

Memory lane becomes a battleground

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A 'memory war' is raging between countries of the former USSR in a cultural conflict that perpetuates animosity between millions of people. That is the claim of Dr Alexander Etkind, a Cambridge academic, who used a debate at the University's Festival of Ideas last night to demonstrate how Russia, Poland and Ukraine are embroiled in campaigns that could damage their own national interests.

He also used the lecture to officially launch a three-year multinational research project that looks specifically at these memory wars, as well as the means and prospects of reconciling them. It is thought to be the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

While traditional conflicts between the three countries have taken place

on the battlefield in a past that now feels distant, memory wars are being fought daily through newspaper columns, television programmes, novels, theatre productions and on the cinema screen.

Etkind's project will examine how the same Soviet-era tragedies and traumas are remembered, promoted, revised and censored in different ways by the countries involved.

"The memories of World War Two, Stalinism, and Soviet socialism live on and are constantly being renewed in remarkably different and antagonistic ways," said Dr Etkind.

"Official histories have for years emphasised moments of glory and triumph; now we see how moments of tragedy and trauma have an important part to play, too."

Looking at seismic historical events such as the Katyn massacre, as well as at seemingly minor occurrences such as the revision of history in children's textbooks, Dr Etkind and his team - drawn from five European universities - will analyse the continuing impact of such events in the countries involved.

Their work can be seen at www.memoryatwar.org/

"When a statue of Stalin is torn down or a Polish film meets a hostile Russian review - these are all manoeuvres in the memory war," said Dr Etkind. "Often you will get tit-for-tat retaliations and counter-offensives. And, like any war, it has the capacity for expansion as more and more genres such as cinema, new media and social media are involved. "Memory wars can become hugely political; tensions rise. If the situation is not controlled then it can explode like any conflict."

"Katyn is a major example. Many decades ago, Russia looked to shift the

blame for the massacre onto the Nazis. For many Russians now, there is no interest, it just happened. But for Poland, it is just the opposite. It is a huge part of their history and is as important as almost anything else."

The Memory At War project will employ pioneering methodology to map memory events in real-time across Eastern European borders. Literature, film, new media, historical textbooks and public politics will all be examined to assess their impact on the public consciousness.

"For all their professed divisions in the memory war, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine are interconnected in a web of influences, jealousies, fears and imitations," added Dr Etkind. "Over the course of the project we will monitor events in these countries and hope to produce a new body of knowledge on cultural and historical memory.

"Really, all this must be seen in the context of identity building. Our identity is part of our everyday existence. In turn, memory is a significant part of identity, both on a personal and national level.

"There may be no bullets fired or blood spilled in memory wars, but there can be real damage. These countries all feel the need to affirm their new identities and move away from their joint history. Each country is reappropriating its past, using what it can, and discarding the rest. But the useable parts for [Russia](#) are not the same for Poland and the Ukraine - and vice versa. Is there any hope for a truce?"

Provided by University of Cambridge

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