Everything for the Lulz: Historical Memes and World War II Memory on Lurkomor'e

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Abstract: The article explores interactions between digital media and cultural memory in post-Soviet countries by focusing on internet memes related to World War II. It introduces the concept of historical internet memes, which are groups of digital content units associated with a historical event or a personality. The article uses a selection of World War II memes from the online encyclopaedia of Russian web folklore, *Lurkomor'e*, to draw comparisons between historical and non-historical internet memes. By using a quantifiable approach, it investigates patterns in the origins, methods of dissemination, and functions of historical internet memes, and provides a basic framework for their future study. Finally, the article explores the role of human agency in historical meme-making by focusing on the role of the *Lurkomor'e* community in the production and dissemination of memes.

Keywords: Internet memes, historical memes, *Lurkomor'e*, World War II, digital memory, cultural memory, post-Soviet space.

Milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* [a billion shot personally by Stalin] is a phrase commonly used in historical discussions, which are plentiful in Russophone online spaces. The meaning of this phrase, however, is not straightforward: in contrast to the commonsense assumption, it is used not to stress the scope of Stalinist crimes, but to diminish it by exaggerating the number of victims beyond rational limits. While the origins of this tongue-in-cheek expression are blurry, it was presumably introduced in 2000s by the *Tynu40k Goblina* community, which is known for its pro-Soviet stance.[1] Since then, the phrase expanded across internet and attracted significant popularity among Russophone web users, who repackaged it through the variety of digital objects. While these objects varied from satirical poems to photoshopped posters, almost all of them were united in doubting the

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[1] The community established around the Oper.ru project, which was created by Dmitry Puchkov (also known as Goblin). A popular Russian blogger and translator, Puchkov became famous for producing humorous/profane

reality of Stalinist repressions and promoting the positive image of Stalin, often, in the context of World War II memory.

Unlike many other digital expressions of Stalin apologetics, the popularity of *Milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* turned it into an internet meme. Because of their intrinsic relationship with economic, social, and cultural logics of participation, internet memes encapsulate some of the most fundamental aspects of the Web 2.0 environment, which, as Limor Shifman argues, is itself dominated by 'a hypermemetic logic' (2014: 23). While this claim might seem exaggerated, a number of studies demonstrate how an exploration of internet memes highlights various aspects of contemporary web culture, including networked patterns of information dissemination (Bauckhage 2011), emerging forms of new literacies (Knobel and Lankshear 2007) and the behavioral practices of internet users (Davidson 2012). Furthermore, as memes are able to shape general mindsets both online and offline, their study can shed new light on how cultural and political identities are negotiated in the age of connective media (van Dijk 2013).

Up to now studies of cultural memory have demonstrated limited interest in internet memes; however, the growing interest in digital remembrance prompts us to revisit the lack of attention towards interactions between memories and memes. This suggestion is particularly important in the context of post-Soviet countries, where digital media form 'a pivotal discursive territory' (Rutten and Zvereva 2013: 2) for commemoration acts. According to Maria Morenkova, the successful propagation of historical visions in Russophone online spaces 'relies less on their scientific validity than on the ability of authors to make them more audible' (2012: 62). Such dependency can be traced back both to general trends of contemporary 'attention economy' (Davenport and Back 2002), where attention to information is valued more than information itself, and particular situation in post-Soviet countries, which are characterised by the overabundance of competing memories.[2]

Internet memes that are distinguished by impressive speed of dissemination and extensive reach are well suited to promoting historical visions online. The tendency to generate strong emotions, which is an intrinsic feature of cultural memories (Winter 2010), enhances these visions with potential virality and makes them even more likely to become memes (Berger and Milkman 2012). Building upon the work of Shifman (2014), who distinguishes political memes inside the larger body of internet memes, I propose to identify historical memes as a separate category of web content. Both political and historical memes are constituted by groups of digital content units, which share common features (e.g. content or form) and used for communicating group identities; yet, unlike political memes, historical memes are explicitly related to a particular historical event or a personality and often refer to existing memory practices by satirising, strengthening or propagating them online.[3]

In this study I examine one group of historical internet memes, namely, Russophone memes related to World War II (henceforth World War II memes). The choice of case study

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[2] See, for instance, works by Fedor, Rutten and Zvereva (2013), Blacker, Etkind and Fedor (2013), Bernhard and Kubik (2014).

[3] It is worth noting that his definition is rather simplistic, and is introduced for distinguishing historical memes content-wise. Further research is needed in order to develop it into a valid theoretical concept, but for now I will use it mainly for identifying materials for this study.

is based on the significant role of World War II memory in post-Soviet countries and, in particular, in Russia, where it constitutes one of the formative elements of national identity (Gudkov 2005). Similar to the Soviet period, when World War II memory was instrumentalised for legitimation of the Soviet political system (Hrynevych 2005), war memories are increasingly appropriated for mobilising public support for the current regimes in Russia and Ukraine (Kappeler 2014). World War II memory also remains an important factor of identity-building in other countries of the region, which after 1991 were caught in a series of "memory wars" (Blacker and Etkind 2013: 8), many of which originated from divergent interpretations of World War II legacy. While a number of studies point to the growing impact of digital media on how World War II is commemorated in Eastern Europe (de Bruyn 2010; Morenkova 2012; Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013), none of them explores the interactions between internet memes and World War II memory, even while the latter still shapes cultural and political identities in post-Soviet countries.

In order to investigate the role of World War II memes in post-Soviet online spaces, I shall use data from *Lurkomor'e*, the Russian online encyclopaedia of digital folklore and culture. *Lurkomor'e* was founded in 2007 by a small group of former Wikipedia editors, who decided to start their own project, originally imagined as an online encyclopaedia of popular culture (Khomak 2012). However, an influx of new contributors and the interests of the project's audience soon shifted its focus towards different manifestations of web folklore, including internet memes. This shift also led to the formation of what is known as *lurkoiaz*, a unique slang that has become associated with *Lurkomor'e*. *Lurkoiaz* absorbed earlier internet slang languages such as *jazyk padonkoff* and *kashchenism*,[4] mixed it with the jargon used among the founders of *Lurkomor'e*, and spiced the resulting mix with a few poorly translated or transliterated terms from Anglophone imageboards. The distribution of *lurkoiaz* among the audience of *Lurkomor'e* contributed to the growing popularity of the project and attracted additional attention to the wide range of subjects covered in the encyclopaedia.

In recent years, the extensive scope of *Lurkomor'e*, together with its authors' inclination to discuss controversial topics regardless of how offensive these topics are, has resulted in the addition of *Lurkomor'e* to Russia's internet blacklist.[5] However, in spite of ongoing legal concerns and a number of technical outages, *Lurkomor'e* remains among the most popular projects in the post-Soviet digital space. Currently, it is the 141st most visited site in the Russian segment of the World Wide Web, and one of the world's 3,000 most popular sites, according to the Alexa rating, with a daily audience of around 450,000 visitors.[6] While the scope of the encyclopaedia has expanded in recent years from popular culture and internet folklore to history, geography, and mainstream cultural and political events, *Lurkomor'e* remains the largest aggregator of Russophone internet memes.

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[4] More information on both can be found in works by Kukulin (2012) and Protasov (2005).

[5] A list of web sites that have to be blocked by Russian internet providers. The blacklist was introduced by the Russian government in 2012 to protect children from inappropriate online content (e.g. materials on drug abuse and suicide), but was later extended to extremist—and anti-government—materials (SOVA 2014).

[6] These data were taken from the LiveInternet project, an aggregator of internet statistics (http://www.liveInternet.ru).

Consequently, it seems to be the most appropriate choice for the study of Russophone internet memes, even though this choice does have a few limitations, which I shall discuss in the section on methodology.

Image 1. The *Lurkomor'e* article dedicated to the *Velikaia otechestvennaia voina* [Great Patriotic War] meme

Source: https://lurkmore.to/index.php?title=Великая_Отечественная_война (accessed 21 May 2015)

Theoretical background

Digital memory studies constitute a relatively recent intervention in the established field of cultural memory studies. The importance of interactions between digital media and remembrance is emphasised by Andreas Huyssen, who claims that it is impossible to explore either personal or public memories without taking into consideration 'the enormous influence of the new media as carriers of all forms of memory' (2003: 18). This argument is supported by a number of studies on various forms of online commemoration, including the establishment of digital archives (Ernst 2012), the formalisation of the past through online encyclopaedias (Ferron and Massa 2011), the dissemination of individual testimonies (Arthur 2009), and the negotiation of traumatic memories through social networks (Zvereva 2012).

While existing studies connect a number of manifestations of contemporary web culture to cultural memory theory, memes have received little attention to date in the context of digital memory scholarship. This can be attributed in part to the problematic nature of the meme concept, which was introduced to the field of cultural studies by Richard Dawkins (1976),

who argued that memes are gene-like cultural units that reproduce themselves in a viral way.[7] This attempt to apply evolutionary theory to the field of cultural change provoked considerable criticism for a number of reasons, perhaps most importantly, for its lack of attention towards the role of human agency in the creation and dissemination of memes (Jenkins 2009). Nevertheless, with the development of the Web 2.0 environment, memes quickly became part of the web lexicon, employed by internet users as a popular term to describe an idea that spreads online as 'a written text, image, or some other unit of cultural stuff' (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 202).

Although a number of works explore the role of memes in web culture, these studies often limit their understanding of memes to pieces of online humour. For instance, Christian Bauckhage (2011) identifies internet memes as 'inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge', whereas Jean Burgess (2008) interprets a meme as 'a faddish practice or joke [...] that becomes widely distributed'. In contrast to these humour-centric perspectives, Shifman suggests that internet memes are not necessarily confined to jokes, and, instead, can be 'deadly serious' (2014: 120). Shifman develops her argument by claiming that memes are 'multiparticipant creative expressions through which cultural and political identities are communicated' (2014: 177). One example of such communication involves the above mentioned category of political memes, which can be interpreted as a form of web-based political participation (Shifman 2014: 120).

While Shifman explores internet memes mainly in the context of the Anglophone internet, her observations are potentially also relevant to post-Soviet online spaces. Earlier studies demonstrate that not only are digital environments in post-Soviet countries disproportionately politicised (Lapina-Kratasyuk 2009; Goroshko and Zhigalina 2009), but they are also focused on traumatic memories (Rutten and Zvereva 2013: 5). This combination of politicisation and memorialisation of digital space brings to life what can be viewed as a subset of political internet memes, namely, historical memes. These memes originate from divergent historical visions of the past, which exist is post-Soviet countries and shape cultural and political identities in the region; yet, memes not only remediate these historical visions online, but also allow individuals to interact with them in a manner that is unavailable for them offline because of state monopolisation of public remembrance.

In this paper I explore several aspects of historical memes, including their origins and formats. Michel Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007) argue that in order to become successful, internet memes must possess the same three qualities—fidelity, fecundity and longevity—as their offline counterparts. Shifman (2014) criticises this approach and instead suggests six different prerequisites for memetic success, such as, for example, the presence of humour, the use of flawed masculinity, and a focus on ordinary people. Yet, these features are more relevant to specific categories of memes (i.e. memetic videos) and seem slightly detached from the discussion of 'serious' memes later in Shifman's book. Other works demonstrate even less concern for the reasons behind the transformation of a particular content into a meme, and tend to explain it exclusively through the prism of humorous potential (Burgess

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[7] More information about the origin of the concept and its subsequent transformations can be found in the work by Shifman (2013).

2008; Bauckhage 2011); however, in the case of historical memes, which often have pre-digital precursors, the question of memes' origins requires more attention.

Another aspect of historical memes that I shall consider is their format, or the medium through which these memes are disseminated online. While earlier studies demonstrate that memes can exist both as verbal and visual texts, and, in general, tend to be transmedial, the majority of works (Shifman 2012; Chen 2012; Radchenko 2013) focus on audiovisual content. In the case of historical memes, however, a textual format might be more common because of the limited number of digitised audio or visual materials that can be used for repackaging or imitation.[8] Thus, my first research question is: What elements of World War II memory become memes, and how are they disseminated across the internet?

My second research question concerns the representation of memes and the role of historical memes in post-Soviet digital spaces. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) distinguish several functions of memes, including social commentary, hoax, and absurdist humour. Shifman's more general analysis suggests that individuals employ memes to negotiate political and cultural identities online (2014). Shifman also lists concrete functions of memes such as public persuasion, the empowerment of grassroots actions, and political expression (2014: 122-123). Yet, the question is how these functions relate to historical memes and what purpose these memes serve in post-Soviet digital environments.

One of the limitations of this study concerns the narrow application of the interpretative reading of internet memes in their 'native habitat'. Instead, I shall use data from *Lurkomor'e* as the main source of data about historical memes. Here it is necessary to recognise the role of human agency, which is represented by the community of *Lurkomor'e* authors and editors, and its impact on the way historical memes are presented to readers of the encyclopaedia. Thus, my second research question is: How does the *Lurkomor'e* community, as a collective agent, shape historical memes and what purpose do these memes serve?

Methodology

As a data set for this study, I used a sample of World War II internet memes from *Lurkomor'e*. In order to gather the sample, I examined *Lurkomor'e* pages on 22 October 2013, using the *Voina* [War] portal as the starting point for the search (Portal: Voina 2013). Portals constitute one of the recent additions to the structure of *Lurkomor'e*; they facilitate navigation through the encyclopaedia's content, help editors organise contributions to the project, and, in general, serve as a space for communication on a particular topic. Unsurprisingly, the *Voina* portal is dedicated to internet memes related to military conflicts—including World War II—thus making it a logical starting point for data collection.

After gathering raw data from *Lurkomor'e*, I used close reading in order to select and examine articles on 67 World War II memes. In contrast to earlier studies, which focus on interpretative reading of a few selected memes (Shifman 2012; Shifman 2013; Radchenko 2013), this study took a more quantifiable approach. This choice of study design was related

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[8] More information concerning these two practices, which are viewed as the most common means of meme-making, is available in the work of Shifman (2014: 20-22).

to my main purpose, which was to map the existing gap between digital memory studies and research on internet memes, and to establish a basic framework for future research. Thus, in this study I attempted to provide an overview of the variety of historical memes related to World War II, and to search for basic patterns in their origins, means of dissemination, and functions.

Before proceeding to set out the findings, two main limitations that could impact my observations and interpretations should be noted. Firstly, the study provides limited interpretative reading of internet memes and does not include observations concerning the use of memes in their natural habitats (i.e. social networks and imageboards). Yet, these drawbacks can be explained from the point of view of the study design, which is focused on general patterns in the use of historical internet memes in Russophone digital environments. Because of my interest in the basic features of historical internet memes, which are themselves a new concept, I relied more on the classification and quantification of my sample, instead of its qualitative reading, even though the latter approach is more common among existing studies of internet memes (Chen 2012; Radchenko 2013; Shifman 2012).

Secondly, the study relies on a relatively small sample of internet memes taken from a single online platform, namely, *Lurkomor'e*. It means that the sample can suffer from selection bias, related both to the selective choice of memes to be described through the encyclopaedia and the way these memes are represented by the *Lurkomor'e* community. According to one of *Lurkomor'e* founders (Khomak 2012), so-called 'constructive hate' serves both as a motivating force behind the encyclopaedia and as a prism through which authors perceive the subjects about which they write. While this tongue-in-cheek description might sound exaggerated, it is indeed the case that *Lurkomor'e* tends to promote more offensive points of view than, for instance, Wikipedia. The former is known for the freedom of expression of its authors, which often use obscene language and make provocative and/or absurd statements in order to stimulate discussion or simply make fun of enraged users. These specific features notwithstanding, *Lurkomor'e* remains the prime source of information concerning Russophone digital folklore in general and internet memes in particular—but it is important to take them into account.

Findings

Origins of World War II memes

Two seminal questions in internet memes studies revolve around where memes originate and why they become successful. While historical textbooks and archival documents may contain significant amounts of raw memetic material, the academic history does not seem to be the most common source of historical internet memes. Instead, the composition of my sample of World War II memes suggests that many of them are drawn from popular culture and can be traced back to historical films, jokes, and urban legends of Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Yet, not every historical personality or event, including those featured in popular films or jokes, turn to be memetic and some additional impact is usually needed for them to become a meme. Such an impact can take different forms, varying from a pompous movie slogan or an

aggressive commemoration campaign to a message in a popular blog or a successful demotivational poster[9] based on an older iconic image.

The degree of interdependence between internet and 'offline' memes is another important aspect of historical meme-making. This question is omitted from the majority of studies on internet memes because these studies focus on the most recent groups of content. However, in the case of historical memes, it is not possible to ignore the large body of their offline precursors, the origins of which can be traced further than the emergence of the Web 2.0 environment. For instance, one of popular *Lurkomor'e* memes, *Shtirlits* can be traced back to a popular Soviet film *Seventeen Moments of Spring / Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* (1973, dir. Tatyana Lioznova) that spawned numerous jokes about the Soviet superspy. It can be argued that the popularity and abundance of Soviet-era jokes about *Shtirlits* led to the formation of popular memory narrative about World War II, which was different from the official Soviet narrative. In contrast to the Great Patriotic War narrative that focused on pompous glorification of Soviet people's deeds, the *Shtirlits* jokes portrayed World War II in humorous and sometimes vulgar way, frequently using sexual connotations absent from the official narrative.

In contrast to other online encyclopaedias (e.g. Wikipedia or Chronos[10]) that tend to reproduce the official narratives of World War II, *Lurkomor'e* also remediates popular and unofficial memories, like the ones examplified in the *Shtirlits* jokes. Many of these memories have already been memes before they were remediated through *Lurkomor'e* and became internet memes. While a detailed exploration of the interplay between 'old' and 'new' historical memes requires separate study, I attempted to recognise their interdependence by suggesting a threefold classification of World War II memes. According to this classification, which is based on the origin of a given meme, World War II memes can be divided into three categories: replications, transformations, and inventions.

The first category, replications, encompasses those historical memes that are based on older memes that originated in the pre-digital era. These offline-born memes are transmitted online without any significant changes to their meaning, and usually spread across the internet by means of mimicry.[11] Examples of such memes include the *tank Tigr* [the Tiger tank] meme, which refers to the most renowned tank of World War II; the *Ton'ka-pulemetchitsa* [Tonka the machine-gunner] meme, named after the legendary mass killer; and the *banderovtsy* [Banderites] meme, which refers to followers of Stepan Bandera or, in a more general sense, to all adherents of anti-Soviet nationalist movements in Ukraine.

The second category, transformations, includes historical memes also based on pre-digital memes; however, the meanings of these memes have experienced dramatic changes in the process of their digitisation. Unlike replications, transformations are often repackaged by means of remixing.[12] Such memes often acquire humorous features and serve as parodies that

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[9] An online genre of visual texts that parodies school and office motivational posters.

[10] A Russian online encyclopaedia which is focused on world history. More information is available on the project's site (www.hrono.ru).

[11] Shifman defines mimicry as the process of re-creating a meme without changing its content or form (2013: 20).

[12] Another strategy of internet meme dissemination that involves changes to a meme's form and/or content (Shifman 2013: 22).

make fun of the meme's original meaning. One example is the *Baldur von Schirach* meme: while the historical von Schirach was a Nazi youth leader, in the distorting mirror of post-Soviet digital space he became a symbol of soft porn and a common protagonist of slash fiction. Another example is the *Hitlar* meme [a derivative from Hitler], which refers to Adolf Hitler, but in a humorous sense. In other words: If you are ready for a serious talk in Russian about the Third Reich, then you will use the word Hitler, but if you are going to make fun online, then it will be all about *Hitlar*.

Finally, the third category, inventions, concerns memes which were invented online and do not have any offline prototypes. While these memes still refer to memories about World War II, they originate from blogs, imageboards, and video aggregators. One example is the *shushpantser* [an artificial word for which there is no direct translation into English] meme, which was invented in *LiveJournal* in 2007. The word itself is made by combining two other words: *Panzer* (German for 'tank'), and *shushpanchik* (a *kashchenism* slang term used to denote any strange entity of unknown form). Another example is the *rezunoid* (a derivative from Vladimir Rezun's surname[13]) meme, which was introduced in Fidonet[14] to label admirers of Rezun's writings. In recent years, the *rezunoid* meme has become an essential term in World War II online discussions, and is currently used as the general label for adherents of so-called 'revisionist' views (Morenkova 2012).

Figure 1. Categories of World War II memes by origin. Source of data: *Lurkomor'e*. Data collected on 22 October 2013.
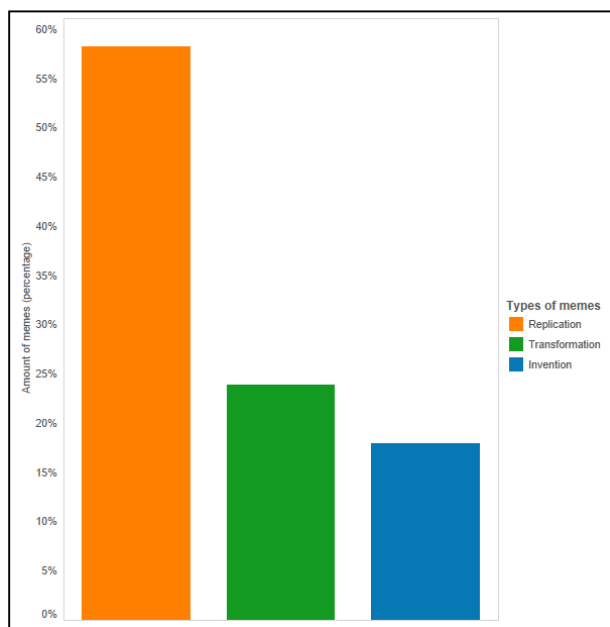
Source: Mykola Makhortykh

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[13] Vladimir Rezun (also known as Victor Suvorov) is a former Soviet intelligence officer and an author of several popular history books. Rezun is famous for his controversial interpretation of the German-Soviet war as a Hitler's preemptive strike against Soviet armies, which prepared their own European offensive in 1941.

[14] A worldwide computer network used for communication between bulletin board systems. Fidonet was highly popular in Russia in the 1990s until the majority of its audience moved to other online messengers.

Even though the dividing line between these three categories is not always clear—consider, for instance, the *Velikoe kino o velikoi voine* [A Great Movie about the Great War] meme, which can be interpreted both as a transformation and an invention—it is still worth considering the basic distribution of memes between categories. Fig. 1 shows that a clear majority of World War II memes are drawn towards the most traditional strategy of meme diffusion, namely, imitation (Blackmore 1999). The relatively small proportion of inventions can be attributed in part to the existence of a large pool of pre-digital memes that can simply be transmitted online, thus minimising the need to invent new historical memes or remix existing ones.

This observation, however, returns us to the initial question about the qualities a historical meme should possess in order to become a successful internet meme. Compared with the abundance of references to World War II memory in Soviet and post-Soviet popular culture, the number of World War II memes on *Lurkomor'e* is relatively small.[15] As it was noted already, it is not every element of cultural memory that can be replicated as an internet meme and, instead, a hypothetical piece of war-related content should correspond to certain criteria that determine whether or not it will be 'circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users' (Shifman 2014: 177).

Starting again with a commonsense assumption, it can be suggested that an important condition of memetic success is a significant level of offline renown—also viewed as a meme's potential to be used to reference everyday culture events (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). However, almost half the memes in my sample do not meet this criterion. While some memes, such as the Hitler or tank Tiger memes, can be interpreted as pieces of common knowledge for Russophone users, others, such as the *Ton'ka-pulemetchitsa* and Hiroo Onoda[16] memes, are almost unknown to a wider audience. By the same token, some popular historical memes—for instance, *Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke* [The Story of a Real Man] or *letchik Gastello* [Gastello the pilot][17]—have not become internet memes even though they enjoy considerable popularity offline.

A number of studies suggest that humour is another significant condition for successful meme-making (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Burgess 2008; Shifman 2014). While many internet memes are famous for their ludicrous nature, this quality is not necessarily present among World War II memes. While some memes, such as the *milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* [a billion shot personally by Stalin] or the *prikovat' k pulemetu* [to chain someone to a machine gun] memes, can be interpreted as instances of black humour, there are also memes where this is not the case. Instead, many of them—for instance, the *bombardirovka Drezdena* [the Dresden bombing] or the *kotly* [military encirclements] memes—are not funny, and even the extensive use of *lurkoiaz* does not make them amusing.

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[15] Simple calculations based on *Lurkomor'e* statistics (https://lurkmore.to/Служебная:Statistics) suggest that World War II memes constitute less than 1 per cent of internet memes covered by the encyclopaedia.

[16] A meme that refers to a Japanese soldier, who continued guerrilla activities in the Philippines years after the end of World War II.

[17] The first meme refers to the heroic story of Mares'ev, a Soviet pilot who lost his legs during an air battle, but continued flying with prosthetic devices. The second meme is also related to Soviet aviation and refers to Gastello's aerial suicide attack on a German target in 1941.

Among six features that according to Shifman (2014) contribute to the successful distribution of memes, flawed masculinity seems to be particularly susceptible to parody via World War II memes, appearing as a prominent aspect in a number of instances. Among these are the *natsional-gomoseksualisty* [national-homosexuals], Hitler, *Hitlar*, *Dobrovolets*, *foshyst* [incorrect spelling of the word fascist] and other memes. While Shifman (2014: 77) interprets the prominence of flawed masculinity memes as an extreme manifestation of the representation of men in mass media, I posit that there are other reasons for their prominence among World War II memes. Many of flawed masculinity memes (e.g. Hitler or *natsional-gomoseksualisty*) can be traced back to Soviet war-time posters and jokes that depicted Nazi leaders as weaklings and homosexuals. Some of more recent inventions (e.g. *Dobrovolets* or *Hitlar*), however, can be also connected with the recent rise of homophobia in Russian mass media (Kon 2010). The earlier discussion of the *Shtirlits* meme indicates that sexual connotations permeated popular memory of World War II long before the emergence of Web 2.0; yet, the abundance of memes-inventions that connect homosexuality with the image of an enemy can be viewed as a result of interactions between the long-living feature of unofficial World War II narratives and current social/legal environment in Russia.

While offline renown, humour and the amusing nature of flawed masculinity might explain the popularity of many memes, a high degree of provocativeness is another feature that is typical of many World War II memes. This feature is common among those memes that deal with particularly controversial World War II subjects, such as mass killings, war atrocities and the public commemoration of World War II. When dealing with these difficult issues, World War II memes tend to provide a strikingly narrow and provocative interpretation of a complicated past. One example is the *pshekosrach* [Polish shitstorm] meme that denotes what is viewed by some internet users as the distortion of World War II history by Poles, including the illegitimate accusations that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Katyn massacre. As a result, the dissemination of such memes is often followed by fierce clashes between proponents and opponents of a particular historical point of view, known as web wars (Rutten and Zvereva 2013).

These discursive online combats are particularly common for post-socialist digital environments, where the past carries a special emotional charge, provoking passionate debates about memory practices in post-Soviet countries. Often, web wars evolve around dramatic changes in World War II remembrance related to identity-building in new Eastern European states, which are sometimes viewed as a 'betrayal' of common Soviet memory of the war. Another recurring trend in post-socialist web wars, which can also explain the high degree of provocativeness of World War II memes, is a protest against perceived hegemony of Western narratives of the war, which ignore the suffering of the Soviet/Russian people and try to diminish it with notions like 'political correctness'.[18]

Some pages of *Lurkomor'e* even provide recommendations for how to unlock the full provocative potential of a particular meme. For instance, the description of the *milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* meme includes a brief discussion of the tendency to overestimate the number of Stalin's victims, and how these instances of 'liberal distortions of history' can be used to counteract accusations in the denial of Stalinist crimes (Milliard

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[18] More information on web wars is available in the work by Fedor, Rutten and Zvereva (2013).

rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym 2014). Another example is found in the description of the *Pobeda vopreki* [Victory against the odds] meme, which lists a number of ways to provoke a fierce reaction from an anti-revisionist audience, such as, for example, quoting Zhukov's memoirs, where he describes Stalin's confusion and frequent strategic failures. Yet, even without such recommendations, many World War II memes provide enough fuel to ignite a small web war just by mentioning them.

The findings of this section suggest that many historical internet memes originate from the pre-digital era and existed before undergoing the process of digitisation. While the majority of these memes maintain their original meaning in a digital form, some of them undergo significant changes that often turn them into parodies. A number of factors determine whether or not an offline meme is replicated or transformed online; these factors vary from how recognisable or ludicrous this meme is, to the presence of flawed masculinity and/or a high degree of provocativeness. While further study is needed in order to evaluate interdependencies between the origins of memes and the factors in their success, humour and recognisability seem particularly relevant for replications, while flawed masculinity and provocativeness are more common among transformations and inventions.

Formats of World War II memes

For a meme to become successful it has to spread across the internet in the fastest possible way. As mentioned earlier, many existing studies focus on internet memes distributed in an audiovisual format. The reason for the prevalence of this particular format is simple: in contrast to verbal texts, which are written in a certain language, visual texts rarely require advanced linguistic capabilities in order to be understood. The iconic image of Grumpy Cat, for instance, is accessible for both a native Russian speaker and a native English speaker; however, in order to recognise the difference between fascist and *foshyst* in Russian—and understand why the latter is hilarious, while the former is not—a proper knowledge of language is required.

The study of the formats of historical memes provides a better understanding not only of what these memes are, but also who disseminates them. For instance, the prevalence of textual memes might indicate that they are largely distributed inside small communities of interest, where members are familiar with the meaning of a particular meme and do not require additional contextualisation. These communities can include internet boards on war history or online groups for World War II commemoration, both of which are plentiful in post-Soviet digital environments. Discussions on these internet fora usually develop in a textual format and rarely involve audiovisual materials; consequently, historical memes that originate there are often confined to this format.

In contrast to the community-specific memes, audiovisual memes might be viewed as more digestible pieces of web content. As mentioned earlier, they are easier to recognize, making their potential audience larger than in the case of textual memes. An audiovisual format also provides more opportunities for the imitation and transformation of a particular meme: according to Shifman, when people understand something intuitively, they are not only happy to share it, but are also more likely to produce memetic responses (2014: 96). A

similar suggestion is made by Marie-Laure Ryan (2013), who argues that transmedial projects often become popular because they provide users with the pleasure of experimentation, which is related to the use of different tools and techniques to obtain a result. While some experimentation is also possible in the case of textual memes, this may be less interesting, and requires more effort to disseminate the result.

While the question of format is important to the study of historical memes, its rigorous investigation requires a profound exploration of how these memes are used in their natural habitats, such as *YouTube* (Shifman 2012), *4chan* (Chen 2012) or *VKontakte* (Radchenko 2013). Such an exploration is time-consuming and is not suitable for a study focused on dozens of historical memes. Consequently, I identified formats of historical memes using materials from the *Lurkomor'e* articles. This approach requires less time and effort, but also makes my observations susceptible to a source-related bias. However, as this study is focused on general patterns of dissemination of World War II memes, I suggest that data from *Lurkomor'e* are sufficient to determine the most common ways of spreading of a particular a meme.

Figure 2. Formats of World War II memes. Source of data: *Lurkomor'e*. Data collected on 22 October 2013.
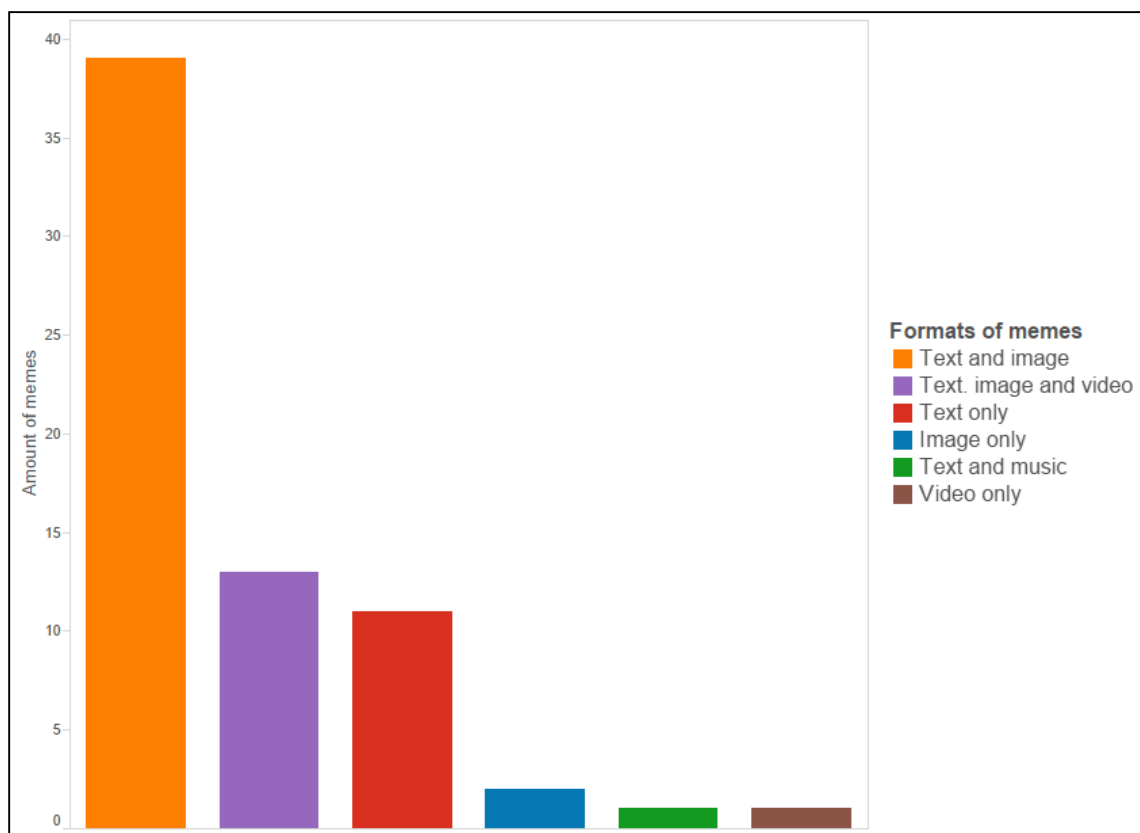
Source: Mykola Makhortykh

The brief investigation of memes' formats demonstrates that historical internet memes are less different from ordinary memes than it was initially expected. Figure 2 shows that the majority of World War II memes exists in various formats and are usually distributed through several media. Verbal texts and images constitute two principal means of dissemination; however, a number of memes are also distributed through videos. The only underrepresented format is sound, which is used for the dissemination of a single World War II meme, the No, Molotoff meme. This particular exception can be attributed to the musical origin of the meme, which comes from a popular Finnish wartime song.

A number of causes can explain the prevalence of static images and verbal texts. Firstly, these two data formats are easier to digitise—especially in comparison with historical video or sound recordings that are less available to the general public. A simple query in Google, for instance, returns a number of textual records concerning *nepotopliaemyi Sem* [Unsinkable Sam], the fabled ship's cat that served both *Kriegsmarine* and the Royal Navy during World War II. However, the same query returns no video or sound files: either they do not exist or they have not been digitised. A similar pattern can be observed for other World War II memes (and probably historical internet memes in general), many of which are represented online only as verbal texts or static images. Consequently, these two formats are often the only ones that are available for the distribution and remixing of historical memes in digital environments.

Secondly, it may be argued that, at present, not many video and sound materials are universally associated with World War II. In contrast to the large pool of recognisable images— the *Rodina-mat'* [Motherland], *georgievskaia lentochka* [the St. George's ribbon], Hitler and Stalin—video and sound materials are more affected by a generational divide between older and younger audiences. If older generations were brought up on Soviet war movies and a large body of military poetry, then their younger compatriots are more familiar with dynamic images from contemporary movies—such as *Stalingrad* (2013, dir. Fedor Bondarchuk), *We are from the future* / *My iz budushchego* (2008, dir. Andrei Maliukov), and *Mist* / *Tuman* (2010, dir. Ivan Shurhoveckij and Artem Aksenenko)—and a few modern remixes of popular war songs. Thus, only those historical memes that are based on the best-known personalities (such as Stalin), or on universal features of World War II commemoration (such as Victory Day*)* are recognisable enough to be distributed through video records.

Finally, it is possible to trace the connection between the origin of a particular meme and its digital format. For instance, memes-replications usually exist in several formats and are disseminated across various media. This tendency can be explained by referring to the work of Henry Jenkins on cultural convergence, where he argues that transmediality is particularly typical of grand narratives that cannot be covered by one medium (2006: 95). The World War II narrative in post-Soviet countries, which is communicated through monuments, verbal texts and images, can be viewed as one of these grand narratives. Thus, many replications are related to memories that preserved their transmedial nature after being transmitted online, because transmediality has already become one of their intrinsic features.

In contrast to replications, the majority of memes-inventions are disseminated in one particular format, namely, verbal text. This tendency may point to the possible origins of these memes, some of which can be traced to particular online communities. *LiveJournal* is one of

the most common sources of historical memes, due to the active involvement of the Russian blogosphere in discursive memory-making (Trubina 2010). Other communities that have contributed to the production of memes include a number of Fido groups and *Tynu40k Goblina*. Interestingly enough, *VKontakte* does not seem to be as influential as might be expected, considering the large number of World War II communities it hosts.

Another explanation for the prevalence of textual format among memes-inventions considers the high degree of provocativeness that is common to many of them. It can be suggested that memes of this type are often involved in web wars, where 'multifarious memories compete for hegemony' (Rutten and Zvereva 2013: 2). These discursive online battles are usually driven by text messages that frequently involve provocative and offensive arguments. A number of these arguments are embodied in certain historical memes, such as the *milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* or the *Pobeda vopreki* memes. While images and videos can also be used in web wars, my observations suggest that historical debates develop more often in purely textual format.

The findings of this section point to the lack of significant differences between the formats of historical and ordinary internet memes. Both tend to be disseminated through a number of media, including verbal text, image, sound, and video. While certain distinctions are still present - in particular, the limited use of sound and video formats for the dissemination of historical memes - these can be ascribed to practical reasons, such as (non)availability of materials for remixing. More significant differences seem to be present among various categories of historical memes, some of which tend to be more transmedial, while others stick to one particular format, often the textual one. The latter tendency is common among memes-inventions, where both message boards and social networks are major platforms for distribution, and web wars seem an important motivator for their dissemination.

Functions of World War II memes

Following the discussion of the origins and formats of historical memes, I shall identify the functions they serve in post-Soviet digital environments. Earlier studies demonstrate that internet memes fulfil a number of different functions, ranging from entertaining web users to providing commentary on social issues. Using a close reading of memes' descriptions on *Lurkomor'e*, I distinguished four categories of World War II memes, based on the purposes these memes serve. Two of these categories are the same as in the classification suggested by Knobel and Lankshear (2007): the first category includes memes used for entertainment, while the second one constitutes memes with a social/political commentary purpose. Two other categories are specific to the World War II context and include memes that serve either informative or memory-transformative purposes.

The first category concerns those groups of content that tend to entertain users in various ways. Such memes can be further divided into three subcategories, the first of which includes parodies that achieve their humorous effect by parodying existing World War II tropes. One example of such memes is represented by demotivational posters based on the iconic World War II image *Rodina-Mat' zovet* [The Motherland is calling], where the figure of the Motherland is replaced with an image of a contemporary politician or an anime character. The second subcategory comprises memes that are based on absurdist jokes and surreal entities.

One such meme is the *general Moroz* [General Frost] meme, which refers to a fictional magical entity that supposedly contributed to the Soviet victory in World War II. The final subcategory is composed of black humour memes, such as, for instance, the *X macht frei* meme, where X can be substituted by anything from a lollipop to Putin.[19]

All three subcategories conform with earlier observations on the use of internet memes for entertainment purposes. The *general Moroz* meme, for instance, can be viewed as an instance of dignifying the banal with 'epically-scaled imagined responses to some real or fantastic event' (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 217). The only difference between the Lost Frog and the *general Moroz* memes concerns the definition of the banal, which in the latter case is represented by the Great Patriotic War, the seriousness of which is diluted with a small element of playfulness.[20] As for parodies and black humour memes, these kinds of digital content can be viewed as examples of global jokes that are common to all digital environments, even though their exact formulations vary depending on their audience (Shifman 2014). Thus, it can be suggested that entertaining historical memes share the most similarities with ordinary memes. This observation also confirms Shifman's assertion (2014) that humorous memes constitute the most universal category of memetic content.

The second category of World War II memes concerns those groups of content that are used as social or political commentary. Two common subcategories of these memes express either pro- or anti-nationalist sentiments and use World War II references to promote a certain view on right-wing movements. For instance, the *Untermensh* meme from the first subcategory recalls the racist rhetoric of Nazi Germany to emphasise the difference between 'bad' immigrants from Central Asia and 'good' ethnic Russians. In contrast, the *natsional-gomoseksualisty* meme from the second subcategory not only makes fun of ultra-nationalists, but also attempts to dehumanise them by accentuating their presumed homosexuality, which is interpreted as a typical feature of degenerate Nazi leaders.

Two other subcategories of commentary-memes are focused on socioeconomic realities and memory politics. The first of these subcategories is represented by sarcastic adaptations of World War II memories to the current socioeconomic situation. One particular example is the *prikovat' k pulemetu* [to chain someone to a machine gun] meme, which refers to the post-war urban legend about German soldiers who were chained to their machine guns. Building upon the legend, which claimed that the German high command used chains to prevent soldiers from retreating, its contemporary adaptation refers to the working conditions of office workers unable to leave their workplaces. Another meme from this subcategory is the *Okonchatel'noe reshenie* [Final Solution] meme, a sarcastic appropriation of the Holocaust term used as a metaphor for the large number of suicides in Russia.

The last subcategory of commentary-memes concerns memory politics in post-Soviet countries and, in particular, a number of controversies related to commemoration of World War II. The *georgievskaia lentochka* meme, which refers to the recently introduced tradition

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[19] A controversial adaptation of the 'Arbeit macht frei' [Work will set you free] sign from the gates of Auschwitz.

[20] A meme that encompasses a wide range of imagined responses to a lost pet announcement that asked Seattle citizens for help in finding a Hopkin Green Frog. More on this meme can be found in a work by Knobel and Lankshear (2007).

of wearing an orange-black ribbon around Victory Day, is one of the memes in this subcategory. The obtrusive promotion of this tradition by the Russian government has resulted in the massive use of the ribbon in a variety of contexts. Not all of these, however, were appropriate ones, as in recent years the St. George's ribbon has been used to decorate restrooms, advertise beverages, and promote go-go bars. Consequently, the *georgievskaia lentochka* meme became associated both with the misappropriation of war symbols in Russia and contemporary commercialisation of World War II memory; however, it also reflects controversies surrounding the (re)invention of this symbol in the context of World War II remembrance and the introduction of a new memory ritual (Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013).

Among these four subcategories, the one that concerns the appropriation of World War II memory for socioeconomic commentary shares the largest number of similarities with the commentary-memes investigated in earlier studies. The purpose of the *prikovat' k pulemetu* meme seems rather similar to the function of the *Flying Spaghetti Monster* meme,[21] which uses wry and satirical humour for the purposes of social critique (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 217). The *Okonchatel'noe reshenie* meme also shares certain similarities with a number of political memes that are often used as modes of expression and public discussion (Shifman 2014: 123). Three other subcategories, however, seem more specific to historical memes in general and World War II memes in particular. The origins of the appropriation of World War II memory in the context of leftist-rightist debate in post-Soviet space can be traced back to the Soviet narrative about World War II, which emphasised differences between (bad) right-wing nationalism and (good) left-wing anti-nationalism (or vice versa, which is the case of World War II narratives produced by emigree members of anti-Soviet nationalistic resistance). Contemporary supporters of left/right movements in post-Soviet countries also appropriate memory to construct the image of their political antagonists, but approach this task in different ways. While the *Untermensh* meme represents a simple replication of the wartime trope, the *natsional-gomoseksualisty* meme is a more complex invention that combines negative images from cultural memory with the homophobia currently on the rise in Russian mass media.

The last subcategory, which includes memes that comment on memory politics, shares certain similarities with political memes that empower the grassroots actions (Shifman 2014: 127-128). While, at first glance, the *We are the 99 percent* and *georgievskaia lentochka* memes seem very different, both of them can be read as empowering ordinary citizens, who otherwise have only limited possibilities for affecting the global economy or public commemoration in post-socialist countries. This particular function of World War II memes also reflects the high degree of politicisation of cultural remembrance in the post-Soviet space.[22] Similar to pro-/anti-nationalist memes, the function of this subcategory is closely related to the post-socialist context and tells us not only about online communities, but also the 'real-world' societies from which these digital groups originate.

Two other categories of World War II memes besides entertaining memes and commentary-memes constitute memes with informative and memory-transformative purposes. While

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[21] A meme that satirises creationist theories by referring to a fictional divine entity that resembles spaghetti.
[22] For more information see the *Memory at War* project, which is dedicated to the use of memory in the contemporary political discourse in Eastern Europe (http://www.memoryatwar.org/).

these functions would be especially characteristic of historical memes, it can be argued that they also correspond more broadly to the underlying property of internet memes, which is the communication and negotiation of identities. The first of these two categories includes those memes that describe World War II personalities and events in neutral terms. Such memes originate either from the Soviet era—such as the Zhukov[23] or *Katiusha* [a nickname for a Soviet multiple rocket launcher] memes—or post-Soviet times—like the *VIF2NE* [an abbreviation for a popular Russian discussion board on war history] or *Dobrovolets* [the nickname of a popular *LiveJournal* user who is interested in war history] memes—but unlike memes from other categories, the subjects of these memes are not re-appropriated into any additional context. Instead, their task is the preservation of memory about a personality, an event or a web resource that is frequently mentioned in the context of World War II discussions.

In contrast to the former category, memory-transformative memes have a clear agenda: instead of passively commemorating a certain subject, they actively challenge a particular memory discourse. The first of three subcategories covers anti-Soviet memes that deconstruct and mock the traditional Great Patriotic War discourse. For instance, the *Pobeda vopreki* meme emphasises the destructive role of the Soviet high command, whose incompetent decisions resulted in huge human losses. Another meme—*28 geroev-panfilovtsev* [the Panfilov division's 28 guardsmen]—points to the discrepancies between a World War II myth and reality;[24] in contrast to the Soviet myth, which emphasised the heroic struggle of 28 heroes near Dubosekovo, the meme highlights the uncomfortable discrepancies between the presumed and real number of dead heroes. Furthermore, it accentuates the awkward fact that not only did one of the 28 heroes survive, but he also provided his services to the German side later in the war.

The second subcategory of memory-transformative memes serves the opposite purpose to the first one. Instead of criticising the Soviet war narrative, these memes support it by challenging anti-Soviet criticism. In order to do so, they usually focus on deconstructing the anti-Soviet myths that were particularly plentiful in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One example is the above mentioned *milliard rasstreliannykh lichno Stalinym* meme, which takes to the extreme the idea of Stalinist crimes and mocks the tendency to exaggerate the number of Stalin's victims. In doing so, this meme and others of its kind often cross the line between criticism of hyperbolic anti-Soviet historiography and the denial of Stalinist crimes altogether.

The last subcategory includes memes that challenge the established narrative of the Holocaust and emphasise the notion of Jewish responsibility for the *Shoah*. One such meme is the *Gazenwagen* meme, which refers to the mobile gas chambers used by the Nazis during World War II. However, the meme puts particular emphasis on the Jewish identity of the chambers' alleged creator, presumably with the point of implying Jewish responsibility for the mass killings during the war. Another meme from this subcategory is the Holocaust meme, which is identified on *Lurkomor'e* as 'source of Jewish profit' (Holocaust 2013). In

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[23] This meme refers to Georgy Zhukov, a Soviet military leader known for his strategic talents and assumed cruelty.
[24] For more information on this controversial World War II episode that later became the basis of the Soviet war myth consult the work of Nikolai Petrov and Ol'ga Edel'man (1997).

that paradoxical case of meme misappropriation, the main criticism is leveled at Holocaust commemoration, which is allegedly used to downgrade the suffering of Soviet citizens—in particular, Russians and Belarusians. Both of these memes as well as other memes from this subcategory tend to mix an anti-Semitic tinge with resentment against assumed Western ignorance of Russian suffering during the war.

Figure 3. Functions of World War II memes. Source of data: *Lurkomor'e*. Data collected on 22 October 2013.
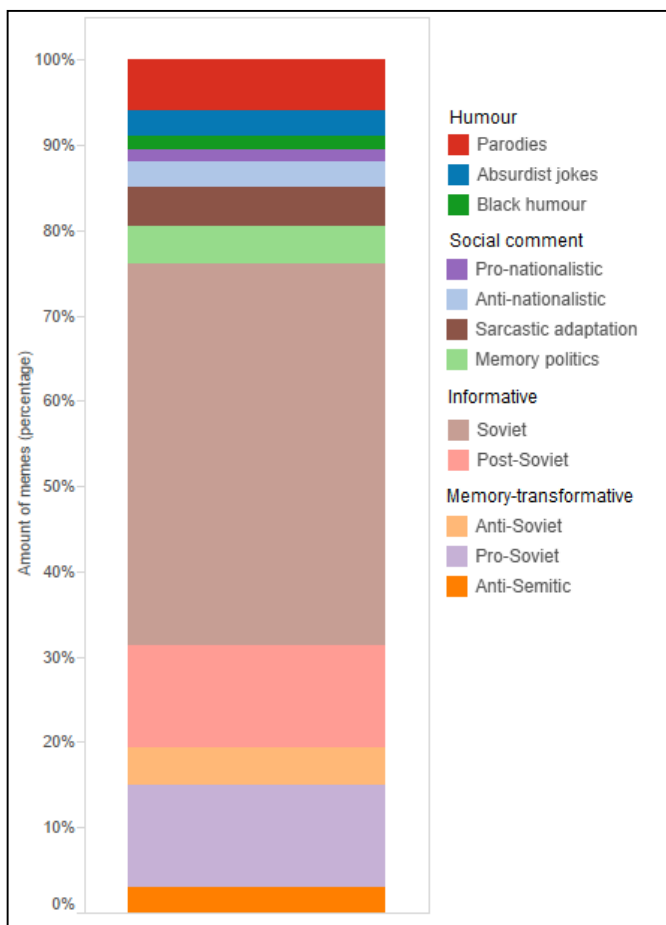
Source: Mykola Makhortykh

While the proposed differentiation of World War II memes might in itself provide valuable insights, it is also worth considering the distribution of individual memes among various categories. Figure 3 shows that, unlike ordinary memes, which are predominantly used for entertainment or commentary (Knobel and Lankshear 2007), historical memes are more concerned with informative and memory-transformative functions. While this observation follows commonsense logic—after all, historical memes should be mostly about the past—it also highlights the differences between ordinary and historical memes. Thus, the study of memes' functionality proves that my initial decision to identify historical memes as a distinct category of digital content is justified, even while further study is needed to identify concep-

tual characteristics that differ historical memes from ordinary and, in particular, political ones.

The distribution of individual memes among subcategories indicates that the majority of informative memes are replications of offline memes from the Soviet era. While there may be a range of reasons for this, I suggest that it partly reflects the sentiments of the Russo-phone internet audience, which is showing increasing interest in the Soviet past (Morenkova 2012). This suggestion is based on a second observation, which concerns the disproportionate distribution of memory-transformative memes, the majority of which belong to the pro-Soviet subcategory. Together these two observations may be attributed to the feeling of mel-ancholia and/or nostalgia about the Soviet past[25] that is particularly present among adoles-cents in post-socialist countries (Nikolayenko 2008). In these circumstances, the longing for the 'values, ethics and friendships' (Yurchak 2005: 8) promised by the reality of socialism fuels interest not only in Soviet memes, but also resistance to the so-called 'distortions of history' that criticise the Soviet system and/or diminish the heroism of Russian people during the war. Thus, the production of invented memes that scoff at critical assessments of the So-viet past can serve a number of purposes, ranging from the communication of melancholic feelings and nostalgic identities to grassroots actions against unwanted developments in memory politics.

The findings from this section demonstrate that historical memes serve a multitude of functions, ranging from entertaining internet users to transforming memory discourses. Two of these functions, information and the transformation of memory, may be unique to histori-cal memes, even though they both correspond to the main purpose of internet memes: the negotiation and communication of identities (Shifman 2014: 177). Whereas both anti- and pro-Soviet sentiments are propagated through World War II memes, the memes' distribution demonstrates that pro-Soviet memes are more prevalent. While further studies are needed in order to interpret this phenomenon, I suggest that such inequality can be attributed to the So-viet nostalgia among young people in post-socialist countries, many of whom are involved in the production and dissemination of internet memes.

Lurkomor'e community as human agency

Having discussed the origins, formats, and functions of World War II memes, I shall now consider the role of human agency in their production. According to Shifman (2014: 30), internet memes focus on the perfomative self and, therefore, successful interpretation of a meme relies on understanding a meme's creator. The impact of human agency, however, is not necessarily limited to the creation of a meme; instead, I suggest that the process of de-scribing memes in online encyclopaedias such as *Lurkomor'e* can also impact their mean-ings. Consequently, it can be assumed that *Lurkomor'e* authors influence how memes are presented to the audience and, therefore, become co-producers of these memes' meanings. The investigation of the *Lurkomor'e* community, however, has to take into account the ano-nymity of the encyclopaedia's contributors. *Lurkomor'e* is known for its tendency to share

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[25] For a more detailed, interpretative study of post-Soviet memory and melancholia, see the work by Etkind (2013).

little information about its authors, and while some editors have their personal pages, these pages usually contain an idiosyncratic and rather opaque mix of cryptic and nonsensical statements.

Figure 4. Metadata categories of World War II memes, sorted by frequency. Source of data: *Lurkomor'e*. Data collected on 22 October 2013.
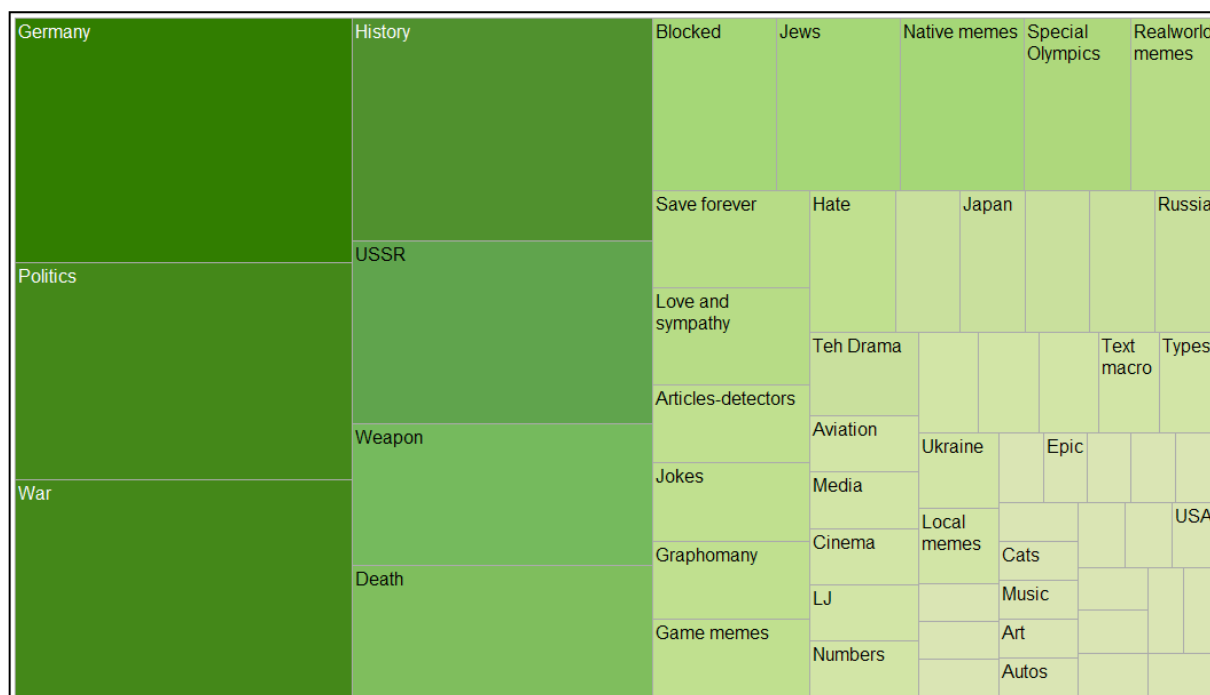
Source: Mykola Makhortykh

For these reasons, I decided to use metadata from *Lurkomor'e* as an indicator of the community's role in the presentation of memes. Similar to Wikipedia, where articles are classified with the help of a special type of metadata—categories (Wikipedia: Categorization 2014)—all articles on *Lurkomor'e* are tagged with unique classifiers. Both *Lurkomor'e* and Wikipedia categories are used to facilitate navigation across the encyclopaedias and organise materials in thematic clusters. Yet, in addition to these practical reasons, categories can also serve as an important source of semantic information about the article's subject (Zesch et al. 2007). I therefore suggest that the choice of categories can indicate how authors from *Lurkomor'e* present a particular meme to the audience.

Based on an exploration of *Lurkomor'e* categories (fig. 4), I found that these elements of metadata provide a number of insights that concern the angle from which memes are presented. The easiest case is provided by thematic categories—such as Politics or War—that briefly describe an area to which a particular meme belongs. Other categories can point either to the emotional load of a meme—for instance, the Hate category, which unites memes that are presented in a negative way—or a meme's habitat—one example is the Realworld category, which unites memes that are presented as influential beyond the internet. A small number of categories define the purpose of a particular meme: for instance, the Jokes category includes

humorous memes, while the Article-detector category covers memes of a highly provocative nature.

Two major limitations should be mentioned in relation to my study of *Lurkomor'e* metadata. First, the number of available categories-classifiers on *Lurkomor'e* is large, but their use is not always consistent. For example, the USSR category, which unites memes related to the Soviet Union, includes the *PPSh* [an abbreviation for a model of a Soviet sub-machine gun] and the *T-34* (a Soviet tank) memes, but does not include the *Katiusha* meme, even though all three memes refer to iconic Soviet weapons. Second, each meme can belong to several different categories, which further complicates the study of how particular categories relate with historical memes. For instance, the number of categories found in my sample was only slightly less than the overall number of memes, and amounted to 59 different categories.

Yet, with the exception of a few problematic cases, the collective tagging of memes on *Lurkomor'e* is able to provide a basic understanding of how the community interprets and presents a particular meme to the encyclopaedia's audience. The distribution of thematic categories (Fig. 4) indicates that views on World War II inside the *Lurkomor'e* community are at least partially determined by recognised patterns of World War II commemoration. One example is the 'national affiliation' of World War II memes: two of the largest groups are formed by the Germany- and USSR-related memes, whereas memes related to the USA and Japan represent a clear minority. Such distribution reproduces a pattern from the Soviet cultural memory, where the main emphasis was placed on the struggle between the Soviet Union and Germany (Gudkov 2005).

Another example is the prevalence of the Politics category, reflecting the high degree of politicisation of World War II memory in post-socialist space (Karge 2010). Based on these observations, it is possible to suggest that the assignment of categories on *Lurkomor'e* reflects patterns of World War II commemoration, which are not only referenced through memes, but also influence the way in which World War II is presented through the encyclopaedia.

In contrast to thematic categories, those categories that describe the emotional load of memes demonstrate some of the unique features of the *Lurkomor'e* community. My study showed that emotion-centred categories, such as the Love and Sympathy or the Hate categories, tend to contain the most inflammatory memes, including the duo of dictators and a number of *srachi* [shitstorms], a Russian nickname for fierce online debates. The distribution of memes among positive/negative categories is of particular interest here: the Love and Sympathy category, for instance, is dominated by Germany-related memes such as the tank Tiger, Mengele, and Goebbels memes, whereas the Hate category deals exclusively with memes related to the revision of history, such as the *pshekosrach* or *banderovtsy* memes.

Such distribution of categories can be related to the notion of 'constructive hate' that serves as a prism through which the *Lurkomor'e* community views the surrounding digital reality (Khomak 2012). On a practical level, this notion manifests itself as a nihilistic and offensive stance towards complex subjects, the main goal of which is to provoke and shock readers. In the case of the Mengele meme, for instance, *Lurkomor'e* places the main emphasis on medical achievements that became possible because of the Nazi death camps. In con-

trast, Polish and Ukrainian interpretations of World War II are portrayed as insignificant and degraded attempts to distort Soviet history, originating from anti-Russian sentiments in these countries.

These observations point to a potentially troubling issue, which is related to the impact of *Lurkomor'e* on digital memories in post-Soviet countries. While I assume that the majority of *Lurkomor'e* editors perceive these sarcastic interpretations merely as instances of black humour, some members of the encyclopaedia's audience may take them seriously. Therefore, instead of promoting fun through the prism of hate, *Lurkomor'e* might, instead, provoke hate through the prism of fun, as provocative interpretations of controversial memes are disseminated and referenced as mainstream definitions of historical phenomena, including, for instance, the Holocaust.

My final observations relate to the most controversial historical memes, which are grouped under the Blocked category. This category includes those memes whose articles were closed for editing by the majority of *Lurkomor'e* authors. The typical reason for closing an article is regular vandalism, which suggests the presence of significant disagreements with the article's content. While I expected that the Blocked category would include many controversial World War II memes, relating to anti-Semitic sentiments or anti-/pro-nationalist debates, in fact these subjects seem to provoke little disagreement. Instead, the majority of memes from the Blocked category (e.g. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Stalin, and Lend-Lease) deal with the Soviet past and the major disagreements inside the *Lurkomor'e* community seem to around the question of Stalinist repressions and the role of Stalin in Soviet history. The special place of the memory of the Soviet terror on *Lurkomor'e* can be traced to complex and ambivalent attitudes towards this subject in post-socialist societies (Etkind 2009). It is another example of the complex interactions between offline and online spaces, an essential aspect of digital memories.

The findings of the last section demonstrate that the role of human agency in the production of historical memes cannot be underestimated. In contrast to ordinary memes, which often serve as 'global jokes' and can function outside their original context (Shifman 2014), historical memes seem to be more deeply embedded in local memories. Thus, established patterns of World War II commemoration seem to be particularly important in determining the main features of World War II memes. Yet, my study also suggests that historical memes are influenced not only by offline memory trends, but also by the digital platforms used for their collection and dissemination. The traditions and customs that develop inside these platforms' communities can influence the way historical memes are presented and disseminated, turning the authors and editors of online encyclopaedias into co-producers of memetic content.

Conclusions

The study of World War II memes from *Lurkomor'e* suggests that historical internet memes share a number of common characteristics with their non-historical counterparts. Both are used for the communication and negotiation of cultural and political identities online; yet, while doing this, historical memes often rely upon existing elements of cultural memory,

which in my case are represented mainly by different forms of Soviet-era popular memory about World War II. Both ordinary and historical memes are disseminated online in a variety of formats, even though historical memes seem to depend more on verbal texts and static images, since there is a smaller volume of sound and video materials that can be used for their circulation.

Both historical and non-historical memes are involved in identity-building in digital and analogue environments; however, they contribute to the performance of identities in different ways. While both are used for entertainment or social/political commentary, the former are also employed for the perpetuation and transformation of memories. Similar to political memes that serve as a means of grassroots political action and public expression (Shifman 2014: 123), historical memes allow individuals to express their views on the past and challenge/support existing historical narratives. This possibility for grassroots commemorative action is particularly important for post-socialist spaces, where cultural practices are often inadequate for past tragedies (Etkind 2009: 182) and social media are used to register historical trauma discourses (Rutten and Zvereva 2013: 4). While internet memes are definitely not the only mode of grassroots remembrance available in post-Soviet countries, they provide speed, accessibility and anonymity, which are important aspects of memory in our digital age.

In contrast to earlier studies, which tend to emphasise the positive impact of digital media on cultural memories in post-Soviet countries, including the propagation of cosmopolitan memory (Trubina 2010) and pluralisation of historical narratives (Morenkova 2012), my observations point to more ambiguous relations between memory and technology. It is hardly debatable that *Lurkomor'e* provides a public space, where different views on the past can thrive and interact—a stark contrast with the public sphere in many post-Soviet countries, where memory and history largely remain in a state monopoly. The encyclopaedia also sustains those narratives, which do not make their way into historical textbooks (e.g. the ones that originate from popular/unofficial histories) and by doing so provides an alternative to hegemonic official narratives about World War II.

It is worth noting, however, that the presence of different interpretations of World War II on *Lurkomor'e* does not necessarily make its stance towards the past neutral or cosmopolitan. Together World War II memes do not produce any ideal metanarrative of World War II, which transcends offline commemorative practices in post-Soviet countries; instead, *Lurkomor'e* remediates common elements of these practices online, sometimes satirising or exaggerating them in the process. Like digital media in general*, Lurkomor'e* does not distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong' memories, so many of presumable 'drawbacks' of World War II remembrance in the post-Soviet spaces, including the high degree of politicisation, marginalisation of the Holocaust memory and framing of the past in nationalistic/sexist terms, make their way online through the encyclopaedia. In a murky world of Russophone web, where online practices bear strong resemblance to Soviet-era 'kitchen-table conversations' (Fedor 2013: 242), World War II memes recall rumours spreading through communal apartments in the Soviet Union. Quick, accessible, entertaining and sometimes vulgar, historical internet memes tell us mainly not about the past, but about how people feel about this past. World War II narratives promoted by these memes are not necessarily correct from a historical point

of view and frequently produce offensive or provocative statements about the past; yet, just because they do not follow the rules of a game, historical memes can serve as an early warning sign of particular processes underway in post-Soviet societies and cultures.

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