The Transnational Mythscape of the Second World War

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*Since the early 2000s the study of European Memory politics has proliferated, but has come to mean different things. It focuses on either the emergence of Holocaust remembrance as a shared cultural memory, disputes within EU institutions over what the European collective memory should be, or standoffs between Russia and its former satellites sparked by differing interpretations of the past back dropped by intercommunal strife. I argue that while such complex multi-level memory politics defy an overarching theoretical categorisation, they can be understood through a comprehensive approach, which is achieved by considering the different narratives of the past to be interpretations of a common historical occurrence. This article argues that European Memory Politics as a whole occurs within a constellation that takes the form of a transnational mythscape of the Second World War, in which international actors promote their interpretations as simplified myths while warding off competing myths that negatively depict their mythical selves. An emergent narrative alliance between Russia and Israel, made in response to European memory politics, is used to illustrate the utility of the transnational mythscape framework for understanding memory beyond the national sphere.*

In a recent review article, Jenny Wüstenberg (2016: 2) argued that European Memory Politics are becoming a distinct field that is multidisciplinary and diverse. However, she added that the puzzle of European memory has not yet been theorised from an overarching point of view.

The constituent parts of ‘memory,’ ‘politics’ and ‘Europe’ have been linked together in different ways: some scholars have argued that European memory is a local manifestation of the wider phenomenon of ‘cosmopolitan memory’ (Levy and Sznaider, 2002), others saw it as a cultural aspect of European integration (Karlsson, 2010: 38), some consider it a matter of parliamentary politics (Littoz-Monnet, 2012; Waehrens, 2011; Troesbst, 2012; Neumayer, 2015) or even a ‘European Memory War’ involving Russia (Mälksoo, 2012; Lough, 2011; Roth, 2009; Perchoc, 2013), while most recently, a different group of scholars focused on the phenomenon of ‘memory laws’ (Belavusau and Gliszczynska-Grabias, 2017; Koposov, 2018).

There is good reason why these different approaches to European memory politics resist being approached through a single framework; memory is a complex phenomenon that takes on different forms. Collective memories develop in relation to societal needs, popular inputs, governmental decrees, historical research, waves of immigration or the travel of culture. Any attempt to offer a general taxonomy of the formation, travel and political mobilisation of memory, especially over a vast, diverse and vague terrain such as Europe, would be a futile endeavour.

Nevertheless, I argue that rearticulating European Memory Politics as a well-defined constellation of several memory narratives allows us to consider the interplay of complex mnemopolitical dynamics. The framework I will use to analyse this set of politics is assembled from Sociology (Bell, 2003) IR (Levine, 2013) and Social Psychology (Wertsch, 2002). For such a combination to work, I align it with a basic ordering principle, the common event of the Second World War, which Ned Lebow (2006: 6) and Aline Sierp (2014: 1-2) explain is the focal point of European Memory Politics and as I demonstrate in this article, the different narratives that form a major part of European politics of memory could be productively considered as representation of the Second World War.

This ‘constellation’ is made possible by an additional trait of these interpretations of the Second World War: the highly simplified ‘mythical’ narrative form that they assume when promoted by groups. The efficacy of these interpretations as foundational stories is dependent on their clarity and simplicity. As a result, the different groups assign the roles of victim or perpetrator to the different historical actors that they represent and they generally follow what Astrov (2012: 118) referred to as ‘a certain grammar.’ Taken together, these two factors indicate a commensurability that enables a ‘dialogical’ or ‘intertextual’ relationship between the different narratives, which I explore and later link to the political interactions between them.

The level of analysis that I introduce isolates the rhetorical dimension of the the politics of memory as a transnational narrative constellation. It is a ‘constellation’ rather than a system because the different interacting moving parts, in this case the different narratives, are not set and connected. Rather, their ‘certain grammar’ is merely a ‘certain dynamism’ (Adorno, 2004: 163) that is projected onto the analytical aid of the constellation, which is ‘devoid of any inherent substantiality and capable of being reliquified at will’ (Ibid: 164).

In simple terms, the different actors merely promote their own narratives internationally and occasionally resist a narrative that casts their historical selves in a bad light, but in so doing, they are reifying a ‘grammar,’ which is the constellation. Therefore, this framework does not aim to be an exhaustive account of the ways in which memory narratives interact. Rather, it offers that in the cases at hand, different memory narratives are made in relation and in reaction to each other and that this level of analysis, which considers the systemic qualities of disparate narrations can be productively partnered with the overt aspects of memory politics.

I proceed in three moves. First, I explicate and interrogate three different strands of European Memory Politics that feature most prominently in the European Memory Politics literature.[[1]](#footnote-1) Second, following the recent ‘transcultural turn’ in memory studies, I argue that collective memories traverseinstitutionalised borders.In effect, this stance ‘releases’ memory narratives from national and other institutional frames. Third, to construct the constellation, I use a variant of Duncan Bell’s (2003) theory of the ‘national mythscape’ to arrange the three different myths within a transnational discursive space, which in this case concerns the Second World War.

The result is a transnational mythscape, in which memory is formed and politically mobilised by groups in alignment with the “certain grammar” of the overall constellation of the transnational mythscape. Lastly, I will use this model to account for a case study: a recent collaboration between the Israeli and Russian governments in the form of a national monument erected in Israel, which I argue is a political move aimed at European memory politics from within the transnational mythscape, even though it is made from without the European space by non-European actors.

**European Memory Politics: Three Narratives**

This article focuses on three major narratives that offer to frame the European project, which I explicate below. The first focuses on Holocaust memory and the idea that a united Europe may never let it recur. The second focuses on both the Holocaust as well as on Communism, as twin pernicious legacies that must never recur. The third focuses on the liberation of Europe from Nazism by the Soviet Union.

I focus on these narratives and not on others for several reasons. First, these three narratives claim to be the definitive stories (or foundational myths) of post-war Europe. Second, the promotion of these narratives and their obstruction has taken the form of open political disputes Third, they all have a prominent status in the literature and have been the subject of numerous studies. Fourth, as I shall demonstrate, the three narratives were cast in the same mould - they were framed and promoted in relation to one another.

Most importantly, these three narratives participate in the case study that I explore in the second part of the article and they both illuminate and are illuminated by it. This analysis offers a narrative constellation, an elaboration into a system-like structure of a set of principles that function as a ‘certain grammar’. This method aims to stop short of the reification of these narratives, recognising that this common discursive space is upheld by dynamic political commitment and that at any moment other narratives or narrations may take precedence.

1. *Holocaust Memory: The Stockholm Narrative*

Scholars often argue that the Holocaust serves as a European ‘founding myth’ (Karlsson, 2010: 43; Leggewie, 2008: 219; Kattago, 2012: 100; Dubiel, 2003: 68; Dinner, 2003; Smith, 1998: 18-19; Subotic, 2018). This term is taken from the modern or constructivist school in Nationalism Studies, according to which a group's identity is dependent upon the formulation and distribution of common markers of identity and first and foremost of those is the foundational event. The deployment of the term reflects a supranational understanding of the EU that extends the mechanics of the nation to the EU level.

In her study of European memory cultures, Aline Sierp (2014: 124) accepted that the Holocaust plays the role of a European founding myth, but added that this is a late development and that until 1989‘the Holocaust was never mentioned, either as a central point of reference or even as a founding act.’

The recent emergence of the founding European myth stems from a number of reasons. First, Sznaider and Levy (2002: 101) argue that it is the ‘institutionalization of an emerging European cosmopolitan memory’, a European instance of a global cultural phenomenon. Second, it could be seen as a Europeanisation, an upwards cascade of the German memory narrative of a negative past, or a ‘negative telos’, a never again proposition that delineates the direction of the EU away from a shameful past, similar to the German *Stunde Null* (year zero) narrative (Diner, 2003: 29, 36, 43; Sagi, 1986: 64). Third, it is related to normative aspirations, a framework that would fuel ‘a new European duty to act’ (Levy and Sznaider, 2002: 101) that reflects Van Der Laarse’s (2013) assertion that ‘the assumption of a painful, unique, and shared past of universal value’ was a response to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

While the origin of this narrative may be disputed, scholars seem to be in agreement about the mode of its installation through a specific act, the “Stockholm Declaration on Genocide Prevention” in the year 2000 (Assmann, 2013: 28; Stone, 2014: 284-285; Dubiel, 2003: 68; Levy and Sznaider, 2002: 101; Kattago, 2013: 384; Troebst, 2012: 19; Sierp, 2014: 91-92; Subotic, 2018: 301). The Stockholm Declaration is a ‘memory event’ (Etkind, 2010: 4-5): a public occurrence that attempts to direct a change in the way a historical event is remembered. Through it, the conditions of commemoration served a normative purpose as a sort of calibration of responses, or even a plan for action.

The Declaration was drafted as part of an international conference set to mark the 55th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, on 27 January 2000. The signatories introducesd a calendric claim to the declaration by establishing the date as the annual Holocaust Memorial Day (IHRA, 2014). The commorative date is important. Walter Benjamin (1985: 261) wrote that ‘calendars do no measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness’ and as I will show, competing narratives and narrations are performed in relation to such temporal monuments.

The declaration committed the signatories - initially 16 states, of which 13 were EU members, to a narrative of the Holocaust as a unique and unprecedented event that ‘must be forever seared in our collective memory’ (IHRA, 2014). It also included normative demands, such as the fight against Holocaust denial and also ‘genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.’ The meaning of this demand for (then) future members of the EU was central to European identity in the early 2000s and ‘joining, contributing, and participating in a shared memory of the Holocaust defines what a European state is’ (Subotic, 2018: 299).

As I shall demonstrate, different actors in the European Politics of Memory similarly attempted to produce memory events to promote their narratives. Next, I shall examine the second strand of European memory literature, that of post-Soviet East European memory.

*2. Memory of Totalitarianism: The Prague Narrative*

The accession of former Soviet Republics and protectorates into the EU in 2004 and 2007 introduced a challenge to the ‘Stockholm narrative.’ For the East European EU states, which have only recently emerged from under Soviet control, it was simply irrelevant. While most of the killing sites of the Holocaust were in the former eastern bloc, and while most the victims of the Holocaust were East European Jews (Snyder, 2013: 79), the brutal Nazi occupation and the Holocaust were a distant memory, followed (and in Poland and the Baltics also predated) by Stalinist terror and communist repression. The liberation of Central and Eastern Europe took place not with the arrival of the allies in 1945 but rather with their departure some 45 years later.

As far as post-communist European states were concerned, their own history was marked by Communist rather than Nazi crimes (Mälksoo, 2009: 660; Onken, 2007: 29) and in the context of a European memory framework that they are expected to share, members of the European Parliament from Eastern Europe challenged the Holocaust-centric memory that they felt had devalued the experience of victims of communism (Sierp, 2017: 443).

The Holocaust did not feature prominently in the narratives of the former Eastern bloc for several reasons. First, it had all but decimated Eastern European Jewry. Second, under Communism, the interpretation of the Holocaust as a distinct event was hardly promoted, since it was seen to highlight the experience of a particular ethnicity, which clashed with Soviet practice (Gitelman, 1990: 26). Third, the prevailing anti-fascist ideology promoted by Moscow celebrated a narrative by which the Second World War was the scene of a glorious victory, with sacrifices made by the whole of Soviet peoples to win the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (Stone, 2013: 34).

Harald Wydra (2011: 127) referred to the Stockholm narrative as ‘hegemonic models of “memory by western design”,’ which are being promoted throughout Europe. Maria Mälksoo (2009: 655) similarly wrote of the ‘subaltern collective remembrance practices’ of Eastern European states in opposition to ‘the hegemonic “core European” narrative of what “Europe” is all about.’ These are both Gramscian terms that indicate a state of hegemony, or the moral leadership of a society by an elite that does not only control power, but its ideology is accepted as the common sense.

However, the ‘subaltern’ mobilised the instruments of common democratic institutions. And the work of Jennifer Waehrens (2011), Stefan Troebst (2012) Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (2012) and Laure Neumayer (2015) demonstrate that it is possible to discuss this second set of European memory politics as institutional parliamentary politics, or, as Littoz-Monnet referred to them, ‘policy conflicts.’ This is memory politics as legislation, binding resolutions, declarative statements and the channelling of institutional resources.

Again, the politics of memory began with the calendar. Stefan Troebst (2012: 19) singles out as the trigger for this second narrative wave the official introduction to the EU calendar of the day of remembrance to the Holocaust on January 27th, 2005. The temporal monument instigated vociferous rebuttals, declarations and EU legislation proposals jointly penned by Eastern European EU members that challenged the Stockholm Narrative by promoting an East European alternative that subsumed it as one form of the overarching category of ‘totalitarian crimes.’

The proposed narrative is most clearly articulated in the Prague declaration of 2008, which according to Heidemarie Uhl (2005: 66) was modelled after the Stockholm declaration. The Prague declaration, which various scholars (Assmann, 2013: 30; Troebst, 2012: 24; Uhl, 2005: 65-66; Stone, 2014: 281) have flagged as a pivotal moment in European Memory Politics, called for ‘ensuring the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination of victims of all the totalitarian regimes’ (Prague Declaration, 2008). It also called for the introduction of a commemorative date, 23 August, the date of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939, as a joint day of remembrance for all victims of totalitarianism.

What I term the ‘Prague narrative’ has been under attack from Jewish organisations ‘Defending History’ and ‘The Simon Wiesenthal Foundation’ for its ‘Holocaust Obfuscation’ (Katz, 2010; Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2009). According to this view, the comparison of Soviet and Nazi crimes is a symptom of ultra-nationalism that conflates oppression with annihilation. This, they argued, deprives the latter of its meaning and reflects ‘a reluctance to own up to any complicity with the Holocaust’ (Katz, 2010).

Despite this opposition, the Prague narrative has gained traction within EU institutions and was fully integrated into the institutional framework of remembrance (Sierp, 2017). August 23 is an official commemorative date, and the label ‘totalitarian crimes’ has become common among EU institutions (Mälksoo, 2014: 86; Prutsch, 2013: 19-21). Aline Sierp (2017: 452) argued that the introduction of the August 23 commemoration is ‘a symbolic gesture that signifies nothing less than the recognition of their painful historical trajectory and with it the unconditional assurance of full membership within the Union’ and according to Katrin Hammerstein and Birgit Hofmann, ‘The demand “never again Auschwitz,” which accurately reflects the Stockholm narrative, seems on the European level to be replaced by the formula “Never again totalitarianism”’ (Hammerstein and Hoffman in Troebst, 2012: 25).

*3. Russian Memory of Victory in the Great Patriotic War: The Moscow Narrative*

The Centre for European Policy Studies published a working paper (Roth, 2009) on the subject ‘Bilateral Disputes between EU Member States and Russia,’ which argued that disputes ‘in the historical sphere’ are a major venue of political contestation with Russia that is ‘highly idiosyncratic’ since it hurts ‘business interests’. Another working paper published by Chatham House, concerning Russia’s energy diplomacy similarly noted a “disproportionate” importance ascribed to conflicts over memory (Lough, 2011: 9).

Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2007) argues that this ‘disproportion’ stems from the importance that Russia ascribes to memory politics. They are merely another form of regional geopolitics ‘no different from energy politics’ and they revolve around the Russian pursuit of European recognition of its foundational mythical narrative of its victory in the Second World War and the liberation of Europe (Uldricks, 2009: 60).

Whereas the Prague narrative frames Russian actions in Eastern Europe as a re-occupation, the ‘victory’ narrative frames the Red Army’s actions liberation. Koposov (2018: 134) explains that this became the core narrative of post-Stalinist Soviet Union, as part of what Dan Stone (2014: 9-11) termed the ideology of anti-Fascism. More recently, the narrative had re-emerged as the ‘foundational myth of the Putin regime’ (Koposov, 2018: 134, see also Vázquez Liñán, 2010: 169; Wertsch, 2017).

Several scholars (Onken, 2007; Zhurzhenko, 2007; Mälksoo, 2009; Uldricks, 2009) singled out the 60th anniversary celebration of the end of V-E day (Victory in Europe Day) that took place in Moscow in 2005 as a major scene for the promotion of what I will call the ‘Moscow narrative.’ This was Russia’s attempt to direct a ‘memory event’ and per usual, politics started with the calendar.

The Second World War officially ended at 23:01 on 8 May 1945 CET, but this was just after midnight in Moscow. And so, in the EU, V-E day commemorated on the 8th and in Russia on the 9th. Additionally, in the EU, the 9th of May serves as ‘Europe day,’ in commemoration of a declaration by the French Foreign Minister made on that date in 1950, in which he proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community. This calendric web of meanings lent symbolic value to the very act of participating in the 9 May event in Moscow.

However, the Russian event was thwarted by the actions of the former Soviet republics and current EU members from the Baltic States. The leaders of two of the three declined the invitation, while the third, Latvian president Vaira Vike-Freiberga, participated in the ceremony, but only after articulating the dissenting Baltic position in regard to the Moscow Narrative via a detailed public declaration denouncing the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states that drew overwhelming response in the form of letters of support from 24 heads of state (Onken, 2009: 41) a move that Mälksoo (2009: 669) termed a ‘memory-political offensive.’

Baltic-Russian relations are complicated by a large ethnic-Russian population that forms about 30% of the population in Latvia and Estonia, almost half of which is without citizenship or political representation (Grigas, 2012). Consequently, they have flared up, most severely in the ‘Bronze Soldier’ monument incident of April 2007, in Tallinn, Estonia, a city with a 40% ethnic Russian population (Kuulpak, 2012). The monument was erected in 1947 to mark the victory of the Red Army and its relocation to a less central place sparked riots in the city.

Moscow’s reaction over municipal memory politics was extremely harsh. It included harmful cyber-attacks, a blockade of the Estonian embassy in Moscow, ‘hidden sanctions’ in the form of divestment and a threat to cut off diplomatic relations completely (Zhurzhenko, 2007). Unlike memory politics within the EU, in which the narratives were promoted through a common institutional framework, Russian-European memory politics, as the two analysts I cited at the start of this section noted, were linked to power politics.

Consequently, accusations of past criminality were levelled in both directions and in direct relation to the ‘Prague Narrative’ that was explicated in the previous section. In 2009, as part of the effort to promot the Prague narrative, a group of Eastern European states passed a resolution in the OSCE that compared Stalinism to Nazism, much to the chagrin of the Russian delegates. In response, “World Without Nazism”, a new Russian NGO with close ties to the Kremlin (Van Harpen, 2013: 144) was formed that regularly publishes reports about ‘neo-Nazism’ in the Baltics (World Without Nazism, 2012).

The organisation engages in what could be termed ‘memory policing,’ which implicates Eastern European actors as collaborators and perpetrators within the Stockholm narrative. “World Without Nazism” even referred to the Prague declaration as ‘an attempt of some countries of Eastern Europe to whitewash the criminal regimes who collaborated with Hitler,’ a statement that was communicated via Russian embassies (Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom, 2011). The implication of victims of totalitarianism with the perpetrators of the Holocaust serves as a counter-example of what Mälksoo (2009: 669) termed a ‘memory-political offensive.’

***Narratives, International Politics and the Transnational Mythscape of the Second World War***

What emerges from this review of European Memory Politics is that memory politics play out both in relation to considerations of political power as well as in alignment with a constellational logic of a “certain grammar,” which I will next explicate. This logic is ‘dialogical’, not in the sense of a call-and-response relationship as in a dialogue, but rather that it ‘concerns the relationship between one narrative and another’ (Wertsch, 2002: 59).

While Narratives may not be a prominent concern of IR (Wibben, 2015: 118), some scholars have produced work on narrative as a source of power in international politics. Subotić (2016: 624) wrote of ‘intersubjectively shared narrative frame[s],’ which are widely accepted general narratives that could deployed by political actors. Cruz (2000) wrote of ‘rhetorical frames that that emerge as dominant at critical junctures in the history of a group or a nation,’ which serve a similar function of providing the general grammar for specific claim.

In all cases, these general narrative designs form the established canon against which new narratives are adjudicated. They serve as framing devices for narrating political projects in international politics. This is the source of narrative power because for a narrative to be believed, it must achieve what Fisher (1987: 75) called ‘fidelity’ or what Bruner (1986: 52) termed ‘verisimilitude:’ it must reflect the established narrative canon or ‘the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources’ (MacIntyre, 1984: 216).

In other words, narratives are adjudicated dialogically: in relation to other, already accepted narratives. But, how do we account for narrative interaction across cultures? Recently, Memory Studies is said to have undergone a ‘transcultural turn’ (Erll, 2011), which had the effect of ‘punctur[ing] the understanding of culture as an atomised realm.’ (Carrier and Kabalek, 2014: 50). This ‘puncture’ makes possible an ontological shift from the national container to the cultural content, the memory, now unbound by the territorial state.

However, on closer inspection, while this literature certainly decentres the state, when operationalised, it remains predicated on the prominence of nation-states as actors in mnemonic politics. The ‘international agential power’ (Hobson, 2003) of the state is undeniable since, as Saskia Sassen (2006: 6) explains, it is ‘the realm where formalization and institutionalization have all reached their highest level of development.’

For this reason, the transcultural promise is often “walked back” and aligned with the contours of interstate relations. For Erll (2011: 14), it is a ‘regional perspective’ that must reign in an unwieldy global focus. For Rothberg (2010), it is a ‘knotted memory’ that stretches across states through a common culture. For DeCesari and Rigney (2014) it is simply ‘transnational memory’ that accepts that many of the transcultural channels are established in relation to the established networks of states (Ibid: 7).

Next, I elaborate the memory constellation by deploying a theoretical instrument cut to the size of the nation state – the mythscape. This is a constellation of the dominant narratives of the nation, in which a state’s mythological canon is formed. Duncan Bell (2003) intended to elucidate the struggle over ‘foundational myths’ as a politically motivated competition of dominance (Ibid: 68) that links political contestation to cultural invention.

He argued that for groups’ narratives of the past to enter the national mythscape, they must be rearticulated in the form of myth, or ‘a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world’ (Ibid: 75). Within the national mythscape, myths strive to occupy the position of a governing myth, which ‘attempt(s) to impose a definite meaning on the past, on the nation and its history’ (Ibid: 74), but they may first appear as challenger, subaltern myths.

The national mythscape is supported by the institutional structure of the state (Ibid:76) and groups rely on various forms of power external to the mythscape to promote their myths within it. However, Bell left the specifics of the overarching institutions open, arguing that they might vary considerably from one national case to the other. Here, I elaborate a ‘transnational’ variant of Bell’s national mythscape that relies on a shared narrative constellation of ‘myths.’

Transnationalising the mythscape is enabled by several conditions. First, per Bell’s prescription, the myths are assembled according to ‘the simplifying schemas of myth’ (Ibid: 77) and the result is what Erll (2011: 11) noted was a ‘mnemonic form,’ or the ‘condensed figures…of remembering that enable repetition.’ Second, since these narratives are regularly mobilised outside the national sphere, they must be intelligible to foreign audiences, further standardising the myths. Third, the transnational mythscape constellates around a common historical occurrence; in this case, the Second Word War, making the different myths even more commensurable. The overall dynamic could be re-imagined as a dialogical competition over representation.

Earlier, I presented the Stockholm narrative, which considers the Holocaust to be the European foundational myth. It takes the mnemonic form of a myth that can be summed up as *Jewish victimhood of Nazi perpetration*. This design is replicated in the Prague narrative of *Jewish and East European victimhood of both Soviet and Nazi perpetrations*. The East European narrative myth does not reject the Stockholm narrative, but rather sets to redact it by joining it on equal terms, a strategy that reflects the position of the Stockholm narrative as a ‘governing myth.’ The dialogical relationship between the two narratives suggests that the successful political mobilisation of narratives outside the mythscape is made in accordance with the internal logic, or the ‘grammar’ of the mythscape.

The importance of the constellational view becomes clearer with regard to Russian actions. First, it explains the failure of the Moscow narrative to affect the transnational mythscape. The Russian myth, according to which *Russian sacrifice and heroism liberated Europe*, is incongruent with the governing Stockholm narrative and contradicts the increasingly accepted Prague narrative. Conversely, the Russian ‘spoiling’ of the East European narrative by ‘memory policing’ is an appeal to the governing myth. It is a dialogical claim: By promoting the narrative of the Baltic celebrations of wartime collaborators with the Nazis, the Russians disrupted the Prague narrative from within the transnational mythscape by associating the East Europeans with the Nazi perpetrators rather than with the Jewish victims: *Jewish victimhood by Nazi and East European perpetration*.

In conclusion, the transnational mythscape provides a useful framework for the various European politics of memory. However, beyond the clarifying function of this model, it also allows us to understand more complex political and mnemonic phenomena that occur on the periphery of such memory politics. In the last section of this article, I will examine a puzzle, related to a recent Russian-Israeli politics, which I argue is a narrative alliance. While neither party to this alliance belongs to the European community, their collaboration takes new meaning when explored through the transnational mythscape.

***‘The National Monument commemorating the Victory of the Red Army in the Second World War over Fascism’ in Netanya, Israel***

On 25 June 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin made his second visit to Israel, after a gap of seven years, to attend the inauguration of a newly built monument entitled ‘The National Monument Commemorating the Victory of the Red Army in the Second World War over Fascism.’ Most journalists writing about the Russian President's visit to Israel considered the ceremony to be merely a cover for more realpolitik pursuits, such as scouting for Gas contracts (Milman, 2012), uniting against ‘the Islamist threat’ (Shoval, 2012), seeking to further Russian-Israeli partnership in light of the collapse of Moscow-friendly regimes (Magen, 2012), or delivering a message to Israel's American allies (Labbot, 2012).

The underlying assumption of carefully planned serendipity is understandable. One may question the importance of the symbolic gesture of the Russian president visiting Israel’s eighth largest city, considering accusations of Russian involvement in the violent conflict in neighbouring Syria, some 70 miles away. Or one might ask how urgent could the commemoration of the sacrifice of the Red Army, made some seven decades ago, be in light of the possibility of an imminent Israeli raid on Russian built Iranian nuclear installations that may spark a regional war?

While the response in the press reflected a realpolitik reasoning quite similar to the bafflement of the two Russia analysts cited above, I suggest that Putin’s visit to inaugurate the monument was a move on the transnational mythscape. The goal of the visit and of the monument was to forge a narrative alliance that connects the Stocholm narrative with the Moscow narrative, establishing the Red Army as the liberator of the death camps and effectively, as the hero of the story of the Holocaust.

In this last section, I will substantiate this claim by first exploring the relations between Israel, Russia and groups therein more closely, and second by analysing the new narrative epitomised in the monument as a dialogical intervention in the transnational mythscape in relation to the association between the groups and the mythscape.

*The Russian-Israeli (Netanya) Narrative Alliance: The Netanya Narrative*

The Russian interest in recruiting Israel for its mnemonic campaign is rooted in the status of the state of Israel as the successor to the victims of the Holocaust and its privileged position regarding Holocaust memory. In 1952, the reparation agreement between West Germany and Israel, which was supported by a minority of Germans (Von Hindenburg, 2007: 50) was explained as a move that would legitimise German political participation in world affairs (Sagi, 1986: 64).

Furthermore, the very notion of the Holocaust as a unique historical event separate from the overall history of the Second World War, which stands at the heart of the Stockholm narrative, is entwined with the Israeli state, in particular the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, in which Holocaust was first framed as ‘an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general’ (Douglas, 2001: 6, Novick, 1999: 133).

Due to its privileged status in relation to the governing European myth, both in being the successor state of its tragic heroes as well as some claim to its very composition, an Israeli endorsement of the Moscow narrative carries considerable weight.

This alliance was happily pursued by an Israeli government on realpolitik grounds. It was eager to enlist Russian support in the struggle to hinder Iran’s nuclear programme and Israeli officials raised the issue on every occasion. Israel was also interested in promoting the Stockholm narrative. Israeli officials often politically mobilize the memory of the Holocaust (Zertal, 2005:5), mostly by comparing the behaviour of contemporary political opponents to that of Nazis. (Ibid: 171-176). Such historical analogies connote a sense of urgency and existential danger and in order for such tropes of ‘Holocaust again’ to affect foreign audiences, the Holocaust must retain its status as a unique and foundational event under the normative directive of ‘never again’ that is solidified in the Stockholm narrative. [[2]](#footnote-2)

But perhaps a more crucial explanation for the Israeli-Russian narrative alliance, which highlights its transnational character, relates to the large Russian Jewish community in Israel and their claim on the militarised Israeli national mythscape, which valorises wartime heroism (Zertal, 2005). Since the 1990s about a million Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union have settled in Israel (Arian, Philippov and Knafelman, 2009: 89). Dmitry Shumsky (2001) explained that Jewish identity in the Soviet Union was that of an *ethnikos* lacking an *ethnos*, or a nationality lacking an indigenous national territory. Following immigration, Israel came to be seen by many in the Russian community as the titular Jewish nation. One of the aspects of this nationalist outlook is the possibility of assimilation while retaining a close relation to the ‘Russian metropole’ (Ibid: 35).

The revisions of the ‘Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance (Yad Vashem) Law’ demonstrate the success of the Moscow narrative. The law, which institutionalised Holcaust commemorative practices in Israel, was initially drafted in 1953 and established a Holocaust Memorial Day as well as the institution of Yad-Vashem, was extended in the year 2000 to establish May 9th as an official commemorative date and also to include within Yad Vashem’s duties the commemoration of the ‘memory and heroism of the veterans of the Second World War.’ In 2008, the law was further extended and today the official Israeli memory law includes Soviet-styled national victory march in the capital (State of Israel, 2008).

***The Victory Monument***

The narrative embedded in the monument itself was already articulated in the call for proposals for its design, which was sent out two years prior. It read:

*‘The Russian people and the Red Army were the deciding factor in the defeat of Nazism, the halting of the Jewish genocide in the European death camps, which contributed to the establishment of the State of Israel three years after the victory over Nazi Germany’* (Keren Hayesod, 2010).

A direct causal link was established between the Soviet victory and the establishment of the state of Israel. This narrative is reflected in the text that eventually accompanied the monument, which asserts that ‘the connection between this victory and the resurrection of the Jewish people in the state of Israel is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Israeli people’ (Ibid).

The monument is composed of two parts. The first is a narrow path that meanders between heavy walls of naked cement and is decorated by a set of bronze reliefs. On one wall of the cement path the reliefs depict iconic images and symbols from the Holocaust, on the other, scenes of Soviet suffering and heroism, suggesting an alignment between the two histories of suffering. As the maze opens-up, the second part of the monument is revealed. Two giant white wings that sprout out of the ground and face away from the monument represent the salvation by the Red Army and echo the heroic Moscow narrative.

The monument bears a resemblance to the Yad-Vashem Holocaust museum, where a zigzagging route ends in the open air, with a balcony overlooking the Judean hills, suggesting that Zionism and the return of the Jews to the holy land is the salvation from the Holocaust.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, in the new and combined ‘Netanya narrative,’ it is the Red Army that provided that salvation.

While the Netanya monument is a national monument, it is not located within the confines of the space of the national mnemonic canon in the ‘Mountain of Memory’ (Feldman, 2007: 1148) in Jerusalem. Rather, it is placed in such a peripheral setting that subsequent ‘Victory day’ ceremonies held in the monument were downgraded to the municipal rather than national level. For these reasons, I argue that the importance of the monument is more related to the ‘memory event’ and the narrative alliance that was formed , rather than to the rooting of the narrative in material form and its dissemination through repetitive ceremonies.

The dialogic intervention appears more clearly if we frame these narratives according to the formula presented in the previous segment. The Israeli narrative design is similar to that of the Stockholm narrative: *Jewish victimhood of Nazi perpetration*. The Moscow narrative is *Russian sacrifice and heroism liberated Europe*, which is incongruent with the ‘grammar’ of the transnational mythscape. Through the monument, which highlights the link between Russian heroism and Jewish victimhood, the two narratives are enjoined to imply a direct causal link: *Jewish victimhood of Nazi perpetration was ended by Soviet Heroism*.

This new formulation plugs also hinders the Prague narrative, in which the Soviets are perpetrators rather than heroes. Putin (2012a) referred to it through the filter of the newly established ‘Netanya’ narrative by stating that ‘It is our duty to defend and preserve the truth about the war and prevent any attempts to justify the Nazis’ helpers.’ Moreover, while it has been reported in Russia and during the ceremony that the monument was an Israeli initiative (RT, 2012; Putin, 2012a), it was actually Boris Spiegel, chairman of World Without Nazism, the Russian organisation dedicated to fighting the Prague Narrative, who initiated the idea of the monument (Shalita, 2011).

While the event ended in a whimper, the alliance was still being forged. Following the ceremony, President Putin (2012c) unveiled plans for the promotion of the Netanya narrative in Russia:

*‘in the fall of this year, we are planning to open a museum in Moscow called the Museum of Tolerance, but it will be largely devoted to the issues of the Holocaust. And I once again sincerely invite you to its opening,’*

President Peres attended the opening and spoke of a ’liberation for the world, for humanity, and for my people’ adding, according to the revised script that ’This victory enabled us to live again and become an independent people once more’ and reminding the Russian president about the other part of the celebrated narrative alliance: ‘During your visit to Israel you said that Israel’s security is important for Russia, and that Russia will not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons’ (Ibid).

**Coda: The Sobibor Monument**

In June 2017, a Russian delegation was disinvited from participating in the design team for the memorial site at the Sobibor death camp in Poland. The response from the Russian foreign ministry was harsh and directed squarely at Israel. At first, the Foreign Ministry spokerson exclaimed ‘that Israel is one of the countries that has behaved disgracefully in this situation’ (Zakharova, 2017) and later added that “Israel's position—to allow Russia's exclusion of the project—is bordering on historical betrayal’ (Ynetnews, 2017).

The harsh words reflect a perceived Israeli withdrawal from the ’narrative alliance’ discussed above that frames the way the Sobibor death camp is narrated in Russian Holocaust memory. Sobibor was the site of the murder of some 250,000 Jews, but in October 1943, a succesful uprising lead by a Jewish Red Army officer, Alexander Pachersky. allowed for the escape of a few hundred inmates, a unique event in the history of the Holocaust.

Sobibor, as the story of a bold and successful rebellion lead by a Red Army officer makes for a compelling story that aligns with the revised Netanya narrative that is certainly powerfully promoted by official channels. Vladimir Medinsky, the Russian minister of culture, initiated the production of a major film (Tabarovsky, 2018) that was heavily promoted by Russian embassies and an exhibition entitled ’Sobibor: Victory Over Death’ was mounted in the aforementioned Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow (Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, 2017).

Following the condemnation, Netanyahu flew to Moscow to meet Putin in person. They met on 23 August, the date of the Hitler-Stalin pact and the official European day of remembrance for victims of Stalinism and Nazism. The Israeli Prime Minister visited the museum and the exhibition and gave a public statement that reiterated the Russian Sobibor narrative in familiar terms that highlight the role of the Red Army as liberator, both in relation to the history of the Holocaust as well as the particular case of Sobibor:

*’We, and I personally, will never forget the historic role that Russia and the Soviet army played in defeating Nazism. We say this everywhere, at all venues. We recently declared this in the Israeli Knesset. Mr President, you know well that it is for this reason that I took the initiative in my time of erecting a monument in the town of Netanya to the liberator soldiers of the Soviet army, and you took part in that monument’s unveiling. In this context, Israel cannot have objections to Russia’s participation in the important project at former concentration camp Sobibor. The Soviet officer of Jewish origin who led the famous uprising at Sobibor is naturally celebrated as a national hero in Russia and in Israel.’* (Putin and Netanyahu, 2017).

Other than Netanyahu mistakenly referring to Sobibor, one of the Nazi death camps, as a ’concentration camp,’ the sentiment was clear: the narrative alliance was upheld.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I argued that the narratives of the well-studied but unwieldy field of European Memory could be approached as participating in a ‘transnational mythscape:’ a narrative constellation aligned with a shared narrative grammar. This framework was deployed to interrogate a Russian-Israeli narrative alliance, which draws on the position of the Israeli state in relation to Holocaust memory, to make a claim on the transnational mythscape that would have a dialogical meaning in regard to other narratives within the mythscape – it advanced the Moscow narrative, by aligning it with the Stockholm narrative and in the process, it impeded the competing Prague narrative.

Bell (2006: 17) anticipated that ‘Conflict rather than harmony seems likely to determine the contours of future mnemonic politics.’ This may be true, but as this article has demonstrated, a memory conflict is not a zero-sum competition. Michael Rothberg (2010) suggested that memory competitions simply breed more memory. Similarly, memory politics breed more politics.

These could involve different manifestation of power: diplomatic, military or other. But they are involve dialogical relationships between the different sides, a common nexus of interpretation that lends itself to a rearticulation as common constellations. This framing allows us to understand the underlying grammar according to which narratives of the past are promoted and resisted by actors.

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1. This is the source of my claim that these are ‘European Memory Politics’. I do not mean to say that these are the only narratives, but merely that he memory contests that I explicate below have taken up a large chunk of the literature. It goes without saying that this will change. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, in 2014 Prime Minister, Netanyahu expressed his discontent about the entry of Hamas into the Palestinian government by proclaiming that ‘Hamas is trying to start another Holocaust’ (Ynetnews, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although as Amos Goldberg (2012) notes, the view is of a demolished Palestinian village, the site of a well known massacre. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)