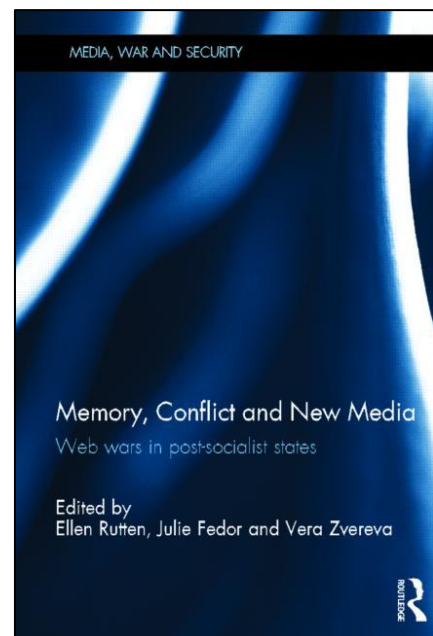# Reviews

Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States, edited by Ellen Rutten, Julie Fedor and Vera Zvereva. Routledge, 2013, pp 288, Paperback, GBP £30.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-63921-7. Language: English

At the time of writing this review, the Ukraine is in the midst of a full-blown war. Not a digital one, but a real one – with tanks, troops, lies, deceit, foreign invasion, separatists, official soldiers and the attendant international attempts to negotiate peace. This war also includes sanctions against Russia, thought to be the culprit behind the secessionist motivations of the Eastern Ukraine region. Why is all this important to a review of memory and conflict in the context of new media? For the simple reason than the real-life conflict is also all about memory. When reading the accounts in this edited volume I am flabbergasted that nobody saw the war coming. In hindsight, it seems so obvious.

The objective of this edited collection is to explore how digitally mediated memory takes shape in post-socialist states. Against the backdrop of the conflict in Ukraine, it becomes especially evident that memories may be digitally mediated, but are never only digital. Nor are they fictive, just because they are negotiated in an online or digital environment. The digital allows memories to be shaped, stored or entirely transformed. In the case of post-socialist states, these memories are collective, helping to form national identities. They often evoke strong sentiments used to legitimise actions and discussion. The present volume provides an array of examples that thickly describe the use and power of memories, furthering our understanding of the important role of the digital within contestations around history, identity and the quest for legitimation. Such contestation takes place within a world that, for all its interconnectedness, clearly remains bound to space and territory.

Memory, Conflict and New Media is divided into three parts, each dealing with a particular aspect of memory: 'Concepts of memory'; 'Words of memory'; and 'Images of memory'. Part One is comprised of five chapters that focus on how memories are presented and dealt with online. Most interesting are attempts by Galina Nikiporets-Takigawa as well as Alexan-

der Etkind to map memory with the aid of online tools such as Google's Ngram Viewer which employ statistical methods to excavate the hidden structures of memory through digitally stored sources. Other contributions discuss topics such as Romany memory or the Holodomor famine in Ukraine Twitter discourse. Chapter One, on Romany memory, is noteworthy for the way it deals with a culture that is not state bound, but indeed transnational.

Part Two of this collection revolves around the way the 'words of memory' become a topic of research and discussion – as key words, blog posts, Wiki-history entries or news stories. One telling example here is the way history and post-Soviet space are contested through the digital. Hélène Dounaevsky gives a compelling account of the Wiki edit wars on the entries of Russia and Ukraine in the nations' respective internet domains. Her piece illustrates that writing history can quite literally be conceived of as just that – writing one's own story. The edit wars on the Wikipedia entries show how historical knowledge is produced – how Wikipedia may be used as a laboratory in which the fluidity of digital content is a blessing, because it can be changed, and a threat for just that reason. Having read this article before the war in Ukraine began was unsettling, as if everything that appeared on the TV screen had been anticipated digitally. The chapter analysing news framing under conditions of conflict in the Russo-Georgian war provides yet another example of the uncanny prophetic dimension of the digital as a seismographic tool.

Part Three, 'Images of memory', begins with an article on the Crimean web war by Maria Pasholok. Here, she anticipates the actual 2013-2014 winter annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia. The described Crimean web war is fought with the use of digital maps – a means that was also used in pre-digital times to legitimise land claims and territorial belonging. Closing her argument, Pasholok compares the Crimea in this web war to non-space, as conceptualised by William Gibson. According to Gibson, cyberspace is a consensual hallucination – which is how Pasholok conceives of the Russian and Ukrainian segments of the internet in this web war. A common imaginary geography that did not remain quite so imaginary for one of the parties involved.

The section of the book on the 'images of memory' is intriguing to the extent that it highlights how images are used to portray memory or to fabricate new, alternative images and hence perceptions of the world or, more precisely, imaginary homelands or actual territories. Images become vital to memories, whether they come from computer games in which history is re-enacted and relived (Gernot Howanitz), or the plane crash of the Polish president Lech Kaczynski, forever embedded in the memory and digital media ecology surrounding Katyn (Dieter de Bruyn). Social media thus represent alternative forms of cultural memory, able to establish new readings of history, memory and the pasts long conserved within state doctrines.

The digital both confirms and challenges memories – this is what makes Julie Fedor conclude that post-socialist memories are not grim when viewed through the prism of digital media, but vibrant and heterogeneous. While I would partly agree with her conclusion that the book offers optimistic prognoses for the future, it remains to be seen what the digital can truly achieve, what alternatives it may provide and how memory once again becomes an actively contested area. Recent events have proven that web activity has real life consequences and does not have to be only virtual in nature. As Baudrillard pointed out long ago, 'the map

precedes the territory' – which in the case of the Crimean peninsula has quite literally become true.

Memory in post-socialist states, more than elsewhere in Europe, is a paradigmatic zone of contestation and a strong resource of national and ethnic mobilisation across existing state borders. The present volume assembles a set of brilliant contributions that I would consider crucial for scholars studying digital culture, ethnicity, and identity issues, or those concerned with how memory is used in new contexts and through new platforms. The authors and their articles have much to offer, both through their lucid examples, and their topical theoretical analyses which continually risk being reversed and superseded by events on the ground.

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