
War Memories, Monumental Activism, and Regional Identity in the Arctic Borderland

Monumental Memory Politics of the Great Patriotic War and Mnemonic Actors in the Post-Soviet Murmansk Region

ABSTRACT Given the recent trend toward the instrumentalization of memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) in Russian federal memory politics, this article examines regional features of this trend by assessing the transformations that occurred in the monumental GPW commemoration in the post-Soviet Murmansk region. The case study analyzes the process of creating war memorials dedicated to the Battle for *Zapolyar'ye*, a Murmansk regional narrative of the Great Patriotic War, by observing new war memorials and activities of mnemonic actors initiating these memorials. The article sheds light on the vigorous commemorative activism pushed by a set of regional mnemonic actors who, although remaining loyal to the official patriotic state narrative of the Battle, tend to emphasize other aspects, particularly heroic or tragic, depending on their agendas. While veteran organizations and sometimes regional authorities promote the state-centric and triumphalist vision of the Battle, local *poiskoviki* activists, on the contrary, appeal to its tragic side, pointing out the importance of the personal remembrance of the fallen. The article concludes that, although the centralization and unification trends in Russian memory politics noticeably affect the regional domain, they are unlikely to fully explain the regional dynamics of developing the monumental media of war memory since such dynamics are set primarily by grassroots activists.

KEYWORDS memory politics, Murmansk region, war memorials, World War II, Russia

In post-Soviet Russia, steering the discourse on the historical past, particularly the violent past, has become an important way of legitimizing state power (Bürger 2016; Malinova 2021; Smith 2002; Weiss-Wendt 2021) and nation-building (Laruelle 2009; Malinova 2015; Torbakov 2011). This process also has regional and local dimensions. Regional and local actors of politics may deal with memories of the violent and tragic past, for example, to promote the desirable narrative of certain significant historical events, to affiliate local narratives of the past with the national ones, or consolidate local communities (Clowes 2016; Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Zhurzhenko 2021). In this way, studying regional cases of dealing with (and using) the violent past is just as important for understanding identity building and symbolic politics in Russia as examining it from the national (federal) perspective.

One example of the violent past is the Battle for *Zapolyar'ye*, the military operations of the Soviet armed forces against Nazi Germany and Finnish troops from June 1941 to



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October 1944. The narrative of the Battle for *Zapolyar'e* (BfZ) has a regional significance for the Murmansk region's history and self-identification. It provides a symbolic tie to the Great Patriotic War (GPW), the Soviet/Russian master narrative of World War II. The narrative of the BfZ is conveyed through numerous memorials dedicated to the war victims, making this part of the past overwhelmingly better represented in the regional mnemonic landscape than any other.

In this study, I analyze the development of post-Soviet memory politics by considering the case of the BfZ as the Murmansk region's central commemorative narrative. I trace the process of initiation and erection of the new memorials dedicated to the BfZ in the post-Soviet period (1992–p.d.) through the lens of its quantitative and qualitative aspects. I also discuss the mnemonic actors involved in creating memorials and analyze their agendas to see what narratives they disseminate.

The article's main argument is that the Murmansk regional memory politics of the GPW is by no means a process orchestrated by the Kremlin but a complex field where various actors use monumental means of war memory for various purposes. These actors can be divided into four groups: veteran organizations, public authorities, occasional activist groups, and search squads (*poiskoviki*). The empirical evidence shows that in the post-Soviet years, the number of new war monuments decreased significantly compared to the Soviet period. The observable impact of those Russian actors who promote the state-centered narrative of the war is quite noticeable but still limited. A major part of the region's war memory politics can be explained by the dynamics of bottom-up patriotic activism, local identity construction, or attracting tourists to the places of military glory. The obtained data make grassroots initiatives the main contributor to the development of monumental war commemoration in the Murmansk region.

In the first section, I briefly outline the current state of the GPW memory politics in Russia, pointing out the importance of a regional perspective on this subject. The second section sheds some light on the central role of the GPW regional narrative for the Murmansk regional memory and identity. In the third section, I present the results of a quantitative survey of war memorials installed in the region in the post-Soviet period and then discuss the set of mnemonic actors initiating these memorials. The next two sections delineate two remarkable features of war memory activism: the conflict over the Valley of Glory, which is the region's quintessential war memorial, and the distinct process of consolidating local identities by monumental means. After giving a thorough account of monumental war commemoration in the previous sections, the sixth section assesses the federal impact on this process. The conclusion highlights the main findings.

MEMORY POLITICS OF THE RUSSIAN STATE AND WAR COMMEMORATION IN THE RUSSIAN REGIONS

To discuss how social representations of the historical past are sustained and disseminated, scholars often refer to the concept of memory politics, which is commonly understood as a set of efforts by the state and other social actors to propagate and maintain the circulation of certain representations of the collective past (Bernhard and

Kubik 2014, 7; Lebow 2006, 13; Malinova 2020, 27). Although the approaches toward memory politics may vary depending on whether they focus on institutions (Lebow 2006; Miller and Efremenko 2020) or discourses (Verovšek 2016), most of them usually understand its object as an organized and institutionalized activity of mnemonic actors. Bernhardt and Kubik (2014, 9) characterize mnemonic actors as political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past. Mnemonic actors contend for dominance in symbolic space, which manifests itself, in part, in creating memorials or other structures made in honor of some person or event. Memorials, which are commonly characterized as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) (Nora 1989), are among the key material tools for the formation of collective representations of the past and, in turn, imagined identities (Anderson 2006; Bodnar 1992; Hass 1998; Norkunas 2002).

For the post-Soviet Russian state, the situation of regime transformation after 1991 necessitated the official promotion of those historical narratives that would be compliant with the tasks of legitimizing the new regime and reassembling national identity. Malinova and Miller (2021, 14) describe such narratives as elements of “usable past,” or “a repertoire of historical events, figures, and symbols lodged with notions that are in one way or another significant for modern political or cultural practices.” To delineate the milestones of the political processes related to selecting, enabling, and adjusting the usable past by the Russian state and non-state mnemonic actors, the researchers usually mark several periods, distinguishing between the period of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency in the 1990s, with the particularly critical official attitude toward the Soviet past, and the two periods under the presidency of Vladimir Putin: the 2000s, with the elaboration of a more conciliatory and “eclectic” historical master narrative; and the 2010s, with a more consolidated and proactive official memory politics that also was not immune to the use of conflicting narratives (Malinova 2018; Titov 2017; Wijermars 2018).

The period of Putin’s rule is marked by growing involvement of the state and state-backed actors in constructing the usable past¹ and increased attention toward the memory of the GPW of 1941–45. Indeed, the measure of the political, societal, and cultural impact made by the topic of the GPW on Russian society is comparable to no other historical event, mainly due to the huge losses the country suffered during the war so that almost every Russian family has an ancestor who is a war hero or a victim. For the post-Soviet Russian state, the official narrative of the war became a genuine foundational myth (Koposov 2011, 163) protected at the legal and institutional levels and sanctified at the level of symbolic politics (Gjerde 2015; Malinova 2018; Miller 2009). The content of the official narrative of the GPW has changed significantly compared to the Soviet period. The Russian political elite recognizes the value of the GPW narrative and the cult of “fallen heroes” (Davis 2018, 20; Hoffmann 2021, 3), trying to frame existing commemorative practices in an official patriotic way and turn them into an element of usable past (Ponamareva 2020). Since 2012, the scale of the Kremlin’s military-patriotic

1. Wijermars (2018, 226) sees a correlation between rises in the level of public protest and peaks in state activity in the field of memory politics, explaining this by the regime’s urgent search for a resource of legitimation during periods of instability.

framing of the GPW memory has expanded, involving new instruments of federal memory politics such as RVIO (*Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, the Russian Military Historical Society), and RIO (*Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo*, the Russian Historical Society), the two most widely known Russian memory-political GONGOS (organizations designed as NGOs but in fact controlled by the state) (Lapin 2020; Weiss-Wendt 2021).

Discussing the profiles of Russian mnemonic actors, Wijermars (2018, 3) acknowledged that “the differentiation between state and non-state actors in today’s Russia is notoriously murky,” referring “non-state” actors “to the grey zone beyond the state’s official structures” and noting that their orientations may vary “from the ‘state-loyal’ to the outspokenly oppositional.” Concerning some examples of “non-state” but “state-loyal” actors, Danilova (2015, 151) emphasizes a significant contribution to the development of war memorials made by “search and recovery operations” (*poiskovye otriady, poiskoviki*), whose mission is to “find the remains of unburied soldiers, identify them and rebury them with respect.” It would be incorrect to characterize the *poiskoviki* movement as some manifestation of the Kremlin-led memory politics rather than a “non-state military-patriotic” mnemonic actor with its own notions of patriotism and war memory that differ considerably from the official ones (Dahlin 2017; Goncharova and Iasaveev 2020; Shokova, Glushkova, and Dereviankin 2020). Gabowitsch (2014) provides more evidence for the insufficiency of the “state versus non-state” binary for understanding memory politics and mnemonic actors. He discovered that the Soviet surge of monumental war commemoration from the mid-1960s, although officially endorsed, was first and foremost the result of actions from below. This observation is consistent with Danilova’s (2015, 153) finding that the monumental activism in the regions differs from that at the national level, being much less centralized and mainly led by local communities.

My argument is that initiating, installing, and using war memorials is a complex process involving different types of actors, not just the state or state-backed institutions. The part of the literature on top-down initiatives within Russian memory politics provides a thorough account of the Russian hegemonic discourses on the historical past and plausibly explains the Kremlin’s incentives, narratives, and directives but shows a limited reach of processes on the grassroots level. An effective way of understanding a complex social subject is analyzing its regional or local dimensions. As Donovan (2019, 15) points out, regional studies “provide the means necessary to make broader claims about processes and developments relevant to the national experience.” In most cases, the implications of national identity-building policies become visible in regional cultural and political contexts, as do the possible restraints for the center’s initiatives and the content and pathways of center-periphery exchange within identity-construction processes. At the same time, regional experiences of identity construction, which are authentic sets of attitudes and practices, can often be generalized to other regions, as in the case of post-Soviet Russian regions (Oushakine 2009, 7). This is undoubtedly relevant to studying collective memory and memory politics, which is one of the key aspects of identity building.

As the academic field of memory studies develops in Russia, regional memory politics is receiving more scholarly attention (Miller and Efremenko 2020). The memory of the GPW is usually central to regional memory politics; regional elites use war memories as powerful tools to legitimize their rule, cultivate patriotism, and acquire symbolic resources for a region's image (Davis 2018; Donovan 2018; Song 2018; Zhurzhenko 2021). A particularly interesting problem in this regard is how the agendas promoted by federal mnemonic actors become implemented at the regional level and how regional memories become "uploaded" to the federal level. Another issue is whether the federal-regional *interplay* in elaborating and delivering memory politics is an internally coherent or a conflictual process. The presented case study of Murmansk war memorials attempts to unpack these complex dynamics by analyzing the agency of regional (and some federal) mnemonic actors.

THE MURMANSK REGION: REGIONAL IDENTITY AND WAR MEMORY

The Murmansk region is a peripheral Russian administrative unit located in the European part of the country's Arctic zone. Murmansk regional identity was formed upon the powerful semantics of its geostrategic position as a "military and naval outpost" of the Russian imperial state (Podvintsev 2016, 188). The region's social and economic development is heavily dependent on federal investments, so the post-Soviet period of problematic transition from a planned to a market economy was associated with a lack of federal funding, economic depression, and depopulation; these factors also affected self-perception of regional communities (Sharova 2016; Zhurzhenko 2021, 207). The socioeconomic decay of the post-Soviet years changed the political culture of the Murmansk region's population, shifting its dominant type from traditional Leftist to Russian nationalist during the "wild nineties" (Turovskii 1999, 123, 126). The memory of the GPW is crucially associated with the regional war narrative, the BfZ. The Murmansk region was the only part of the Eastern Front where the German forces failed to advance far. Soviet military historiography named the Battle's offensive part, the Petsamo-Kirkenes operation, "Stalin's tenth blow"² and had a high opinion of its implementation by the army command (Babin 1984, 291; Rumiantsev 1955, 93).³

Describing the military actions at the Murmansk theater of operations in 1941–44, the Soviet and post-Soviet historiography used several related terms such as *Bitva za Zapoliar'e* (the Battle for *Zapoliar'e*), *Oborona Zapoliar'ia* (the Defense of *Zapoliar'e*), and some others. The latter definition is ingrained in the public context particularly due to the campaign medal "*Za oboronu Sovetskogo Zapoliar'ia*" ("For the Defense of the Soviet Polar Regions") awarded to at least 350,000 people (Kolesnikov and Rozhkov 1986, 81–82). The two core symbolic elements in the medal's title are the battle's defensive nature (as of the "big" GPW) and its explicit regional dimension. The

2. In the late 1950s, due to the campaign against Stalin's cult of personality, his name was deleted from the wording.

3. On the operation see Holtmark (2021a, 2021b).

semantics of the word *Zapoliar'e* has heroic, patriotic, military, and romantic nostalgic connotations (Podvintsev 2016, 21–22). Under the military-patriotic “brand” of *Zapoliar'e*, the regional GPW narrative is inscribed into the national patriotic master narrative of the GPW,⁴ taking its place together with Smolensk, Volgograd, or Kursk in a distinctive Russian national “league of regional war memories,” a set of regional narratives of the GPW used by regional and local authorities to obtain more symbolic capital and compete with the other regions for the attention from federal mnemonic actors.⁵

From this viewpoint, the memory of the BfZ observed through the lens of the aspect of the memorials dedicated to the Battle can reveal some features of the complex and multifaceted Russian memory politics, namely the peculiarities of its regional development. This study geographically scopes the Murmansk region since the BfZ operations and logistics took place almost exactly within the region’s borders. Since only a minor part of the region was occupied by the German forces, the local war memorials experienced both waves of war memorialization in the Soviet period described by Gabowitsch (2014). In addition, they sensitively reflect current trends of memorialization in this border region.

In this article, I analyze data regarding Murmansk regional memorials that are (1) located in the Murmansk region and (2) dedicated to the BfZ. I considered those war memorials that meet both criteria and, as suggested by Gabowitsch’s (2014, 6) “biographical approach,” collected information about the most important facts of their “lives”: date of occurrence, location, type (a sculpture, a memorial plaque, a gravestone, etc.), initiator/installer/sponsor, subject of commemoration (to whom a memorial is dedicated), later changes (upgrades, restorations), and so on.⁶ To retrieve such information, I surveyed relevant open sources whose diverse profile includes academic articles, official reports and regulations, local reference literature, media reports, and web materials that list, describe, and report on new war memorials. I also study regional mnemonic actors dealing with the monuments, particularly their agendas and performance, by surveying their web resources and media reports about their activities. To unpack the most illustrative cases of monumental commemoration of the BfZ, I employ a qualitative analysis of relevant web sources. The data were collected remotely in 2021–22.

NEW MEMORIALS AND MNEMONIC ACTORS

In this section, I observe changes in the monumental commemoration of the BfZ by conducting a quantitative survey of the war memorials installed in the post-Soviet period.

4. One of the recent manifestations of this was the declassification and publication of a series of documents related to the defense of *Zapoliar'e* in 1941 by the Ministry of Defence as part of commemorating the Day of the Unknown Soldier on December 3, 2020 (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2020a). The Ministry published these documents “to protect and defend historical truth, counter falsification of history and the attempts to revise the results of the Second World War” (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2020b).

5. For example, regions compete for honorary titles such as “City of Military Glory” and “City of Labor Glory.”

6. Originally, this approach involved studying “all the twists and turns in a memorial’s life, from creation to decay or retirement and, often enough, to its withering and death” (Gabowitsch 2014, 6). Given the massive size of the data, such a task is unlikely to be achieved; therefore, I must limit my effort to documenting only the facts mentioned.

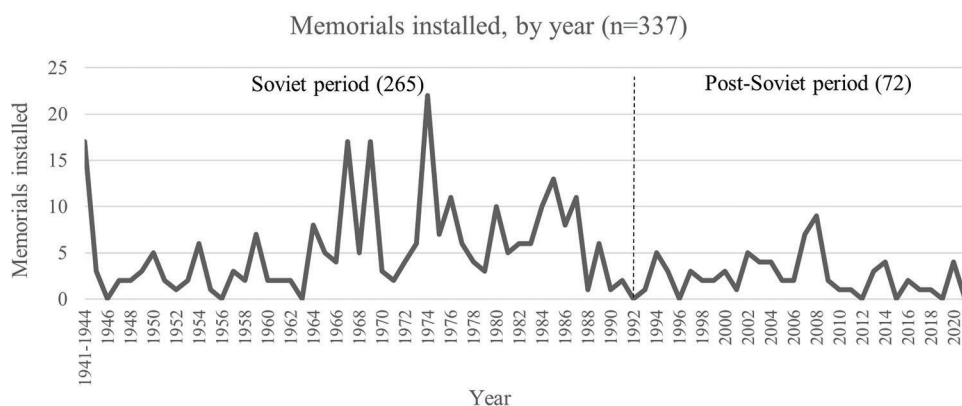


FIGURE 1. Memorials dedicated to the Battle for *Zapolyar'e* installed, by year, 1941–2021. Source: Committee for Culture and Art of the Murmansk Region (2012), Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region (2020), Oresheta et al. (2009), *Pamiat' o proshlom gorod Hranit* (2014).

Next, I take a closer look at the mnemonic actors, categorize them, and describe their agendas and the ways they interact with each other. There are also a few words to say about the geographic patterns of their activity.

I managed to count 514 commemoration objects dedicated to the BfZ.⁷ The date of occurrence is uncertain for 177 objects, so, unfortunately, we cannot consider them in the context of post-Soviet war commemoration. The sample for 1992–21 I use for further analysis of mnemonic actors scopes 72 memorials that appeared after 1991 (see Figure 1).

As the data show, the promotion of the official patriotic cult of victory in the GPW under Putin in 2000–21 did not cause significant quantitative changes in monumental war commemoration in the Murmansk region during the same period. On average, the number of new memorials per year in the post-Soviet period is two times less compared to the Soviet times. The reduced number of monuments in the 1990s is likely to be associated with the shortfall of money, while the subsequent decade shows some growth of monumental initiatives. However, the 2010s are marked by even fewer erected memorials than under Yeltsin, which is curious enough given the expansion of state-driven military-patriotic frames after 2012 (Weiss-Wendt 2021; Wijermars 2018). Another observation is that some peaks can be explained by anniversary years, most notably the anniversaries of the German defeat in *Zapolyar'e* (October 26, 1944). The memorials installed in the post-Soviet period include (1) sculptural monuments (33); (2) objects related to remains of the fallen in the war, namely graves, obelisks, and memorial signs (25); (3) memorial plaques (11); and (4) other objects⁸ (3). To find out more details

7. In general, all the GPW memorials in the region commemorate the BfZ. The only exception is the monument to Zoia Kosmodem'anskaia, a Soviet partisan hero who fought on the Moscow front and has no relation to *Zapolyar'e*. The monument was initiated by the Murmansk city administration and installed in Murmansk in 2018.

8. Two welcome stelas and one historical site.

about the contemporary developments of the memorials, a qualitatively focused analysis of mnemonic actors and the most representative cases of memorial developments is needed.

A type of an actor's primary social activity is selected as a relevant subject for constructing categories. On this basis, one can single out, list (in ascending order of the number of initiated commemorative objects), and describe the mnemonic agendas of the following categories: (a) veteran organizations (15), (b) public authorities (19), (c) occasional activist groups (22), and (d) search squads (*poiskoviki*) (30).

a. **Veteran organizations** usually associate veterans from certain military or civil service branches and provide them with social support of various kinds, including material, legal, or informational assistance, representing their interests in interaction with authorities, and organizing social events. In the field of war commemoration, regional veteran organizations perform not so much as typical "mnemonic warriors" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 15) but as "moral watchdogs" securing the circulation of conservative and official war narratives (Zhurzhenko 2021, 218). The *Shchit* (Shield) noncommercial fund is an illustrative example of such an organization. This GONGO was established in 2007 and was purposed to provide social support for FSB (*Federal'naiia sluzhba bezopasnosti*, the Federal Security Service) veterans. In the field of memory politics, the fund pursues public and patriotic activity among the young population of Murmansk, describing its mission as "to spread information about the history of security services in different periods of the Soviet and Russian history as widely as possible." Veteran organizations, while carrying out the task of forming "a positive image of men in uniform which is often unfairly slandered," explicitly frame the memory of the BfZ in an official patriotic way, placing the security services and other force structures (*siloviki*) at the center of their narrative (Shchit 2022a). *Shchit* organizes commemorative events, publishes thematic materials promoting the patriotic narrative of the war, and monitors the state of the commemorative infrastructure created in the wake of the memory of the BfZ (Shchit 2022b). There are some other veteran organizations, although they possess incomparably smaller resources than *Shchit*; such organizations can formally be noncommercial and charity funds (e.g., the *Vozrozhdenie* ("The Revival") fund, the Arctic Border Guards fund), veteran councils, and initiative groups.

b. **Public authorities** as commemorative actors encompass institutions of political power at federal and regional levels and local self-governance bodies. Such actors are the regional and local executive (administrations) and legislative (councils) bodies. Being engaged in creating the region's commemorative infrastructure, they perform both as initiators of new memorials and as providers of administrative advantages for initiators from other categories. Motivations of this group of mnemonic actors are usually determined by the powers and interests of each institution. Most often authorities initiate new war memorials "to perpetuate the memory of significant historical events," as specified by the Murmansk City Charter (Council of Deputies of the City of Murmansk 2018). Public authorities also share some common interest in increasing the tourist attractiveness of the region or locality, depending on the level of decision making. The Murmansk regional administration has been pursuing a targeted regional tourist brand construction

policy since 2013 (Podvintsev 2016, 192–194). As part of this policy, the regional government adopted the Program for the Development of the Tourist and Recreational Cluster of the Murmansk Region (Federalnyi portal malogo I srednego predprinimatel'stva 2016), aimed at developing historical-cultural and military-patriotic tourism using the landmarks related to the memory of the BfZ in Kolskii and Pechengskii districts and the city of Murmansk (2016, 20–22, 37–38). In addition, the regional government provides funds for restoring memorials commemorating the BfZ. In 2014, it transferred 10 million rubles to local administrations for these activities (Zhurin 2013).

c. **Occasional activist groups** are professional, educational, and local collectives who initiate commemorative objects that usually have some relation to their place of employment, study, or residence. These can be school and work collectives, proactive local citizens, personnel of military units, or indigenous (Sami) activists. Although commemoration is not central to their repertoire of social activities, these groups contribute quite generously to memory infrastructure, driven by a variety of incentives—often out of a sense of patriotism, to strengthen their local civil and professional identities or merely to enrich their daily life. Most commonly, actors from this group follow the Soviet-era agenda of commemorating the “fallen heroes” and maintaining a symbolic reference to their predecessors who fought in the war. However, it would be an oversimplification to characterize occasional activist groups as potent sources of what is commonly referred to as “vernacular memories” (Bodnar 1992) since their initiatives do not necessarily conflict with the official “sanctified” memories of the BfZ but supplement the existing memory framework with some missing links. Besides, such “citizen-based commemorative activism” (Danilova 2015, 212) often relies on the support of other mnemonic actors due to a lack of resources. Private companies also invest in memorial projects, often supporting local amateur mnemonic actors who lack funds.

d. **Search squads (*poiskoviki*)**. This category of mnemonic actors refers to a range of volunteer organizations involved in searching, identifying, repatriating, and re-burying the remains of war victims (primarily those who died in the GPW but also in other wars that took place in the Murmansk region, for example, the Winter War of 1939–40). The *poiskoviki* work with thousands of the unburied remains of the soldiers who fell in the BfZ, emphasizing that their work notably resulted in “debunking many myths [about the BfZ] and unraveling the immense losses of [Soviet] fighters,” as one of their leaders put it (Khraniteli nasledii 2019b) and promoting a “mourning” victim-centered narrative of the Battle.⁹ The movement has been active in the Murmansk region since 1959 spanning 22 search squads with at least 600 activists, and has contributed to the reburials of more than 22,000 fallen war victims (Khraniteli nasledii 2019b). They are also engaged in restoring old memorials, creating new ones, and promoting youth patriotic education. Since 2000, the squads associated with the regional umbrella *poiskoviki* organization have received a small amount of funding from the regional budget that

9. Another example is the critical reception of the official commemorative practices by one of the *poiskoviki* leaders, Konstantin Dobrovolskii, who complained about the lack of budget funding for the activists and blamed the officials for not paying enough respect to the remains of fallen soldiers (Britskaia 2018).

barely covers operational costs. However, despite the lack of funding and other practical issues, the *poiskoviki* movement remains a well-organized and motivated movement steered by a coordinating council and driven by considerations of duty and high mission (Khraniteli nasledia 2019b), the regional *poiskoviki* are reputable mnemonic actors whose leaders (Konstantin Dobrovol'skii, Mikhail Oresheta, Lev Zhurin) are respected by local authorities and people. In September 2021, a state-funded memorial to regional *poiskoviki* was installed in the Valley of Glory (*Vechnii Murmansk* 2021).

In general, these four categories of regional mnemonic actors are characterized by generally consistent and nonconflicting agendas based on the patriotic framing of the BfZ. All actors are sympathetic toward the general idea of commemoration and its patriotic tonality. However, the actors have diverging opinions *within* the mentioned unitary memory framing that sometimes leads to tensions. For example, the regional authorities launched a thorough redevelopment of the Valley of Glory, making it more aesthetically acceptable and attractive for tourists. The initiative caused a fundamental objection from *poiskoviki* who gave war memorials a less triumphalist and more mourning and victim-centered meaning and, in this regard, harshly criticized the official initiative (Khraniteli nasledia 2019a). Nonetheless, regardless of those separate instances of conflicts, regional mnemonic actors are generally open to collaborating. Veteran organizations are the most active type of actors in terms of collaboration: the data show that in 12 cases of joint memory projects (when the actors who participated in initiating an object belong to two or three categories) veteran organizations acted as co-initiators eight times. Still, although the actors are not averse to interacting, interaction is ultimately not a common pattern in their behavior, indicating their independence rather than interdependence.

Talking about the geography of post-Soviet war memorials, it is reasonable to look at how the activity of mnemonic actors is distributed throughout the region. In general, one can observe two mnemonic areas. The urban area is marked by a set of typical urban memory infrastructure (monuments and memorial plaques) that makes up approximately two-thirds of all post-Soviet BfZ memorials. The rural area comprises the places where the BfZ hostilities took place (the Zapadnaia Litsa valley, the Mustatunturi ridge, and the Rybachii and Srednii peninsulas); for that reason, this area is formed mainly by the objects containing the remains of the fallen fighters. The data also show that officials and occasional activists initiate memorials predominantly in the urban area while *poiskoviki* focus on rural developments, apparently because they work with remains “in the fields,” not in the urban zones. Interestingly, this regularity is weaker in the case of the veteran organizations, which appear to be making efforts to become visible in both mnemonic areas.

Overall, observing the four groups of regional mnemonic actors, one can say that their agency is driven by a range of incentives. Only the veteran organizations, particularly *Shchit*, which unites FSB veterans, are engaged in the targeted promotion of the official state-centered narrative. The other actors, such as public authorities, occasional activist groups, and *poiskoviki*, tend to complete other practical tasks, for example, attracting tourists and burying the fallen soldiers. Although the patriotic framing of

commemorative activity is typical for them, the understanding of the axiology and ethics of patriotism may vary, as it is in the case of veterans and *poiskoviki* who share state-centered and victim-centered notions of the BfZ, respectively. Geographically, two mnemonic areas are distinguished: the urban area, predominantly with monuments and other objects of urban memory infrastructure; and the rural area, mainly with military mass graves and graveyards. Officials and occasional activists tend to initiate memorials in the urban area, while *poiskoviki* are most often active in the rural area; veteran organizations are active in both areas.

In the following sections, I discuss the qualitative aspects of the Murmansk region's mnemonic actors dealing with the BfZ monumental commemoration. First, I analyze a salient and multifold debate over the redevelopment of the Valley of Glory, the region's central place of memory. Next, I trace the post-Soviet changes in the identified urban and rural mnemonic areas, revealing some curious cases of the mnemonic actors' behavior. Last, I consider the impact on regional monumental war commemoration made by federal-level mnemonic actors.

MNEMONIC ACTORS IN CONFLICT: THE CASE OF THE VALLEY OF GLORY REDEVELOPMENT

Besides introducing new war memorials, the Murmansk mnemonic actors work with existing ones by carrying out various conservation practices, such as reconstruction and restoration of monuments as well as identification and reburial of body remains. Since 1991, 13 monuments have been reconstructed or restored (several times in some cases); remains of the fallen soldiers have been identified and reburied within the boundaries of six memorials. In several cases, war memorials undergo more significant modifications, sometimes associated with no less significant problems. An outstanding example is the *Dolina Slavy* (the Valley of Glory), a renowned memorial complex located in the valley of the Zapadnaia Litsa River. The place became an arena of fierce fighting between German and Soviet troops in 1941–44 and was unofficially known as the Valley of Death. A centerpiece of the geography of the BfZ, the Valley of Glory has become a popular destination for commemorative and patriotic tourism. Nowadays, the memorial complex consists of two parts: the core section for official commemorative activities (e.g., the ones related to Victory Day), comprised of monuments and pieces of authentic war-era armaments and intended for official commemorative events; and the cemetery with about 7,000 buried Soviet soldiers. The memorial complex was established in 1959 and continued to develop in subsequent years: since 1985, honorable reburials of the remains of fallen soldiers found thanks to the *poiskoviki*'s efforts, have been regularly held on the Valley's territory; since 2005, some objects have been reconstructed and restored (Committee for Culture and Art of the Murmansk Region 2012, 27).

These processes had a normal course until 2018, when the regional Committee on Culture and Art¹⁰ decided to remove the state protection status from the cemetery

10. Transformed into the Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region in 2019.

(Ministry of Culture of the Murmansk Region 2020) to carry out large-scale reconstruction and improvement works, including the renewal of gravestones and relocation of remains. This reconstruction provoked many negative reactions and became the subject of a broad media discussion. Negative voices from local *poiskoviki* and heritage activists pointed out the decision's illegality and the wrongdoings during reconstruction, such as numerous mistakes in the names and circumstances of soldiers' deaths (Britskaia 2019; SeverPost 2018; Khraniteli naslediiia 2019a). The conflict heated up with renewed vigor after up to a hundred old gravestones from the Valley were accidentally found on a dumping site.

Two groups of actors participated in the debate around the Valley of Glory: supporters of the reconstruction represented by public authorities and opponents of the intervention from local *poiskoviki* and heritage activists. The main contradictions between the mnemonic actors concerned narrative, structural, and aesthetic issues. First, a conflict developed between two different narratives: the official triumphalist narrative that emphasizes the fact of Victory and gives patriotic and loyalist senses to it and the set of various popular notions that consider war victims as the primary subject of commemoration. The latter notion of the BfZ is widely shared by other regional branches of the *poiskoviki* movement whose activists, although firmly identifying themselves as patriots (Dahlin 2017), disapprove of the official version of patriotism, labeling it as “*ura-patriotizm*,” or “cheering patriotism,” as rendered by Laruelle (2015, 24), because of its perfunctory nature that disregards the tragic side of the war. The Murmansk *poiskoviki* leaders criticized the restoration and commemorative rituals in the Valley of Glory from the same positions (Britskaia 2018; Khraniteli naslediiia 2019a). Second, the conflict revealed a contradiction between the bureaucratic desire to regularize impromptu mnemonic signs and the grassroots desire to preserve local commemorative practices that had been carried on since 1959. Last, the official concern for the visual qualities of the memorials came into collision with the popular strive to save the place's authenticity; as one protester put it, “[the memorial complex's] ‘spontaneity’ was also an imprint of our postwar history” (Khraniteli naslediiia 2019a). Federal media reported several similar cases of controversial redevelopment of war memorials in other regions (Mikhailov 2020), so the case of the Valley of Glory supplemented this recently emerged nationwide pattern.

Interestingly, the officials and public organizations close to them explained the works by aesthetic considerations and the need to make the Valley more attractive to tourists. As acknowledged by one representative of the Committee on Culture and Art, “we decided to make the burial more aesthetic so that relatives of the dead and guests from the region and other cities and countries would come here and the burial would not look makeshift” (Nord-News 2018). The named reasoning corresponds to the policy of the regional authorities aimed at taking care of local war memorials and promoting military-patriotic tourism. For example, the previously mentioned Program for the Development of the Tourist and Recreational Cluster of the Murmansk Region (Federalnyi portal malogo i srednego predprinimatel'stva 2016, 21, 37–38) adopted by the regional

government puts the Valley of Glory on the list of tourist resources for historical-cultural and military-patriotic tourism.

In general, the case of the Valley of Glory redevelopment featured a visible confrontation between the official and grassroots dynamics of commemorative activity. It manifested a contradiction between the official endeavor to raise the attractiveness of the memorial complex in the eyes of local people and tourists on the one hand and the *poiskoviki's* pursuit of preserving the genuine notion of the BfZ as a place of mass self-sacrifice and keeping the memorial in its authentic form on the other. The conflict over the sensitive memory of the fallen heroes overlapped with the widespread dissatisfaction with the insufficient war memorials conservation policy maintained by the regional authorities, which indicates a vivid bottom-up engagement in the war commemoration practices.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL IDENTITIES: URBAN AND RURAL WAR MEMORIALS

The Murmansk region is a highly urbanized territory, so almost two-thirds of new memorials are located in cities and towns, most notably in the cities of Polyarny and Murmansk with 13 and 11 objects reared in the post-Soviet period. In Polyarny, which is a port city maintaining the Northern Fleet base, all new memorials are dedicated to the Northern Fleet and initiated by the military. Despite the disappearance of the control of the Communist Party in the post-Soviet years, local authors continue to design war memorials in a strict and solemn style inspired by socialist realism.¹¹ Of particular interest is the Sea Soul memorial complex, authored by Lev Kerbel', a famous Soviet and Russian sculptor also known abroad, and installed in 2003. Kerbel's last work, the memorial combines the same-name monument and a submarine cockpit, glorifying the Northern Fleet navy men who fought in the BfZ and exemplifying the sheer socialist realist style. This memorial was part of a joint initiative of the city administration, the local Council of Deputies, and the Northern Fleet Command, yet the idea belonged to Lev Kerbel' and Konstantin Dobrovolskii, who is one of the leaders of local *poiskoviki*, and local workers (*Pamiat' o proshlom gorod hranit* 2014, 67–69). The case of the Sea Soul memorial complex exemplifies an entangled and complex initiation process when it is hard to conclusively identify the initiative vector and classify it as top-down or bottom-up. In general, the commemorative process in Polyarny is characterized by a homogenous, even monotonous set of repertoires shared by a robust network of local mnemonic actors. The last war memorial in the city was installed in 2010.

In contrast to Polyarny, Murmansk war memorials are dedicated to a broader range of the BfZ heroes while being more evenly distributed over the period. One of the distinctive features of Murmansk is a good representation of the memory of non-military people who contributed to the common cause of victory. Five of the eleven post-Soviet war

11. Perhaps this is due to adherence to the canon of commemorative culture that developed during the Soviet period (Danilova 2015; Gabowitsch 2014; Konradova and Ryleva 2005).

memorials are dedicated to the city residents of non-military background, namely to the Murmansk police officers (2000), drivers (2005), war workers (2008), firefighters (2008), and citizens (2017). Murmansk local activist groups perform as the most active mnemonic actors, with seven initiated memorials for the post-Soviet period, whereas *poiskoviki* are inactive in the city. Common patterns of behavior of the Murmansk occasional activist groups are the initiation of memorials to their heroic predecessors who fought in the BfZ (e.g., city firefighters install a monument to wartime firefighters) and the use of public donations (along with taking official funds when possible) as funding strategies. The military men are diversely represented by monuments to the border guards (2013), the Northern Fleet commander, counter-admiral Aleksandr Shabalin (2018), and the Polar division warriors (2020). Two memorial objects glorify the reconnoiters (1997, 2013). A remarkable monument erected in 2020 memorializes the reindeer transport battalions, which played a significant role in the difficult task of supplying the front and rescuing the wounded. The memorial has a complicated history, as local Sami activists, who put forward this idea, campaigned for its installation for many years (at least since 2014) before they finally managed to overcome bureaucratic inflexibility, and the monument took its place in one of the city's residential areas (Britskaia 2020; SeverPost 2018).

Rural memorials are mainly located on the territories of the Pechengskii and Kolskii districts located along the GPW-era important Murmansk operative direction. As said, most of the mentioned objects contain the remains of soldiers discovered by *poiskoviki*. One of the outstanding objects is the monument to the Norwegian participants of the Resistance movement created at the expense of the Norwegian citizens and installed in the settlement of Mezhdurech'e in 1997, simultaneously with a similar monument erected by the Norwegian side in the village of Kiberg as part of a trans-border cooperation initiative (Leksikon KS 2013). Other notable objects are two crosses on the Srednii peninsula and the Mustatunturi ridge (both installed in 2006) that remain the only commemorative objects of this kind created in the post-Soviet period. In 2020, in the village of Lovozero, the capital of Kola Sami, local Sami activists erected a monument to reindeer transport battalions, which is similar to the one that appeared in Murmansk the same year.

The case of the destruction of the monument to submariners in the settlement of Liinhamari in the Pechengskii district deserves special mention. The monument erected in 1972 by Northern Fleet submariners crumbled in September 2020. Later it was established that the monument was deliberately destroyed, so after a wave of public discontent in the media, a criminal case of vandalism was initiated (Smelova 2020). Several actors, including Nornickel, expressed interest in restoring the monument (Vishnevetskaia 2020). This incident gradually involved mnemonic actors from all categories hoping for a successful re-erection in the observable future.

Observing the urban and rural mnemonic areas, we see that the mnemonic actors regard monumental commemoration as a means of consolidating their identities. Navy and military men, various civil servants, and indigenous activists strive to make a monumental reference to their predecessors who fought in the BfZ to inscribe them in the

narrative of the Battle, which possesses considerable symbolic value for the local population. Through monumental commemoration of the wartime civil and military groups, their post-Soviet descendants increase their symbolic presence in the urban cultural space, featuring the inclusive nature of community-led remembrance noted by Danilova (2015, 212). Moreover, locating new memorials in the urban areas and along popular tourist routes is related to the official endeavors to improve the region's image as a tourist destination.

FEDERAL IMPACT ON REGIONAL WAR COMMEMORATION

The federal impact on the regional memory infrastructure can be measured by assessing the involvement of federal officials, business corporations, political parties, and a specific mnemonic actor such as RVIO in the initiation process. The only case of a direct initiative by federal authorities took place in 2008 when, according to the president's decree, Polyarny gained the status of a "city of military glory" that requires the installation of a welcome stela (*Pamiat' o proshlom gorod hranit* 2014, 75–77).

Major federal business companies, such as Nornickel, Sberbank, and PhosAgro, participate in erecting new memorials, providing the initiators with financial and technical support. In this direction, Nornickel, an ambitious mnemonic actor in the Russian North, deserves special attention. In 2014, as part of the "*Vstavai, soldat*" (Arise, Soldier) federal commemorative program for the reconstruction of old memorials, the state corporation restored the monument dedicated to the seaborne fighters lost two years before (*Telekompaniia TV-21* 2014). Nornickel also sponsored the memorial complex *Pavshim radi zhivym* (To the Fallen for the Sake of the Living) installed in the city of Monchegorsk in 2020 (*Vechernii Murmansk* 2020).

As for the participation of political parties in initiating memorials, the ruling United Russia party (which is much more active than the other party movements in the realm of memory politics) involvement mainly has a format of the regional-level implementation of the "*Istoricheskaia pamiat'*" ("Historical Memory")¹² party project aiming at the promotion of the restoration of historical and cultural monuments and encouraging "patriotic education of the young people" (*Proekty partii Edinaia Rossiia* 2022). As part of the project, regional party functionaries and *poiskoviki* activists initiated the installation of an obelisk to the fallen soldiers in the Pechenga district near the Luostari settlement.

RVIO, a prominent federal mnemonic actor, has had its Murmansk regional department headed by Governor Andrei Chibis since 2016. The Murmansk department actively participates in BfZ commemorations, military reconstruction events, and other kinds of military-patriotic activity, including monumental commemoration (RVIO 2023a, 2023b). However, the RVIO activists do not initiate or restore memorials but

12. Not to be confused with the "*Istoricheskaia pamiat'*" foundation, a Russian state-backed nonprofit organization (Miller 2020).

only participate in opening ceremonies and report about such events in their media, as was the case with the opening of the restored memorial plaques to war heroes in 2016 and 2017 that were both initiated by the *poiskoviki* (RVIO 2016, 2017). The monument to the Polar Division, installed in the city of Murmansk in 2020, attracted close attention from the RVIO media resources, although it was not initiated and created by the organization's activists (*Vechernii Murmansk* 2020).

In a certain way, regional veteran organizations can also be put in this category, as some of them are run by federal employees and promote official narratives (e.g., *Shchit* uniting FSB veterans). Federal officials used the *Shchit* fund as an organizational platform for international commemorative projects. Thus, from 2013 to 2019, the fund, together with Igor Chernyshenko, a member of the Federation Council from the Murmansk region, co-organized cross-border Russian-Norwegian patriotic commemorative tours to war memorials; these tours got coverage in both Russian federal and Norwegian media (Myklebost 2023).

As we can see, federal actors contribute to regional memorials and participate in associated commemoration practices. Some of the actors, such as the Nornickel corporation, the United Russia political party, and the *Shchit* veteran organization (which is not a federal actor itself but has federal-level patrons), are involved in war commemoration through different memory projects. However, the scale of their engagement remains limited. The participation of large companies in developing the memorials is sporadic, perhaps except for Nornickel showing a bit more ambition in this regard; United Russia and RVIO generally limit their efforts to participating in commemorative ceremonies. In general, the strategies of federal actors seem to imply not so much initiating as many places of memory as possible but rather adapting to the already existing conditions and parameters of war commemoration and increasing influence over part of this sphere.

CONCLUSION

The Battle for *Zapoliar'e* is extensively imprinted in the Murmansk regional commemorative culture. Despite essential ideological changes that occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Battle remains a central subject of regional historical memory, perhaps even a founding myth of regional identity. Murmansk war memorials disseminate the regional narrative of World War II, framing the national war narrative for the local population, strengthening the regional identity, and stressing the region's role in the GPW by reserving a decent place for *Zapoliar'e* in the Russian national "league of regional war memories."

The article shows that the regional configuration of mnemonic actors is diverse, including such groups of actors as veteran organizations, public authorities, occasional activist groups, and *poiskoviki* organizations, not to mention other separate actors such as private companies, military collectives, and ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, the last decade was marked by increasing influences of state-backed actors who attempted to spread various forms of control onto part of the commemorative process in the Murmansk

region, purporting to promote a triumphalist, state-centered war narrative. Against this backdrop, the contours of the conflict between official and vernacular memories emerge in several dimensions—conceptual (between celebrating and mourning war narratives), structural (between top-down and bottom-up initiatives), and aesthetic (between cultural authenticity and tourist accessibility), as we see in the case of the conflict over the redevelopment of the Valley of Glory between regional authorities on the one side and *poiskoviki* on the other. In addition, some tensions often covered by federal mass media emerge outside these dimensions due to poor or unpopular administrative decisions, malicious intent, or absence of care at the regional level.

Still, the case of Murmansk demonstrates that the federal impact remains limited, and most war memorials have been initiated by local actors driven by various incentives far removed from the pro-Kremlin agenda. The most active actors in the region are the patriotic *poiskoviki* squads who share their own version of patriotism, which often contradicts the official state-centered patriotism promoted by state-backed mnemonic actors. GONGOs (RVIO, veteran organizations), business corporations, and political parties are less active in installing new and maintaining existing memorials. An exception there is the *Shchit* FSB veteran organization, which has put serious efforts to propagate statist narratives through commemorating war heroes, also as part of cross-border cooperation with Norway. As for the agency of other groups of actors, they use war memory to strengthen local identities by inscribing them in the narrative of the Battle for *Zapoliar'e* using monumental means. The presented analysis thus challenges the Kremlin-centric understanding of Russian memory politics.

The case study also shows that the regional mnemonic actors tend to combine the war commemoration agenda with practical considerations. For instance, considerable efforts to renovate old memorials and place new ones in major cities and along popular travel routes demonstrate the official engagement in strengthening the region's tourist attractiveness. The presented analysis of the Murmansk regional commemorative infrastructure can become a starting point for new discussions on the issues of articulations and circulations of war memories in Russian regions. ■

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