when
the past
becomes a
weapon
the future
disappears

Jeanna   Kolesova

Essay   by   **Lilia**   **Yuldasheva**

The creek sick of speech
Told water it took no side.
The water sick of silence
At once began again to shriek.

—Gennady Gor

What should be kept in mind when speaking about collective memory and the politics of history?

The position, power, and responsibility of those who create it, I'd say. The fascinating thing about collectivity in the process of creating collective memorial policies is this: although it's called "collective," there are always highly specific subjects in charge. So who is performing unity and commonality? Modern memory politics is an outcome of World War II, which is itself, in turn, the natural outcome of the development of European nationalisms and nation-states. Thus, state and nation became intertwined, reflecting and reproducing each other to create memory politics.

The official historical narrative of any state is never, in fact, a multitude of histories woven into a common narrative, but rather an artificially constructed history that pretends to be common. It comes with a particular agenda and is created by the state, which aims for everyone to associate themselves with a certain "us." But who, exactly, is this "we"? . . .

Unity of any kind requires boundaries to exclude those who don't belong.

When we talk about national identity, the boundaries, remarkably, separate not only those belonging to other nations, migrants, and non-citizens but also many who would seem, by right of citizenship, to be part of the nation. This is the trick: in fact, the criteria for deciding who is worthy to fulfill the role of bearers of national memory and identity also include normativity, able bodies and minds, loyalty, and obedience. Those who are different are distorted, hidden, and erased from collective memory and "common" history.

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The ways of shaping and transferring memories are multiple.

Public memory makes use of celebrations, memorials, parades, and place-naming. Educational systems establish historical narratives, create a canon of historical figures worth remembering and erase others, and offer an interpretation model for young people to believe in. Mainstream art and literature create images that are worthy of being recorded and assured a place in history.
One can try to confront memory politics by creating varying discourses.

But alternative ways of remembering are also tools of resistance.

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Oral histories, personal narratives, family members' memories, evidence, embodied memory, and archives consisting of small details and objects are powerful forces in the struggle against the simplifications and distortions of unified versions of history.

You were telling me the story and your voice was breaking, and when I touched your shaking hand, your memories entered my body and became mine.

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What is so important about collective memory? It provides identity, unity, an explanation for events and the status quo, and intergenerational connection. It unites in terms of times and geographies.

Real experiences, felt viscerally and by many different bodies—the bodies of children, women, men, queer, disabled, ill, hurting, freezing, loving, scared, fueled with anger, anxiety, and hope, racialized, weak, small, tall, strong, depressed, displaced—these real experiences of historical events are being replaced by narratives that adhere exclusively to the symbolic order.

Thus, the body is excluded from history.

With the erasure of the body, the multiplicity of experiences, perspectives, and emotions disappears. This theft of experience and the violence of the symbolic over the real is an unnamed crime whose objective is to cover its traces and convince everyone of the unified reality it creates instead.

Let me refer to all of those who remember the stories of exclusion as "we."

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What can art practices do? Is it possible to bring us back to the memory—the very body of it?

When we speak of art, it should be noted that art itself plays a role in the politics of memory creation: it has all the responsibilities and tools to analyze the official narrative. Any form of social practice can be used in different ways and become absorbed by oppressive mechanisms, and art is no exception. Art creates heroic images as well as images of enemies and traitors, and these make up a triad in almost any war narrative. They rely on each other to show the audience with whom it should identify and what the consequences will be if one complicates things too much, gives in to doubt, or becomes a little too human (meaning weak) and eventually a traitor.

A politics of memory tries to imitate emotions and feelings with affective strategies: it allows the state to settle into our bodies. Affect works as a political means of contagion: it acts on bodies to form a single social body, a nation, a collective subject individuals can merge into by believing in what state ideology dictates. Art's objective can be to return emotions displaced by the official version of history and then replaced by the collective affects of pride and the victor's superiority.

The poem cited in the epigraph was written by Gennady Gor (1907–81) in Leningrad during the Nazi siege of 1942–44. Gor, born in a tsarist prison, was a poet who belonged to Leningrad's avant-garde circles of the 1930s, which were later claimed to be "formalist." In striking contrast to state-sanctioned, heroic "Blockade" poetry, in which the stoic body of the exemplary citizen triumphs over death, Gor's poems speak of famine, disease, madness, violence, and cannibalism. The poet captured the ongoing shock and horror of living in the besieged city awaiting death; his works were hidden for more than 70 years and first published in Russian in the early 2000s. This writing about the disaster, this evidence from within the catastrophe has changed the landscape of Russophone literature as well as the surface of memory of the war. The degree to which this voice and individual experience have contributed to cracking the stale narrative of the Blockade is due to its very singularity.

Overall, art is just one possibility for recognizing an absence, admitting the impossibility of unity when unity requires the erasure of so many.

Memory and history have much in common—both are filled with voids, gaps, and absences. Behind the histories we know are millions of other stories that have never been told, never entered the archives, never left a trace.
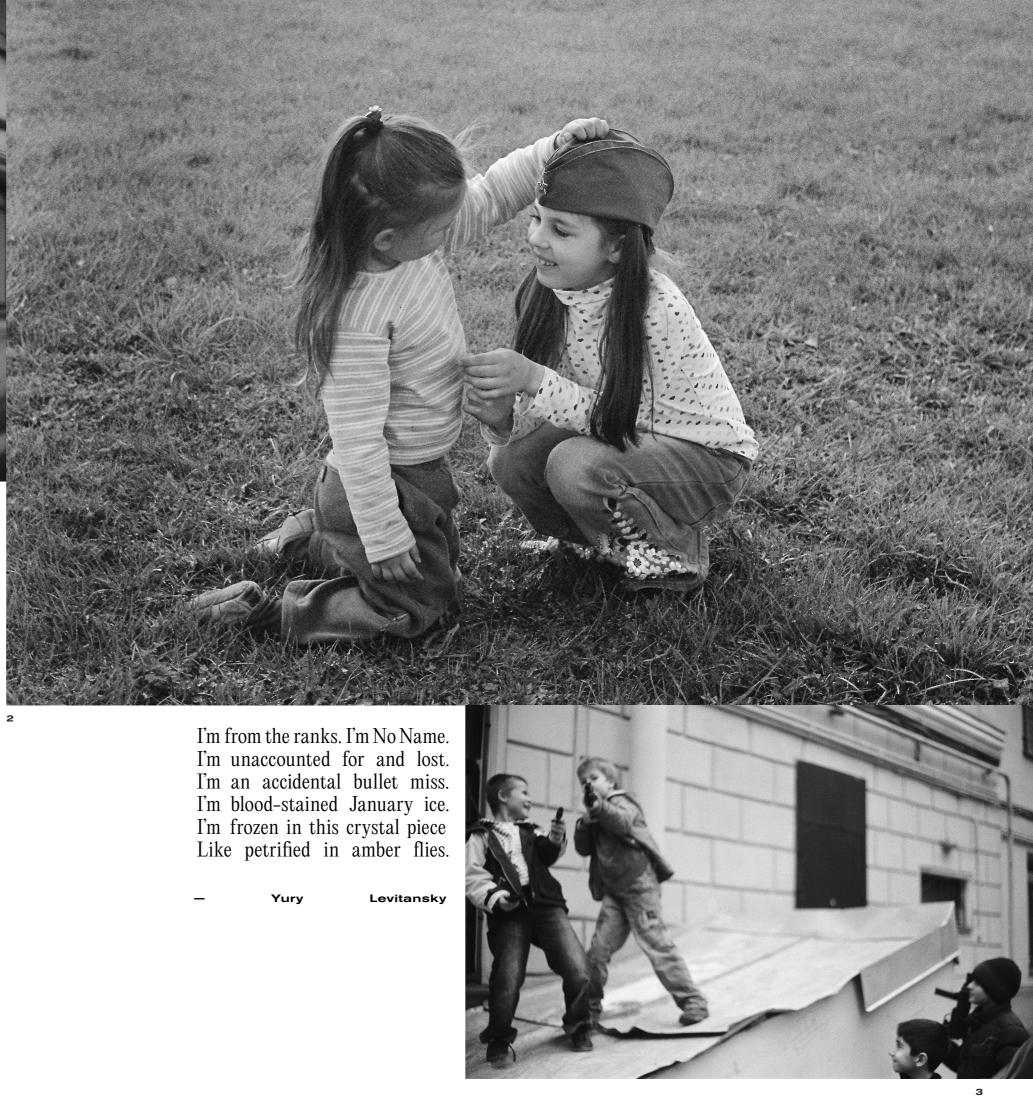
If there is any way to feel the dehiscence of grief, the reality of loss, the enormity of bereavement, it needs to be done, as maybe it is one of the most important boundaries of all. It allows us to embrace those we don't remember and cannot know. To become, to stay close to them.

When the Angel of History flies away and casts a parting glance at the ruins, let the ruins answer him with numerous gazes.

I remember being very proud, imagining myself in the place of veterans, imagining my own bravery and the will to die on a battlefield.

I'm from the ranks. I'm No Name.
I'm unaccounted for and lost.
I'm an accidental bullet miss.
I'm blood-stained January ice.
I'm frozen in this crystal piece
Like petrified in amber flies.

— Yury Levitansky

WW2 MYTH has been forming in the body of society for several decades. It is a complex process that involves many factors. One key factor is the manipulation of collective memory. You know, there is a golden rule of socio-chemistry that says: no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation.

Memory will always be the basis for the formation of substance; otherwise, the state cannot exist.

I remember my grandmother teaching me what to do if you fall into the swamp. I know how to survive the forest swamp. I do not know how to survive it in the village.

When I think of my village, I think of the swamp. The swampy sludge clings on to you from all sides. You try to get out, but as you move, it sucks you in. You want to scream for help, but the sludge fills your mouth and lungs, and spreads through your inner organs.

You sink into the mire and become part of it.

I hoped that the process of destroying an object of association destroys everything that happens and has happened in the present and the past.

My grandmother said she did not want to remember anything from her childhood, especially nothing related to war and victory. She got the medal only afterward, as an adult. It was given to those who worked in the factories during the war as minors.

She said war doesn't have a child's face.

Metals, minerals, and soil remember way longer than humans do. I can't destroy medals. I can't destroy memorials. I can't destroy a memory. But at least I can try to change it.

Biographies

Jeanna Kolesova (*1988 in Moorland Village, Russia) is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher. They studied documentary film and photography in St. Petersburg, interactive media at CalArts, and experimental film and new media at the Berlin University of the Arts. Kolesova belongs to various artistic-political groups. Their works reflect on the manipulation of history and information and the influence of imperial technologies on human and non-human bodies and landscapes. Kolesova's works have been exhibited at Kunstraum Kreuzberg in Berlin (2023), EMOP Berlin (2023), HYBRID Biennale in Dresden (2022), Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2021), and at the Photography Museum in Berlin (2021). They were awarded a KUNSTFONDS scholarship in 2024.

www.jeannakolesova.com

Lilia Yuldasheva is a non-binary researcher and cultural worker of mixed ethnicity, migrant experience, and culture. They were born in Uzbekistan and moved to Russia at the age of nine. Lilia is interested in watching landscapes from the windows of trains and buses, in ways of building connections and intimacy, and in thinking of a variety of ways to become a political subject. The most important identifications as such for Lilia are queer, anarchist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperial. Lilia is chronically depressed and is trying to stop masking it. They work in the media and cultural spheres and currently live in Berlin.

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Some phrases and sentences that occur throughout the catalogue are taken from the 2022 performative video lecture *Memory and War* and the two-channel video installation *Memory Is an Animal which Barks with Various Mouths*, 2023.

Colophon