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Digital Humanities and Memory Wars in Contemporary Russia

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Over the last several decades, Russia’s monolithic “official history,” a form of historical narrative supported and promoted by the Russian government, has been establishing itself in textbooks (Korostelina, “War of Textbooks”; Nelson, “History as Ideology”; Zajda, “The New History School Textbooks”) and museums (as in “Russia, My History,” a series of new exhibitions on Russian history held in the largest cities across Russia in 2017–2018 to promote the “official” historical narrative). This state-sponsored narrative has partially rehabilitated Stalin and his actions during the Soviet era and, to a certain extent, restored the image of the “great leader” and “effective manager” who won the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and advanced the Soviet economy. The fate of the victims of Stalinist repressions is seen, in that context, as an “unfortunate necessity.” Such creation of a “usable past” for the national narrative is quite a popular way of framing a possible “good future” (Adler, “Reconciliation with—Rehabilitation of—the Soviet Past?”) from a “bad past” (Bevernage, “Writing the Past out of the Present”; Gow, “Dark Histories, Brighter Futures”). In narratives of Russian history, there is thus an increasing trend to manage national and public memory by repressing the memory of repression (Adler, “Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable”).

However, this “official history” has faced a lot of contestation from civil society across the country. Its expressions can be found both offline, in some of the regional museums, contemporary art projects, and theater (Adler, “Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable”), and online, in the form of personal blogs, social media posts, and so on. The latter comprises a specific field of “postsocialist digital memory,” formulated by Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva in the introduction to their book Memory, Conflict and New Media. However, the “postsocialist digital memory” debates have excluded many important emerging projects on the intersection of digital humanities, memory production, and memory studies. I argue that these form a new way of public engagement with memory production, offering alternative
narratives of Soviet histories, and moreover establish ways of dealing with the Soviet past on a personal level.

These projects, developed and run by activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have faced double exclusion: on the one hand, they were not created within academic institutions, therefore do not belong to the “academic discourse,” but remain invisible and unfamiliar to Russian historians and geographers. On the other hand, they are not the object of research into “digital memory.” This chapter aims to fill this enticing gap by introducing, analyzing, and grounding on a scholarly base several web-based projects dealing with personal histories, oral history, and public memory. These projects provide tools for the general public to participate in the production of alternative historical narratives in contemporary Russia.

In this chapter, I aim to present, analyze, and locate several projects at the intersection of the digital humanities (DH) and contemporary practices of digital memory. I will particularly focus on the following projects: “The Topography of Terror” (Topografiya terror) and “The Other Side” (Ta storona) created by the Russian NGO “Memorial”; “The Siberians Freed and Exiled” (Sibiriaki volnie i nevolnie) at the Tomsk regional museum; and “Outlasted” (Prožito) by historian and activist Michail Melnichenko. These three projects vary in origin, have different goals, and are designed to fill different gaps in the historical knowledge production system. I will fill in the background to their creation and critically examine the role played in them by DH. This will lead me to some general observations about the role of unofficial DH practices and their significance for Russian society. But before coming to the projects themselves, I need to introduce the debates on digital memories in Russia and discuss certain particularities of Russian academia and DH.

**Postsocialist Online Memory Wars**

The “memory wars” in contemporary Russia have been a subject of close consideration by many scholars of media and culture, as well as by historians and geographers of postsocialist societies. The online “memory wars” in personal blogs and social media posts have emerged in response to the set official historical narrative, which did not welcome public engagement and discussion. This trend is not specific to Russia: web-based projects have become an important part of memory practices, both official and popular, in other countries as well. Scholars of new media and memory studies in postsocialist countries have traced the general course of online memory projects in recent times, debated the changes they have wrought in the earlier post-Soviet memory battle, and even formed the new field of “digital memory.”

In the introduction to their book *Memory, Conflict and New Media*, Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva talk about transcultural variations in digital memory studies. They observe that postsocialist practices in digital memory are often excluded from scholarly debates on the subject, especially if they are not available in English. The
existing digital memory studies, according to the editors, are still mostly “Western” (meaning European-American and Anglophone), a focus that commonly excludes regional and social media. In this chapter, I want to take that argument further and say that not only do postsocialist digital memory studies frequently exclude the non-English segment of online debates, but they fail in equal measure to analyze digital humanities projects. In other words, they exclude the numerous Russian online projects that are trying to form a new landscape of memory. They do not engage directly with the online war of narratives, nor go beyond comments on Facebook or its Russian equivalent, Vkontakte; they try to work only with established historical and spatial data.

Web-based practices and sites of commemoration, and platforms for alternative pasts, have grown popular in recent years all over the world. From personal accounts in social media to critical expositions with quite complex structures, these online initiatives have been analyzed by various scholars as new types of commemorative practices. They have been assessed as novel practical approaches rather than theoretical innovations (Foot, Warnick, and Schneider, “Web-Based Memorializing”), as independent online projects in contrast to official narratives (Mikula, “Virtual Landscapes of Memory”), and as new developments in memory studies in a digital context (Marshall, “Virtual Memory Landscape”). More specifically, DH has provided the rationale for a number of tools and methodologies for implementing digital techniques in these areas. In Russia, however, the creation of such projects, with the developing of appropriate tools and techniques, remains outside academia. Unlike typical DH projects based in West European or North American universities, Russia’s DH community has arguably, for the most part, grown out of politically charged commemorative activities outside academic walls. Let us try to see why it happened that way.

**Russian Academia and Digital Humanities: An Overview**

Digital humanities in Russia is confined to the very margin of the formal academic establishment, largely owing to the system inherited from the Soviet age. There have been few changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the way academic knowledge is organized at the institutional level. Though new institutions and universities have appeared in post-Soviet Russia, the structure of university departments and research institutes largely remains what it was under the Soviet system; in some cases, the very people remain the same.

The 1990s saw a boom in new emerging institutes, some of which still play a crucial role in academic knowledge production and its reform. Examples are the Higher School of Economics, Moscow; the European University in St. Petersburg; and the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. However, such institutional changes have not taken place in major institutions dating from earlier times, like the Moscow State University, the St. Petersburg State University, and various
institutes under the Academy of Science; nor have they reshaped the research and education landscape outside Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other major cities.

The set structure perpetuates a strict system of separation between the disciplines, hence a lack of interdisciplinary opportunities, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, it imposes restrictions on the whole cycle of knowledge production, from teaching and research to funding and publishing. For instance, the absence of any academic journal in the digital humanities, and the narrow focus of “classical” journals in the humanities generally, leave no opportunity for Russian DH scholars to publish and receive credit for their work.

Certain disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and human geography experienced strong opposition (if not total suppression) in Soviet times. For over fifty years, these disciplines developed in accordance with Soviet ideas of “socialist” science, which include very distinct notions of subject, object, and method in the humanities and social sciences. The residual effects of the Soviet agenda can be noted even today—both in self-censorship and in a tendency to align academic pursuits with the demands of the state, developing research agendas in accord with government-sponsored topics.

Moreover, as I have already stated at the beginning of this chapter, after a period of democratization in the 1990s and early 2000s, historical and geographical discourses are again being taken over by “government-approved” narratives. This historical narrative legitimizes the Soviet colonial past in many ways and fails to admit Soviet crimes fully or take responsibility for them. While some facts are partly admitted, others are entirely ignored. This applies not only to academic discourse but also to the public and official discourse engendered by the authorities. For example, the official program for the commemoration of victims of Stalinist repression was signed off by the government in 2015 for a period of five years, but has so far been implemented only in part. Many of the planned events—conferences, exhibitions, changes in the school curriculum—have not been organized; institutions and popular commemorative practices envisaged by the program have not materialized. This is the way of dealing with the “problematic” past that Roland Barthes called “inoculation”—admitting a small part of the evil while hiding its larger dimensions and fundamental problems (Barthes, Mythologies, 43). However, a social demand for alternative historical discourses does exist, and debates and discussions of the Soviet past flourish on the web.

The Russian school of geography underwent a similar process. In 2014, the Russian Geographical Society became a powerful organization with Vladimir Putin, the minister of defense Sergey Shoigu, and Nikolay Kasimov, dean of the Geography Department of Moscow State University as its directors. The society is involved in many scientific and educational projects including the “Virgin Russia” photography festival, video lessons in geography for schools, a grants scheme for scientists, and annual prizes, among others. By and large, the society’s activities are similar to those of Britain’s Royal Geographical Society, but the affiliation with the government and
the lack of alternative forums carries the risk of a monopoly in the production of geographical knowledge, as also of aligning its agenda with that of the state.

All three factors described above have proved strong institutional barriers against the incorporation of digital humanities within the existing academic infrastructure. The Anglocentric history of digital humanities, anchored in the academic system, traces its emergence to the earliest humanities computing centers—the Princeton and Rutgers Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities (1991), the University of Virginia’s Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities (1993), and Brown University’s Scholarly Technology Group (1994), together with centers at Oxford and King’s College, London (Gold, Debates in the Digital Humanities, 282). These centers have become crucial points for the theorization of digital humanities as a field. They have also produced important new digital resources and tools, thereby bridging the gap between humanities scholars and the new technology, and serving as crosswalks between cyber infrastructure and its users. Scholars at these places learn how to introduce computational methods, encoding practices and tools into their research, so that users of digital resources can be transformed into producers.

No such development took place in the Soviet Union, where programmers and mathematicians were kept as far removed as possible from scholars in the humanities. Things have just begun to change in contemporary Russia. While current debates in DH scholarship critique the existing roles of DH centers within academia (Gold, Debates in the Digital Humanities, 287), the Russian centers are just starting to appear and are trying to establish themselves within both Russian academia and NGO-funded DH projects. These centers and working groups, while inspiring in their growth, still face a lot of challenges. Even the luckiest among them, who find their way into the Russian academic establishment (such as the Digital Humanities Center in one of the most progressive universities, the Higher School of Economics established in 2018 in Moscow and Perm), still need, to some extent, to align their research and teaching agendas with overarching state-promoted narratives in history and geography. In particular, research in fields like the traumatic periods of Soviet history is underrepresented in Russian academia.

My narrative explains why DH initiatives in memory and history are mostly set up and managed by noncommercial operators and individual activists unconnected with academia. In fact, these NGO initiatives are a notable addition to the conventional model of DH development in Western universities. Because of their grassroots nature, some of the Russian projects have come up in the nonmetropolitan regions that suffered most heavily from Stalinist terror. The social demand for such inquiry is higher in those parts than elsewhere in the country, and projects are often supported by the descendants of victims. Hence personal memory and family histories take the place of the unavailable “objective” archival data.

An alternative history is crystallizing not from academic data collection and analysis but from nonacademic social initiatives. The projects thus abound in a
range of distinctive features and issues which this chapter aims to present. Let me now switch to the projects themselves and discuss the context of their creation, their audience and social role, and the tools and technologies they use. These commemorative projects partially fulfill the need of both authors and audiences to cope with the societal traumas that the current political order marginalizes offline. These projects have great potential as sources for formal academic studies; but in point of fact, most of them are created by NGOs, local museums, and individual activists, often using crowdsourcing methods.

**Digital Humanities, Activism, and Memory**

The account above explains the unusual position that digital humanities occupies in the Russian academic knowledge production system. However, as I have also said above, projects aiming to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the “problematic” past, often missed out by academia, have started to emerge in the Russian activist sector. They have developed without any financial, methodological, or theoretical guidance or support from academia, but that does not mean they did not receive any assistance from individual academics. In many cases, faculty and graduate students were involved in these projects, though not as part of their university work. Instead, they acted as external experts in projects formally independent of academia. This relationship has influenced the development both of academic knowledge and of the web projects themselves: it has added a new element to the worldview of digital humanities centers and projects.

In a word, while academic conditions in Russia were not favorable for developing alternative histories and digital humanities as fields of study, the initiative was taken by individual activists and NGOs, who sometimes collaborated with colleagues from academia. Such temporary alliances could take the form of code festivals, workshops, or short seminars over a few days, but never more sustainable collaboration.

I will now take up the projects I wish to introduce one by one.

**THE TOPOGRAPHY OF TERROR**

“The Topography of Terror” (*Topografiya terrora*) is one of the most famous and successful projects in Russia, developed and maintained by the historical and civic NGO “Memorial.” In 2018, the number of users exceeded 120,000 and the number of views was more than a million. The majority of users were from Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg), Ukraine, and the United States.

The project operates at the intersection of spatial humanities, memory studies, and tourism, aiming to fill the knowledge gap about Stalinist repression in Moscow. Its first task was to map the sites that were occupied by various Soviet institutions of oppression (KGB offices, camps, prisons, places of execution, psychiatric
hospitals, and other institutions) within the compass of a single city, Moscow. In
terms of memory politics, the project therefore aims to contest the popular per-
ception of Stalinist repressions and gulags happening “far away” from the heart of
Russia: the subtitle and slogan of the project is “It was happening right here.” This
strategy is supported by numerous offline thematic excursions for Muscovites, espe-
cially school students.

In terms of DH technology, the project is quite challenging and innovative.
There is as yet no developed methodology or approach to map ex-Gulag land-
scapes and remains of the camp system, or to solve the uncertainties of their
location. Historical mapping and spatial humanities is an underdeveloped area in
general. Mapping ex-Gulag landscapes is further complicated by several factors:
the poor accessibility of Russian archives, the lack of precision in the available data,
and the spatial-temporal affinities between the sites. In other words, a Gulag camp
might have existed for couple of years in a distant village in the middle of Siberia
(a village that existed only because of the camp), then moved to the next village.
It is extremely hard to determine the location of either site or the dates when the
camp existed there. There are no “official” governmental maps laying out the sites
of Soviet prisons or Gulag camps, or showing the resettlement of nations in Soviet
times. These topics have hardly been investigated by any academic cartographer
within Russia. Projects to map the Gulag do exist, but usually they are small-scale
efforts, limited by the scarce archival data available. This is the case, for example,
with Mapping Gulag Russia’s Prison System from the 1930s to the Present (http://
gulagmaps.org), a project started by the University of Oxford, and a recent mapping
initiative of the Gulag History Museum (http://gulagmap.ru), both of them based
on the same data sources.

Large-scale mapping is still rarer and methodologically undeveloped. The few
examples include a map of the Gulag in Perm, initiated by the local branch of the
NGO “Memorial,” which is basically restricted to Gulag camps on the Yandex Maps
web service (the Russian analogue of Google Maps). This makes “The Topography
of Terror” virtually unique in Russia, as it is a large-scale attempt to map all the vari-
ous places in Moscow associated with the Great Terror and the Gulag. Moreover, it
relates to one of the most remarkable episodes in the memory wars, actually within
the city of Moscow, which was a much more challenging battlefield than the periph-
eries. However, the mapping system employed by the “Memorial” team has never
been widely discussed by professional cartographers, though the issues are far from
simple, either in method or execution. The project adopts a layered approach, cov-
ering both existing buildings and those that have been demolished. The conceptual
typology includes such site types as “a place of mass execution,” places associated
with famous prisoners, sites of protests, former camps, and places related to “science
under repression.” These various types of places are mapped on separate layers, and
brief historical information is provided about each place.
The social importance of the project is hard to overestimate, but let me turn to the analysis of its digital humanities aspect. The closest possible analogues are the Spatial History projects carried out at Stanford University (http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/index.php). This subdivision of digital humanities aims to merge historical data with its spatial dimension. However, the spatial history projects do not just place the historical events on a map, but rather visualize on maps various analyses of the extant historical data. In other words, the work conducted using that data is significant in itself, even before it is mapped. By contrast, “The Topography of Terror” uses a much narrower range of mapping and analytical techniques. Basically, its maps simply show the location of a place or event, without any further analysis.

The project combines some features of a commemorative DH project, preserving the memory of events and places, with the informative and historical functions of providing archival data, with a store of underrepresented historical facts and narratives; but it offers no analytical features or theoretical perspective. For example, the proposed topology of the GIS layers used for the maps is never explained on the website, and it sometimes looks quite random. The ways of locating data are inconsistent (half the sites are indicated by unscaled dots, others by polygons representing buildings), and their precise status and locations are not reflected on the map. In other words, we cannot tell whether a building still exists or not, nor whether we know for certain that an event took place at the site indicated. Owing to the rudimentary mapping technologies used for the Gulag system in Russia, the visual language is also inconsistent. “The Topography of Terror” does not seriously challenge this state of things. Questions of design aside, the distinction between scalable and nonscalable visual symbols remains unclear.

The fact that this project was developed outside academia and, moreover, never welcomed or supported by Russian academia, meant that its methods and findings have never been published, shared, or discussed among the professional community of cartographers, geographers, and historians. While the project team has apparently solved the issues of locating the historical sites, mapping the borders of camps, and developing a representational methodology for places which could not be located, the details of these findings remain unknown. Neither the data itself, nor the methods of acquiring it, nor the principles behind its application has been publicly presented. It is therefore hard to assess the project in cartographical terms or to check precisely how the data was acquired and mapped. On a more general level, the bounds of what should be considered as “ex-Gulag” landscapes have not been debated either.

Yet “The Topography of Terror” must be praised for impressively filling a gap among spatial humanity projects by its large-scale mapping of the ex-Gulag camp system and for introducing a means of classifying and representing the data. It has developed a unique method of acquiring data from archives and private memories,
defining the topological categories of landscapes of repression, and dealing with spatial uncertainties; but it has not gone on to develop various sets of thematized maps from the data, as might have been expected from a DH historical project. In terms of “digital memory” debates, it is a powerful contestation of official memory politics in Moscow, which takes place offline.

Both Russian academia and the project itself would benefit greatly from wider collaboration between the project team and the academic community. Professional solutions to the issues described above would enrich the Russian practice of human geography, formalize the concept of “terrorscapes,” and develop the methodology of large-scale historical mapping, allowing the production of more analytical maps of social, cultural, and temporal patterns of life in Soviet Moscow. These are functions one would expect in the research agenda of any such DH project in the West.

**THE SIBERIANS FREED AND EXILED**

The second project that I wish to discuss is a regional initiative called “The Siberians Freed and Exiled” (Sibiriaki volnie i nevolnie). The project is a major online component of a newly built permanent display conceived by the Kraevedcheskiy Museum in Tomsk, one of the chief cities of the Urals. The main purpose of the project is to collect from ordinary people, through crowdsourcing, data on persons exiled to Siberia (mainly to the Tomsk region) during Stalinist repression. The narrative of forced relocations during the Great Terror has been mostly whitewashed, arising only rarely in the official historical narrative. This project attempts to make good the absence of reliable data on deportation by resorting instead to vernacular memory. While “The Topography of Terror” maps such official archival data as is available, “The Siberians” addresses local knowledge and memory instead of archival data. It allows any member of the public to submit a story online, and provides simple tools for visualizing the data. What also makes this project different from “The Topography of Terror” is that it was initiated within a state-owned institution rather than an NGO, but still without direct collaboration with any academic institution.

Apart from serving as a platform for self-expression and for sharing family histories, “The Siberians” features a very simple analytical tool. Stories are mapped across the region and sorted by family names and periods of deportation. No further analysis or conclusions are provided: the mapping is limited to navigation, classification, and visualization as its main purpose.

Yet “The Siberians” has great potential and could be an important project for academic participation. In particular, it could shed new light on the relation between official data and data gathered from ordinary citizens. It could equally be developed into a proper commemorative project, helping to overcome the memory traumas of families whose members suffered from forced relocation and exile in the twentieth century. In its present state, the project seems to be positioned somewhere between
these two purposes. However, the fact that it is initiated and run by a government museum is itself significant in terms of the memory wars. It is a rare example of the contestation of the official memory from within a governmental institution.

**LIVED THROUGH**

The third project that I wish to address is “Outlasted” (*Prožito*), started as a personal initiative of the Moscow-based activist Michail Melnichenko and supported by the Zimin Foundation. Its main goal is to collect, scan, and digitize the personal diaries of people from the twentieth century, thereby building up a major corpus of personal archives (hence personal histories) in Russia. By October 2019, the project had decoded more than 4,000 diaries, made more than 400,000 annotations on them, and placed them on the website. Over 1,000 volunteers work permanently for the project, 25 percent of whom are students.

Unlike the previous projects, “Outlasted” is not a spatial humanities project. It belongs rather to the “digital archives” branch of the broad field of digital humanities. However, the team aims not only to create a corpus of archival texts, applying the basic techniques of text digitizing and encoding, but also to develop the technical tools for its research and analysis. For the present, however, the analytical part of the project is largely restricted to advanced search by topics and key words (“summer,” “winter,” “the death of Stalin,” etc.). The project has plenty of offline activities—code festivals, workshops, public seminars—in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities, which attract a lot of attention among student and activist communities.

As in my previous examples, the digital humanities aspect of the project remains at a very basic level, at the starting point of any project to create a digital corpus. Nor does it provide any consistent historical narrative, unlike “The Topography of Terror” or “The Siberians,” that might enable us to classify it as “pro” or “contra” the official version.

The projects addressed in this chapter face a double exclusion. On the one hand, being developed and run by nonacademic institutions, they are not analyzed by academic DH scholars; and by not being so analyzed, they are not adequately projected in English. However, they are among the most important projects in contemporary Russia in advancing the field of spatial DH, spatial histories, and vernacular memory programs. Moreover, they excitingly fill the gap in academic knowledge production at the intersection of geography, history, and digital humanities by contesting the official historical narrative in post-Soviet Russia. Both the project teams and academia generally would benefit greatly from cooperation, especially as it would allow the projects to further develop their analytical tools, improve their data processing, and invent new means of digitizing the archival information. The institutional structure, along with the current system of academic funding, slows down professional and academic development of historical and geographical DH.
Yet this situation has resulted in the rise of unofficial projects merging educational, analytical, and research objectives. One looks forward to a day when these two trends will combine.

**Notes**

1. The Kraevedcheskyi Museum is a part of the widest network of cultural institutions in Russia. Its aim is to present local narratives in a display which combines history, ethnography, and geography.

2. One of the rare publications treating them is Polyan, *Ne po svoei vole*.

3. The Zimin Foundation is a not-for-profit organization established by the ex-president of a major Russian telecom company, who has the reputation of being in opposition to the Russian government. The project has now been transformed into a new center at the European University at St. Petersburg, with Mikhail Minchenko as its director from 2020.

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