in the period 2000–2005, the state actively tried to stimulate the production of such national films through a five-year plan issued by the Ministry of Culture. On occasion, the ministry organised competitions to solicit films on particular topics (a type of *goszakaz*). Van Gorp argues that these measures were effective primarily through how they influenced filmmakers' 'common sense'. Provided with an economic incentive, they were tempted to make films that would satisfy the ministry's criteria and therefore be eligible for state support. Paradoxically, the direct calls did not always result in the actual production of a film. For example, as Van Gorp illustrates, while during the years 2001–2005, 11 films were produced about the Second World War (of which seven received state support), an advertised commission for a film on the same topic in 2004 failed to produce a result. The availability of state funding, she concludes, therefore appears to have worked as an indirect system of state commission.

The voluntary pragmatic conformity to governmental preferences identified by Van Gorp persisted after 2005 and indicates how state control over film production during these years can be difficult to prove. Indeed, as Greg Dolgoplov asserts,

[a]lthough the attraction of conspiracy theories is undeniable, it would be wrong to consider that all these positive subjects are 'ordered' from the

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top as the outcomes tend to be authorially messy and ‘dirty’. [...] Putiner cinema and television drama is best defined by a heterogeneous ‘dirty’ base that supports broad genre variety, an indigenization of Western formats, a decline in experimental art house cinema, and a resurgent populism based on retro-oriented blockbusters and a banal, domesticated national consciousness in tele-serials and soap operas.

(Dolgoplov 2008)

My analyses of a wide variety of TV and cinema productions in the case studies support Dolgoplov’s assertion.

In 2009, the system of financial support for the film industry was drastically reformed. The newly established Federal Fund for Social and Economic Support to National Cinematography, or *Fond Kino*, was assigned the allocation of most of the available funds. The remainder is allocated by the ministry itself in support of the so-called leaders of national film production (whose criteria determining ranking is unclear) and through competitive thematic calls (Ziborova 2013). In both 2010 and 2011, the call mentioned, for instance, ‘films of historical, military and patriotic content, developing a sense of pride in one’s country,’ as well as a similar theme regarding documentary film (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation 2010; Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation 2011). The structural reorganisation involved a significant change in the composition of the councils overseeing the distribution of funds. After the restructuring only a few film professionals were left among their ranks, their places now occupied by bankers, vice-ministers, chairmen of the boards of directors for major media holdings and other people ‘wielding substantial financial and political leverage’ (Ziborova 2013: 74). The council at the Ministry of Culture responsible for the allocation of funds was headed by (then) Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, leaving little doubt about the direct correspondence between political preferences and subsidised projects. For a film to be completely free from the implicit and explicit restrictions that are now connected to these streams of state funding, it has to be produced with exclusively private funds (Ziborova 2013: 75).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to direct funding and the stimulation of pragmatic self-censorship, the state has also exerted indirect control, for instance by placing individuals loyal to the Kremlin as heads of significant production and distribution companies (Pomerantsev 2014: 43–45).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, film and television production are increasingly mutually interdependent in Russia. Major historical films, in particular, are often released (in extended versions) as TV miniseries, premiering on TV not long after their cinematic releases. By producing and financing such productions, state TV channels have become yet another means to promote the release of films on certain topics. Simultaneous release on the big and small screens dramatically increases the audience reached by such productions. Stylistically, their impact has been exceedingly important. As Il’ia Kalinin correctly argues, Channel One and the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK, owner of, e.g., *Rossia 1* and *2* and *Kul’tura*) have

‘shaped the commercial format of patriotic cinema that now dominates domestic screens’ (Kalinin 2013).

The lack of alternative sources of funding (that is, of funds not connected in any way to state-aligned production companies, TV channels and other sources of direct and indirect governmental support) seriously restricts the number of independent productions. In chapter 5 I analyse one such independent film, *Boris Godunov* (Mirzoev, 2011). For now, it suffices to say that the person who sponsored this politically sensitive film funded it on the condition that his name would not be disclosed. The film also encountered some difficulties with distribution. The system of financing has thus acted as a restrictive tool within Russia’s increasingly state-owned media landscape in this period.

There has, though, been some opposition to the evident loyalty to the Kremlin shown by key individuals in the industry. The most significant development in this respect is the decision of a group of filmmakers to leave the Union of Cinematographers of the Russian Federation and establish their own independent union, Kinsoiuz, in 2010. In their founding statement ‘We don’t like it’, which collected more than 150 signatories, the protesting filmmakers explicitly oppose the Union of Cinematographers’ ‘imposed agreement of opinion, official patriotism and lackey-ness’ (*Istoriia Kinsoiuza* n.d.). Their discontent was directed mainly at the Union’s long-serving chairman, Nikita Mikhalkov, an Academy Award winner and a personal friend of Putin (on Mikhalkov, see also chapter 3). Among Kinsoiuz’s founders are the (internationally) acclaimed directors Aleksei German, Aleksandr Sokurov and Boris Khlebnikov.<sup>16</sup> While this split among filmmakers created a stir at the time it emerged, its overall effect upon the industry appears to be limited.<sup>17</sup>

## Methodology

In order to be able to study memory politics as a socio-cultural process involving governmental politics, societal actors of national importance and the sphere of cultural production, I adopt a case-study approach. Each case is dedicated to the remediation and political instrumentalisation of a particular cultural memory across the three domains. As will be described in detail in the next chapter, I depart from the theoretical conceptualisation of cultural memory developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann to frame and analyse the interdisciplinary subject at hand. In addition, I build upon the concept of remediation as it has been adapted for the study of cultural memory by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (see chapter 2). The selection of the cases is motivated, first, by the aspects of memory dynamics they allow me to explore. Taken together, the four major case studies represent as wide a variety of political, social and cultural actors as possible. The memory of the Time of Troubles formed the central narrative of state memory politics and has a particularly rich history. Putin himself advocated that the figure of Petr Stolypin be regarded as an exemplary political figure, but did so only after television

productions had prepared the ground. Stolypin's case is particularly revealing since, unlike other historical references used by the regime, there were no previous memory texts to build upon. The case of Aleksandr Nevskii provides insights into the memory politics of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), as well as the coinciding interests of the ROC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in favouring the medieval prince. Finally, the memory of Ivan the Terrible and the *oprichnina* offers a case that allows an exploration of how ultranationalist and fundamentalist Orthodox groups use cultural memory to put forth visions of Russian statehood that undermine current political structures.

My selection of cultural productions includes documentary and feature films, television series and TV shows. They were each chosen on the basis of one or more of the following criteria: 1) the example is a major project that involved substantial investment and/or was presented as an important event; 2) the persons and/or organisations involved warrant particular attention; and/or 3) the production had significant societal impact or sparked controversy. Consequently, my research is limited to TV channels with national coverage.

Since this study is also an investigation of the balance between the political arena on the one hand and television and cinema production on the other, I have selected cases that were sufficiently prominent in both domains. As a result, some important names did not make the cut. Catherine the Great has largely been absent on the cultural front, though this lack has recently been addressed with two major television series in the wake of the annexation of Crimea.<sup>18</sup> From time to time, political statements made reference to Peter the Great, but his memory was never as explicitly instrumentalised as, for instance, Petr Stolypin's.<sup>19</sup> One major TV series was broadcast about Peter in 2011, but this should be seen as the exception that proves the rule, as it were, of a further lack of symbolic investment.<sup>20</sup> Since my main objective is to gain insight into the various actors involved in memory politics and their interaction with one another, an examination of the reasons why these and other specific cultural memories were for the most part absent in this period is beyond the scope of this study.

The attentive reader will have noticed that the selected case studies all concern prerevolutionary Russian history. Obvious case studies, on Stalin or the memory of the Second World War, are missing. This decision, as well as being informed by my overarching aim of achieving a diverse sample of governmental, nongovernmental and cultural actors, results from the following considerations. First, the existing literature on Russian memory politics in the new millennium somewhat overstates the importance of these memories in this particular timeframe and often fails to place the regime's attitude towards the Soviet past in the context of other instrumentalised periods in history. The evidence provided by my case studies challenges the argument made by, for instance, Graeme Gill, that 'the pre-Soviet past has not been a major source of either symbolism or enthusiasm in post-Soviet Russian discourse (Gill 2013: 143). Contrary to Gill's assertion that, '[w]hile it may be an era of

general interest, pre-Soviet Russia has not generally been seen as a relevant model or guide for contemporary or future development' (Gill 2013: 143), I have found a pronounced political interest in the pre-revolutionary period both for framing policy decisions and for informing future policy. Second, the various episodes of Soviet rule tend to be conflated in order to argue that the Putin regime has taken an overall justificatory stance towards the Soviet past. While, indeed, the memory of the Second World War makes up one of the primary elements of patriotic symbolism (as Ludmila Lutz-Auras explores in her excellent study of its politicisation),<sup>21</sup> the state has been much more hesitant in associating itself with Stalin.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, I would argue that the prominence awarded to the victory of 1945 represents a revival of memory culture from the Brezhnev era, when the myth first came to serve this purpose (see Gill 2011), rather than sincere praise for Stalinism. Triumphs in war have proved to be particularly useful in serving as the basis for patriotic celebrations, and the victory in the Second World War just so happens to be the one that Russians were used to celebrating. The memory was 'the most 'politically usable' element of the collective past due to its previous institutionalization and its uncontested positive meaning', as Olga Malinova has pointed out (Malinova 2017: 65).

The regime's failure to come to terms with the crimes committed by the Soviet state continues to be a cause for concern (one that many excellent scholars have addressed). While I do not directly address this issue, the question of the permissibility of state violence against its own people occupies centre stage in the chapters on Ivan the Terrible and Stolypin. The legacy of the Soviet past features indirectly in yet another way. Indeed, one of my main arguments is that the rationale behind the recirculation of pre-revolutionary memory, e.g. by the Russian state, lies in the fact that these historical narratives had been actively used during the Soviet period (see chapter 2). Thereby, this study also sheds light on a particular aspect of the reworking of the Soviet past that has not received enough attention: the reappropriation of elements of Soviet history propaganda. Three of the cultural memories that I examine in the case studies had been instrumentalised by the Soviet state, and yet, as will become clear, contemporary memory politics engages differently with this legacy in each case. But with regard to the memory of Stolypin, the opposite is true. Lacking pre-existing symbolic representation, his political actions were, in fact, almost unanimously evaluated negatively by Soviet historians and politicians (see chapter 3). The contrasts between the cases therefore allow me to reflect on the importance of Soviet-era prefiguration.

Because this book is an interdisciplinary study, I use a wide variety of primary sources that fall roughly into the following categories: official governmental documents (including presidential decrees, policy documents and public statements); newspaper and journal publications accessed via the websites of their respective media outlets and the Integrum World Wide database; radio transcripts from *Ekho Moskvy*; documentary and feature films; various genres of television production; and online forums. My assumptions about the



television and film industry and, in particular, the ways the state influences them have also been informed by a number of interviews I conducted in Moscow in late 2014 and early 2015 (see List of interviews). The multi-disciplinary and cross-media methodology of this study enables me to accommodate both conformity to and contestation of official memory politics. This study thereby makes a contribution to the understanding of memory politics and, in particular, how governmental memory politics relates to societal and cultural memory practices and, to a certain extent, is constrained by them.

The structure of the book is straightforward. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research. The subsequent chapters present the four main case studies, each governed by a similar structure. The first part of each case study provides an overview of the historical development of the particular memory under consideration, including its representation in the arts, before turning to the analysis of the political, social and cultural actors involved in its contemporary mobilisation. The second part is dedicated to a discussion of key television and cinema productions, encompassing their production history and reception. Chapter 7 presents an additional small case study about the talk show *The Trial of Time*, used as a prism to examine the politics of television programming. Building upon the thematic case studies that precede it, this final chapter employs an analysis of the societal debate generated by the show as a stepping stone for a reflection on the interaction between the different levels of memory politics: the state and media and non-state actors, on the one hand, and the general audience whose perceptions they aim to influence, on the other. Finally, the Conclusion sums up my main findings and places them within the context of more recent developments in Russian memory politics.

## Notes

- 1 The names inscribed were the following: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Ferdinand Lassalle, August Bebel, Tommaso Campanella, Jean Meslier, Gerrard Winstanley, Thomas More, Henri de Saint-Simon, Édouard Vaillant, Charles Fourier, Jean Jaurès, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Petr Lavrov, Nikolai Mikhailovskii, and Georgii Plekhanov.
- 2 I would like to thank Marina Frolova-Walker for drawing my attention to the obelisk's refurbishing.
- 3 Scholars have proposed various concepts to describe the political practice of engaging with history, such as politics of history, history politics and historical politics. Within the context this study, however, I feel it is most appropriate to speak of memory politics (see also chapter 2).
- 4 Russia is not unique in this respect, however. A similar revival of memory politics can be observed across Eastern Europe. See, e.g., Miller & Lipman (2012); Mink & Neumayer (2013).
- 5 On the memory of the October Revolution, the 'Great Patriotic War' and Stalinism in the public discourse of the 1990s, see Koposov (2011a), Langenohl (2000), Lutz-Auras (2012).
- 6 On state-sponsored youth movements and the promotion of state patriotism, see Hemment (2015); Lassila (2014); Mijnsen (2014).

- 7 See, e.g., Torbakov (2011), Etkind et al. (2012), Brouwer (2016a).
- 8 See, e.g., Oushakine (2013).
- 9 For an example of the latter opinion, see Beard (2015).
- 10 The Levada Centre uses the following categorisation of TV channels. State TV channels: Channel One, Rossiia, Kul'tura, and regional channels that are part of VGTRK. Private channels: NTV, Ren-TV and other non-state-owned and commercial channels, including local and regional channels.
- 11 Books have also been a particularly prolific medium. Bookstores abound with (non-specialist) historical works of varying academic quality as well as historical fiction. A number of fiction writers, most notably Boris Akunin, are extremely popular and have gained significant social status and influence. Several of Akunin's works have been adapted to the screen, for instance *Turkish Gambit* [*Turetskii gambit*] (Faiziev, 2005) and *The State Counsellor* [*Statskii sovetnik*] (Iankovskii, 2005).
- 12 This figure includes both domestic and foreign film productions. On the basis of one of the follow-up questions, the proportion of domestic films appears to be greater than of foreign films. Comparing results from 2002 and 2011, 69 (59) per cent of respondents indicated a preference for Soviet films shown on television, while Russian films were similarly preferred by 66 (59) per cent. Foreign TV films were less popular: 37 (29) per cent of respondents indicated a preference for American films, 21 (10) per cent for Western European productions, 9 (6) per cent for Arabic and Indian films and 3 (2) per cent for Eastern European films (Levada Centre 2012: 263).
- 13 Although these percentages show a marked decrease between 2002 and 2011, this does not appear to be related to the particular genres: with the notable exception of the news (similar percentage) and genres that were not listed in 2002 (e.g. court shows and '*Dancing with the Stars*' types of programmes) all genres show a significant to dramatic drop in percentage. A possible explanation for this fact could be the diversification of television programming since 2002.
- 14 Until recently, the restructuring of the system did not necessarily preclude the production of state critical films, as is evidenced by the case of Andrei Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* (*Leviatan*, 2014) about the pervasiveness of corruption within the Russian bureaucracy, legislature and Russian Orthodox Church. Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii has made it very clear, however, that such 'anti-Russian' films will no longer be supported by state funds, regardless of the potential international success of a given project (promoting the international competitiveness of the Russia film industry is one of the explicit aims of film policy). See 'Vladimir Medinskii: "Leviatan" zapredel'no kon'iunkturen' (2015).
- 15 Peter Pomerantsev's widely discussed journalistic account about the structure of (in)direct control of media was confirmed by several of my interviewees.
- 16 The remaining founding members are: El'dar Riazanov, Iurii Norshtein, Daniil Dondurei, Aleksandr Gel'man, Vladimir Dostal', Vitalii Manskii, Andrei Proshkin and Aleksei German Jr. The current number of members exceeds 200.
- 17 This conclusion was supported by two of the persons I interviewed (Interviewee A; Interviewee D). Still, signing the petition was a highly symbolic act that, in turn, could translate into real-world consequences. Interviewee G, for example, related the story of a film director who was supposed to take part in the Moscow Film Festival as a special guest. However, when his name appeared among the signatories, the invitation was withdrawn; someone who is openly defiant of Nikita Mikhailov cannot appear as a special guest at the festival of which Mikhailov is the director. The tragedy of the situation was that the film director claimed his name was included erroneously: he had not signed the petition.
- 18 *Catherine* [*Ekaterina*] (Baranov & Sabitov, 2014); *The Great* [*Velikaia*] (Zaitsev, 2015). Catherine the Great is typically included in the manifold TV documentary

## 18 *Introduction*

series about the Russian tsars, yet since she is not singled out among them in any particular way this does not warrant a case study. Moreover, while she did make it to the finals of the TV show *The Name Is Russia*, her memory did not prove popular (see chapter 4).

- 19 The traditional image of Peter the Great as the ruler who sought to integrate Russia into Europe and modernise the country in emulation of the West is the most likely obstacle in this case. The way that his legacy is commonly perceived was too pro-Western to be of use to the Putin regime's narrative of Russia's 'unique path' of historical development.
- 20 *Peter the Great: The Testament* [*Petr Pervyi. Zaveshchanie*] (Bortko, 2011). During this period, Peter the Great appeared in a small number of films, including *The Sovereign's Servant* [*Sluga gosudarev*] (Riaskov, 2011) and *Russian Ark* [*Russkii kovcheg*] (Sokurov, 2002), but was never featured as their main subject.
- 21 Lutz-Auras (2012); see also Malinova (2017). On the symbolic meaning of Putin's personal involvement (or, 'performance') in the celebrations connected to the memory of the Second World War, see Wood (2011).
- 22 For an analysis of films about World War II, see, e.g., Liderman (2007).