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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Signifying the present in links to the past: memory organizations react to the February 24, 2022, Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

How do actors make sense of disruptive events through historical references? This article examines how Polish, German, and Ukrainian memory organizations responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, by mobilizing the past to imbue this event with meaning. Drawing on 740,720 tweets from 139 memory organizations, I apply a computational hermeneutics approach to analyze historical references, their narrative forms, and the networks of actors promoting these mnemonic interpretations. I identify four modes of eventful references to the past—analogy, continuity, contextual reference, and rectification. While Polish actors frame the invasion through both Soviet and Nazi terror, German organizations focus on the Nazi past and avoid direct historical analogies. These differences reflect enduring domestic memory cultures, which, I argue, are reactivated in the immediate aftermath of a disruptive event. The analysis offers novel insights into how digital memory environments structure meaning-making. As a contribution to eventful cultural sociology and memory studies, it demonstrates how actors' reliance on preexisting memory frameworks in response to present crises also contains the seeds of new historical interpretations.

Keywords Social memory · Eventful sociology · Culture and networks · Computational social science · Ukraine

Introduction

On November 30, 2022, a little more than nine months after the first Russian missiles struck Kyiv, launching its devastating full-scale assault on the country, the German Parliament passed a resolution recognizing Stalin's man-made famine of

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the early 1930s as a genocide. What came to be known in Ukrainian memory as the Holodomor claimed the lives of millions of Ukrainians. Robin Wagener, an MP from the German Greens who initiated the resolution, remarked: "Putin is part of Stalin's cruel and criminal tradition… today Russian terror is once again haunting Ukraine" (The Guardian 2022). The resolution was part of an ongoing effort to show recognition for Ukrainian victims of mass violence in the past, and to address the longstanding relative neglect of Ukrainian 20th-century history in Germany, and by extension, Western Europe. It was also about mobilizing historical memory to foster solidarity with Ukraine and exert political pressure on warmongering Russia. This moment demanded symbolic work: Here, references to the past were activated in an attempt to extend existing boundaries of a shared political "we"—the Western European challenge of recognizing Ukrainian victims of the current war as "our victims", mediated by historical references.

Against this backdrop, this article pursues two questions: First, when responding to an eventful rupture, how do actors draw on references to past events to make sense of what is happening? Second, in drawing such eventful references, do they activate existing frameworks of meaning or introduce novel interpretations of the past? These are pertinent questions for cultural sociologists and for scholars of social memory, as they illuminate micro-level mechanisms that shape consequential meaning-making. Events do not possess inherent meaning; they must be interpreted and imbued with significance (Alexander 2012; Wagner-Pacifici 2017). To trace these dynamics, we need to interrogate both the *what*—which historical events are invoked—and the *how*—the forms through which these references shape contemporary understandings.

To pursue these goals, in the following, I examine how memory organizations imbue the February 24, 2022, Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine with historical meaning. As key actors in shaping collective narratives, these institutions hold the authority to preserve the past and commemorate the victims of past political violence. I examine actors from Poland, Germany, and Ukraine in their immediate reactions to the invasion, a moment of profound uncertainty in which patterns of meaning-making begin to take shape. These organizations, I demonstrate, indeed draw on history to make sense of the rupture in the present. I identify four distinct ways in which this happens: analogy, continuity, contextual reference, and rectification.

Together, the *what* and the *how* of eventful references shed light on how these actors mobilize preexisting memory frameworks to construct specific ideas of victimhood. This shapes their expressions of solidarity with Ukraine in distinct ways. In Poland, support for Ukraine is articulated through a shared historical language, with eventful references linking both Soviet and Nazi terror to the current invasion. In contrast, German memory frameworks remain more cautious, exclusively focused on the Nazi past and deliberately avoiding the collapsing of past and present that comes with drawing direct historical analogies. These varying responses, I argue, reflect the persistence of domestic memory cultures, which are reactivated in moments of uncertainty. This historical juncture brings into focus the meaning structures underlying broader divides in European memory (Judt 2005; Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2013; Verovšek 2021), but also how actors attempt

to transcend existing barriers. The process of reevaluating historical understandings is increasingly central to the European Union's stance toward Russia, particularly in light of the U.S. abandonment of Ukraine under the Trump administration in 2025. Overall, the analysis underscores the enduring power of established historical references within memory communities as they navigate disruptive change in the present, and it reveals the meaning structures that shape the conditions for subtle shifts in collective interpretations of the past.

Drawing on an initial dataset of 740,720 tweets by 139 memory organizations from 20 countries, spanning, in some cases, up to 15 years of digital communication on the social media platform Twitter/X[1] I use a computational hermeneutics approach (Mohr et al. 2015) to enable a qualitative, context-rich understanding of textual data (Bonikowski and Nelson 2022; Grigoropoulou and Small 2022; Voyer et al. 2022; Jensen et al. 2023). I focus on the most widely represented communities in this dataset: Polish and German organizations, as well as Ukrainian organizations directly affected by the war. The analysis considers three dimensions: the content of tweets, forms of referencing the past, and the networks of organizations. It combines named entity recognition (a computational social science technique), qualitative content analysis, and network analysis.

The discussion proceeds as follows: First, I situate the study in the context of eventful cultural sociology and the sociology of memory, with a particular focus on social memory in digital environments (Hoskins 2018). Following an overview of the case, the sampling, and the methods employed, I present and discuss the findings using a meaning-centered approach to the politics of memory.

Eventful cultural sociology and social memory

In recent times, cultural sociologists have become increasingly interested in events (Mast 2006; Alexander 2012; Berezin 2012; Reed 2016; Wagner-Pacifici 2017), exploring them as social constructions and collective representations. These writings propose that events are not simply occurrences in the world; they are phenomena that actors interpret, and around which they orient their actions based on processes of meaning-making. In a Durkheimian sense, events arise from conflicting meaning structures, invoking the sacred by disrupting profane routines. An event, writes Jason Mast (2006, p. 117), "is a set of narratively interconnected occurrences that achieves 'generalization,' drawing a public's attention away from the specificity of everyday life." In conversation with historical sociology and, in particular, pragmatist schools of thought (Gross 2018), scholars argue that events can serve as potential causal drivers of change. Events can trigger cascading and sequential effects, leading to further critical junctures, big or small (Berezin 2012). Path dependence implies that early events shape the context and possibilities of later events. A hermeneutic understanding of agency emphasizes how actors interpret events and navigate

[1] Most of the data used in this article comes from before the change in Twitter/X's ownership structure (Elon Musk's acquisition of the platform in October 2022) and its subsequent politicization by far-right actors after 2023.

their consequences through meaning-making: Events may lead, in the words of William Sewell (2005), to the "transformation of structures", through a mechanism of reframing linguistic signs. Disruptive events create conditions of uncertainty, generating an urgent need for meaning-making and interpretation. They can have consequences that create new horizons of individual and social experience for the actors involved, thereby opening avenues for novel understandings of the world (Abbott 2016; Gross 2018). Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017), in her inquiry into the symbolic affordances of events, builds upon Sewell's insights and suggests shifting the focus from the duality of event and structure to what she terms the dynamic interplay between "form" and "flow", both of which arise from eventful temporality, and, in particular from disruptive events. Her approach emphasizes the significance of various configurations and styles of representation and signification. Wagner-Pacifici notes that "events take shape" (ibid, p. 10) and "exist within and are shaped by these forms" (ibid., p. 11). She posits that the sociological analysis of events must focus on the "contingency of practices of form taking and form exchange" (ibid.). Contingency exists within this temporal expanse, but it must be actualized, shaped, and articulated by actors. Actors establish a specific symbolic relationship to the event, and they pursue their ends based on this symbolic framing.

The sociology of memory investigates a similar phenomenon: how do the ways in which individuals and collectives make sense of the past inform their orientations in the present? Scholars such as Barry Schwartz (1982), Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991), Jeffrey Olick (1999, 2013), Ron Eyerman (2019), Jeffrey C. Alexander (2012), Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002), Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger (2010), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006), Bin Xu (2020), and Eviatar Zerubavel (2012) have long argued that the way the past influences the present is shaped by processes of selection, classification, and evaluation. Different communities may remember certain periods and events in the past as more significant than others, reflecting the diverse ways in which societies construct the past. The politics of the past (Kubik and Bernhard 2014), in particular, is shaped by the selective nature of social memory, most evident in the creation and repeated invocation of founding myths, symbols, and forms of representation that construct a compelling narrative of a community's origins. Memory plays a weighty role in nationalism (Spillman 1997), carrying past triumphs or defeats into the present, such as through nostalgia (Karakaya 2020). Werner Binder (2021) has recently argued that theories of memory culture must be seen as a foundational part of the civil sphere, an essential pillar of democratic life and imagination.

If memory is a key means of representing and making sense of past events, how do current events shape, and perhaps transform, collective recollections? That question is directly connected to a longstanding debate in the sociology of memory, tracing back to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who is recognized as the founder of the concept of collective memory. At its core is the tension between presentism, the idea that memory is shaped by current needs, and the view that preexisting structures of meaning influence how the present is understood. Halbwachs argued that memory is never fixed but evolves in response to contemporary social contexts and demands. He emphasized the social life of groups such as families, professional circles, and social classes as the genuine locus of memory. His was a functionalist argument; he

observed that social groups have specific needs, and these needs, along with their relational composition, shape their perspective on the past.

Scholars have contested this claim by arguing that social memory does not change quickly, nor does it emerge based solely on current needs. Jeffrey Olick, for instance, interrogates the historicity of social memory (Olick 2013). Christina Simko, summarizing the critique of the presentist approach to memory, argues that assuming memory is radically malleable in response to contemporary concerns or projects fails to acknowledge that memory itself has historicity, that symbolic structures endure, that it is shaped by what are often relatively stable institutional frameworks and "commemorative trajectories" (Simko 2016, p. 461).[2] Still, present concerns and needs must reconfigure elements of foundational interpretive structures—what Isaac Reed calls "landscapes of meaning" (2011, p. 92)—in specific ways, as memory would otherwise remain static and frozen.

Foregrounding how actors respond to large-scale external shocks by referencing the past in similar or divergent ways provides a pathway into this problem. Moments of rupture are valuable for cultural sociological analysis: external, disruptive occurrences create uncertainty. With no clear script available, actors must construct responses that reveal their deeper, implicit understanding of the situation. This allows us to ask to what extent existing mnemonic frameworks prefigure how actors respond to the current event (path dependency), or whether the event itself forces a reevaluation of historical narratives (contingency). Does the past structure the response to external shocks, or do crisis ruptures compel actors to embrace novel interpretations?

Digital memory environments

Digital memory environments offer a rich context for exploring this question. The digitalization of memory represents a technological shift with significant social and cultural implications (Hoskins 2018; Merrill et al. 2020; Jensen et al. 2023). As research in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies demonstrates, the internet functions as an archive, but unlike traditional repositories, digital memory is interactive and participatory, shaped by users, algorithms, and platform governance. New cultural techniques are emerging that reconfigure memory functions in digital spaces, extending psychological recall by technologically mediated forms of storage, retrieval, and individual as well as collective meaning-making.

It is within digital environments that real-world events, and references to them, are increasingly negotiated. The digital realm has become a temporal arena where events are not only represented but instantly imbued with meaning. Exploring this, a growing body of research in digital memory studies highlights how contemporary events and anniversaries serve as catalysts for making past events visible and salient. For example, Jensen et al. (2023) collect nearly 200,000 tweets discussing the history of the children's TV show *Sesame Street* to analyze how collective nostalgia for this show is triggered by two anniversary events. Richardson-Little et al. (2022) examine

[2] See Gensburger (2016) for a qualification of Halbwachs' arguments in this regard.

how the German far-right wing party uses Twitter/X around the commemoration days of four major events related to the fall of the Wall in 1989/90 and former East Germany for contemporary political messaging.

We can push this analysis further by systematically examining how actors *respond* to unfolding events. Digital memory's temporality, in particular its immediate and evolving nature, results in a contraction of space and time, creating a condensation of meaning that makes it an ideal context for studying the interplay between continuity and change in memory frameworks. The granular time-series data available in digital spaces enables us to trace how reactions to an event evolve over minutes, hours, days, or weeks, as well as how actors respond to one another, capturing the temporal dynamics of meaning-making.

From the *what* to the *how* of eventful references

Memory and references to past events operate not only through the *what*—the event and its meanings—but also through the *how*, that is, *how* the past is represented. This includes the modes, styles, and formal features that shape individual and collective memory. Aleida Assmann (2009), for example, discussing forms of memory, distinguishes between the written word, the image, the body, the place (including the monument), the archive, ecology, and the work of art. These are different modes of representing the past, with different esthetic qualities, and hence affordances that actively shape the content of references to the past. At the level of language, we can examine how the formal features of narrative shape memory. Narrative theory offers rich insights in this respect. Hayden White argued that historical narratives are textual representations that elucidate events or processes. They achieve this by constructing stories characterized by clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Narratives contain a character (dramatis personae), a story (a chronological sequence of causally related events), and a plot (the arrangement of events as they are told, not necessarily in chronological order) (Steinmetz 1992, p. 497; Piper et al. 2021). Narratives foreground some elements of what is happening, such as events that are deemed particularly important. They achieve this through what Margaret Somers calls "emplotment", which "gives significance to independent instances, not their chronological or categorical order." Emplotment crystallizes meaning through form and content, it "translates events into episodes" (Somers 1994, p. 616). By examining how these formal elements are arranged in narratives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the broader significance of references to particular past events.

Khlevniuk and Noordenbos (2024), arguing that insufficient attention has been paid to "the *ways* in which political narratives connect past events to current affairs" (ibid., p. 2), offer a recent important contribution in this regard. They systematically map different "temporal structures" in Russian state media's memory politics concerning the war in Ukraine to categorize how historical references, particularly to the Great Patriotic War, are used to shape narratives. They identify four such temporal structures in their material: *Historicism* presents the past as detached and self-contained, while *resemblance* draws selective links between past and

present, ranging from implicit resonances and explicit comparisons in analogies, up to a "maximum level of similarity" in repetition. *Continuity* frames history as an unbroken trajectory leading to current events, and *mythic time* collapses historical distinctions, portraying the present as part of an eternal struggle. From this, it becomes clear that memory politics can differently structure the relationship between past and present.

These insights provide an excellent point of departure for the present analysis. In the following, I ask if, and how, memory actors draw on past events to make sense of a shocking event in the present. Eventful references take three distinct forms: Relating to the present event, relating to the past event, and construing a relationship between the two. I examine this within the context of digital memory, focusing specifically on the social media platform Twitter/X. I conceptualize modes of *responding* to an external shock in the sense of eventful cultural sociology, as a matter of both content and form. Responding entails processes of signification, and possibly also a realignment in relations among actors (Wagner-Pacifici 2017, p. 25). The radically disruptive shock confronts actors with uncertainty; therefore, we can expect their initial responses to be driven by a need for anchoring and re-establishing meaning, potentially through the introduction of novel themes and forms. I focus on responses as they unfold in the hours and days following the critical event—something made possible by the granular level of digital data—tracing their emergence over time to interrogate and contextualize these initial reactions.

The case: memory actors reacting to the Russian invasion of 2022

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the early morning of February 24, 2022, the global political community reacted with shock and condemnation. The Biden administration stated, "The world will hold Russia accountable" (The White House 2022); the EU Commission condemned the attack and Russia's responsibility for the war in strong terms. The way individual countries reacted was influenced by their respective political and memory contexts. Here, I focus on Poland, Germany, and Ukraine. Poland's response to Russia's invasion was swift and unequivocal, strongly condemning Putin's actions and expressing unwavering solidarity with its Ukrainian neighbors. This reaction was driven by a deep-seated fear that Russia might not stop at Ukraine.[3] The Polish government acted decisively, providing the highest level of military aid in Europe and establishing itself as a logistical hub for military infrastructure (Dyduch and Góra 2024; Kalhousová et al. 2024). Polish public opinion in 2022 was overwhelmingly pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia, characterized by deep-seated distrust in Putin and widespread skepticism that any peace settlement with him could be negotiated. The country also welcomed more than three million Ukrainian refugees, a policy that starkly contrasted with its otherwise restrictive stance on non-European migrants.

[3] Diplomatically, Warsaw advocated maximalist support for Kyiv in all forums. It vocally backed Ukraine's fast-track EU membership bid and urged fellow NATO/EU members to isolate Russia as much as possible.

Germany's reaction was marked by a combination of shock, support, and inertia, supportive of Ukraine's struggle yet wary of escalation and seeking a quick resolution to the conflict (Driedger 2022; Jarausch 2024; Tkocz and Stritzel 2024). While willing to bear certain costs, Germany's policy was initially slow to shift due to its longstanding economic ties with Russia and a strong legacy of post-WWII pacifism. Before the invasion, Germany was Russia's largest trading partner in Europe and heavily dependent on Russian fossil fuels: 55% of its natural gas supply came from Russia. The principle of "change through trade" (*Wandel durch Handel*) had long guided German policy toward Russia, based on the belief that economic interdependence would promote stability and mutual benefit.[4] The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine became a watershed moment. Chancellor Scholz proclaimed a "turning point" (Zeitenwende), announcing a major increase in Germany's military budget just days after the attack. Enthusiasm for this shift was, however, far from universal. Public opinion remained divided, with great variation across party lines and even within political camps.[5]

In the past two decades, the notion that Russian geopolitics constitutes a common threat brought Poland and Ukraine closer together. In contrast, among Western European publics, the initial response to Russian efforts to undermine Ukraine's legitimacy as an independent state, which became evident after the 2014 occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine, was rather muted. In a public opinion poll conducted in January 2022, shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion, only 28% of the French public and 37% of the German public believed that defending Ukraine was a risk worth taking in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion, yet 53% of Poles thought it was (ECFR 2022).

Historical memory was a core element of the Russian narrative used to justify the 2022 full-scale invasion (Zavershinskaia 2023). Central to this narrative was the claim that Ukraine was governed by a "Nazi" regime, necessitating "denazification" through Russian military action, a notion that, as Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2020) demonstrates, goes back to the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine's initial westward turn. Ukraine's memory landscape is shaped by overlapping traumas—Nazi occupation, Soviet repression, and contested nationalist legacies—long suppressed under Soviet rule but reclaimed after independence (Kasianov 2021). Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has actively distanced itself from Kremlin-dominated historical narratives, passing memory laws that recognize Stalin's man-made famine of the early 1930s, known as the Holodomor, as genocide, equate Nazi and Soviet crimes, and honor nationalist resistance figures, despite their controversial pasts. From a European perspective, the 2022 invasion probed the boundaries of what constitutes European core memory. European memory has for a long time predominantly been a Western European construct (Judt 2005; Judt

[4] Even after 2014, Germany continued to build direct gas pipelines to acquire Russian gas that bypassed Ukraine.

[5] Influential voices in the German left, for instance, cautioned against "escalating" tensions through a commitment to deliver weapons to Ukraine, taking a markedly different stance than the Greens, who emerged as the strongest advocates for Ukraine.

and Snyder 2013; Hilmar 2016)[6] yet the symbolic, eventful conflicts surrounding the Russian aggression are closely tied to the historical experiences of Central and Eastern European societies in the 20th century.

For both the Polish and German publics, making sense of the invasion and the outbreak of war on European soil was influenced by their respective domestic memory traditions. In Poland, historical trauma from past Russian occupations, particularly Soviet rule, mass deportations, and Stalinist terror, shaped the perception of the war. The division of Poland under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 remains a central reference point in national memory. In 2022, Polish leaders consistently reminded their European partners of the lessons of Munich in 1938, that appeasing aggressors or maintaining business-as-usual with dictators leads to catastrophe. They routinely invoked World War II analogies, portraying Putin as a direct successor to Stalin and even Hitler in his genocidal aims. The Polish public needed little persuasion about Russia's threat, given that stories of Soviet repression and wartime suffering have been passed down for generations. On the other hand, for decades, Polish-Ukrainian diplomatic relations have been strained by contested memories of mass violence against civilians during World War II (Stryjek and Konieczna-Sałamatin 2021; Soroka 2022). A key point of contention is the meaning of the Volhynia Massacre, a series of coordinated attacks between 1943 and 1945, carried out by Ukrainian nationalists against the Polish civilian population in the Volhynia region, which was then part of Eastern Poland (now in Western Ukraine). In Poland, these atrocities are remembered as ethnic cleansing, while in Ukraine, these events have long been downplayed within a nationalist narrative of the struggle for independence.[7]

Germany's memory culture, in contrast, is influenced by the idea that peace and demilitarization are fundamental lessons of World War II. The notion of "never again", as part of the pacifist legacy, is understood to mean "never again war" (Tkocz and Stritzel 2024). Unlike in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries, the memory of communist crimes is not strongly associated with Russia. Pro-Russian sentiment is higher in the former communist-ruled East Germany: there, support for arming Ukraine in 2022 has been lower, and concerns about sanctions against Russia harming the German economy have been more pronounced, than in the rest of the country. The German far-right party, some of whose members maintain strong personal ties to Putin's circles, attempted to downplay the Kremlin's aggression under the guise of advocating for a "peace settlement" with Russia (see Zavershinskaia 2023). Finally, Germany and Poland also constitute two very different memory regimes within the EU. Germany represents the Western European model, where the primary focus is on reckoning with the Nazi past and recognizing the victims of Nazism and the Holocaust. In contrast, dominant memory narratives in Poland (like those in many of its postcommunist neighboring countries)

[6] Ukrainian history and memory have long occupied a marginal role in the broader European framework. During the Cold War, Ukraine's history was largely subsumed under the Soviet narrative. The Great Famine of the 1930s was virtually unknown in the West for decades.

[7] The ethnic violence was followed by a prolonged period of silence during the Soviet era. The memory of these atrocities resurfaced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Soroka 2022).

emphasize national victimhood, and the suffering endured under both Soviet rule and Nazi terror.[8]

Memory organizations in focus

Against this backdrop, the following analysis examines how memory actors responded to Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Scholars writing on the politics of memory typically study actors such as government officials, parliamentarians, or policy advisors. Here, I introduce a different, relatively understudied perspective by focusing on memory organizations (Wüstenberg 2017; Hilmar 2020). They include memorial sites, museums, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civic memory initiatives, and memory institutes (the latter of which are deeply embedded in the policy field). Memorial sites and museums typically have a wide and diverse range of tasks: they commemorate, educate, archive, organize exhibits, engage in public history, and organize academic conferences and collaborations.

Some memory organizations operate as civil society initiatives, while others are directly staffed and managed by governments.[9] States shape the functioning of memory organizations in different ways, either through direct influence and strong ties to national executive power, as in the case of postcommunist memory institutes, which typically advocate a nationalist agenda (Mink 2017; Kasianov

[8] The dynamics of memory between East and West have, for decades, evolved through political and cultural processes influenced by forces of center and periphery. It is a relationship fraught with tension: With reference to postcolonial theory, Maria Mälksoo (2009) described Eastern European memories as the "subaltern" in the larger European framework. Scholars write about the "memory wars" in the context of a dominant, hegemonic Western European frame and Eastern European contender (Stone 2012). Recent contributions point out how the politics of victimhood—narratives of totalitarian oppression, national sacrifice during World War II, and humiliation by the West—that pervades Eastern European societies today has become a "meta-narrative" in the region (Barton Hronešová 2024). Others challenge the notion of an East/West memory divide, arguing instead that the relevant divide is between a nationalist, anti-communist (far) right on the one hand and pluralist interpretations of history on the other (Toth 2019). In both cases, symbolic dynamics between center and periphery are shaped by geopolitical logics and specific epistemologies of "East" and "West", both of which are intertwined with political ideologies (Stone 2012; Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2013; Blacker and Etkind 2013; Hilmar 2016, 2020; Radonić 2018; Subotić 2023; Van de Putte 2024).

[9] As Wüstenberg (2017) illustrates by discussing the evolution of the German memory landscape after 1945, many memorial sites that are well-established today initially emerged from civic activism and grassroots initiatives. There is an important link between the activist, bottom-up character of such initiatives and their ethical dimension and legitimacy claims in the civil sphere more broadly. In this context, the historicity of these sites matters in a double sense: First, if they are located at a site of mass violence, they possess a special ethical relationship and, consequently, a certain authority in relation to this site, acting on behalf of the victims. Second, if they have emerged from efforts to commemorate the victims of that site or local context, as part of political struggles for recognition (achieved against resistance from those who undervalued this memory, including bureaucratic inertia and political suppression) then these struggles for recognition become a fundamental element of these organizations' identities. The effort to establish memorials, transforming forgotten or ignored places into sites of remembrance, is in itself a vital part of memory work. Organizations can then effectively derive their legitimacy from the fact that their own history is intertwined with a struggle for inclusion and democratization, drawing from broader values of civil society (Alexander 2006; Xu 2022). Memory organizations with such a history claim to legitimately embody these social values.

2021), or through public funding, as in the case of civil society organizations (Wüstenberg 2017). Overall, the proximity to local, federal, or national levels of government varies significantly among memory organizations. It is influenced by factors such as national context, funding situation and structure, the degree of democratic organization within the domestic memory and civil society field, and the networks in which they are embedded. In Germany, for example, federal and state funding is a crucial source of revenue for memory organizations, as it generally is for museums and most cultural institutions. A diverse range of foundations also operates within the national memory field. These organizations are public entities with specific mandates that, in their day-to-day operations, function independently from various branches of government. Kubik and Bernhard (2014) offer a typology of four different kinds of mnemonic actors—"warriors", "pluralists", "abnegators", and "prospectives"—each with a different approach to the past and a different political rationale for remembering. Mnemonic pluralists are guided by an inclusive, multifaceted vision of the past. Mnemonic warriors, in contrast, treat the past in an instrumental way and "tend to espouse a single, unidirectional, mythologized vision of time" (ibid., p. 13). Mnemonic abnegators avoid engaging in memory politics, either because they perceive historical consensus or see no advantage in challenging dominant narratives. Mnemonic prospectives are future-oriented, using memory selectively toward transformative causes. Kubik and Bernhard propose that high-level actors in memory politics, can be primarily understood through their instrumental, strategic approach to promoting certain interpretations of the past. Yet the relationship of memorial sites, museums, and civil society initiatives with the past—("pluralists", in their sense) is necessarily multidimensional. Commemoration activities, especially for victims of mass violence, are driven by ethical concerns and a sense of respect for the victims, often tied to the historical site itself, principles that also motivate those who work at these sites. These sites are also committed to scientific and educational objectives, seeing themselves as independent from official politics in their day-to-day work.

It is worthwhile to study memory organizations as key memory actors because they play a significant role in the civil sphere (Alexander 2006; Xu 2022) and in shaping memory-related policy fields (Wüstenberg 2017). The narratives they communicate influence policymakers, media discourse, and public sentiment. They actively shape debates on historical responsibility and the moral dimensions of commemoration.

Method and data

I employ a combination of computational social science and qualitative methodologies (Mohr et al. 2015; Fuhse et al. 2020; Bonikowski and Nelson 2022; Grimmer et al. 2022; Voyer et al. 2022). The primary empirical analysis is based on a dataset downloaded from the social media microblogging platform Twitter/X using the AcademicTwitter API (Barrie and Ho 2021). This dataset includes the complete archive of tweets, along with information about the accounts and their followings, from 139 memory organizations. Social media researchers have noted this platform's

intricate connection to the logic of events (Tufekci 2017): Conversations there often unfold as reactions to real-world events, and discussions about specific topics typically decrease in intensity after a relatively short period.

I adopt the methodology of computational hermeneutics (Mohr et al. 2015). It moves beyond quantifying frequencies and running models; it aims at qualitative depth, "close reading", and context-rich interpretation. This approach can be used to examine content and form of social media posts by memory organizations in substantive terms. It seeks to uncover the worldviews they project and the assertions they put forth and hence offers a comprehensive understanding of the narratives and discourses present within the digital conversation.

Studying memory references and networks in Twitter/X data

A primary advantage of Twitter/X data (Johansson et al. 2018; Shugars et al. 2021) is its process-generated nature, meaning it was not produced for the purposes of this study. However, it is highly context-dependent and significantly influenced by the platform of origin. As a publicly traded, for-profit entity, Twitter/X aims to maximize user engagement, which in turn shapes user interactions through its algorithmic design. Attention on the platform is a coveted and monetized resource.[10]

The empirical analysis focuses on the content and form of eventful references. It identifies specific events that are referenced in tweets: *What happened, when, and to whom?* Events can be defined chronologically, marking specific points in time, or thematically, focusing on broader themes; both of these understandings are relevant for the present analysis. Content is shaped by form; therefore, formal features must be analyzed as part of this process. The utterances of memory organizations on Twitter/X articulate memory in a specific form. The statements are brief and often summarize specific positions. They typically contain merely elements of narratives—teller, mode of telling, recipient, situation, agent, sequence of events, object, spatial location, temporal specification, and rationale—rather than a combination of all these components (Piper et al. 2021, p. 300). In narrative theory, an event is seen as a unit of action or change. Here, I foreground one particular dimension of this issue (ibid., p. 302-303), namely, how the relationship between events is derived from a temporal framework. Hence, for the analysis of variation in form, I focus on how the link between a present event (the 2022 invasion) and one or more past events is being established in tweets. I pay special attention to how notions of victimhood (Alexander 2012) serve as a moral anchor (Van de Putte 2024) in linking different temporal levels.

The specific use of tweets by these organizations may vary; they can be employed to convey historical information, announce and promote events, establish links

[10] The conversations on Twitter/X do not necessarily reflect the views of a broader population. In the present study, concentrating on organizations as institutional actors helps mitigate this issue. The emphasis shifts to what these entities, frequently supported by professional press departments or specialized public relations staff, choose to communicate on the platform.

with others, or criticize how others (such as states, media, or individuals) depict the past. The organizations in focus here assert a "memory mandate", in the sense that they claim to speak on behalf of communities or nations in their references to the past. The content they produce on social media is part of an institutionally scripted mode of communication, which may also shape the form. In addition to eventful references, I also record network ties between organizations in the form of "mentions" on Twitter/X (each time an organization mentions another in a tweet, it is counted as a network tie). Mentions can be interpreted as communicative acts, responses directed at another, engaging in a dialogue. Mentioning creates a relationship between the actor and the one mentioned (Fuhse et al. 2020). In the case of organizations, where the relationship to the past is institutional rather than personal, it entails acknowledging another organization's institutional legitimacy.[11] Conversely, the act of not mentioning, from a relational perspective, might imply avoidance, especially in tightly knit networks where actors are likely interconnected through a third party. The absence of connections, as Pachucki and Breiger (2010) suggest, in this sense, be an outcome of deliberate avoidance and therefore, an element of meaningful, symbolic communication.

Sampling and preprocessing

I downloaded all available tweets from 139 memory organizations from 20 countries, creating an initial dataset of 740,720 tweets, encompassing in some cases, over 15 years of data (see Online Appendix A for the full list of organizations in this sample). Using the definition introduced above, memory organizations are operationalized as institutional actors that commemorate the past. For the sampling, I collected all organizations that concentrate on the Nazi or Communist past (or both), with a focus on organizations located in Europe.[12] The organizations present in the final sample include memorial sites, museums, NGOs, foundations, and victims' associations. The sample also includes a number of memory institutes in Central Eastern European societies that stand out as they are directly aligned with government agendas (Mink 2017; Kasianov 2021; Kończal 2022). Germany

[11] In digital spaces, mentioning takes on added significance by affirming an actor's presence in a fleeting environment. A mention, even if critical, bestows attention, which is inherently valuable.

[12] The process of identifying organizations was conducted through network following: I manually checked which organizations these memory institutions follow. The basic procedure was as follows: I recorded organizations that fit the criteria, downloaded their data, checked the list of their following, and so on. This iterative process generated a list of 139 organizations. This result is exhaustive in the sense that organizations repeatedly appear in the following list, indicating genuine connections are reflected in the sampling. German and Polish organizations also constitute cohesive network communities in terms of following and in terms of "mentioning" (see Online Appendix B).

and Poland dominate in the primary dataset of 139 organizations: The sample includes 48 organizations from Germany, 34 from Poland, and 4 from Ukraine.[13] Accordingly, the analysis focuses on organizations from these three countries.[14]

I focus on organizations devoted to the Nazi or Communist pasts, a deliberate decision that reflects the research interest. The choice is informed by the substantive question of how memories of the 20th-century and specific national memory cultures may shape responses to this event. It is also informed by another contextual factor, the role of Russia's "de-Nazification" claim to legitimize the 2022 invasion, which specifically instrumentalizes memories of World War II (Zavershinskaia 2023).[15]

The preprocessing steps are tailored to the objectives of the analysis (Grimmer et al. 2022). In this case, a key aspect is reducing the text corpus by filtering out less relevant or redundant information. To prioritize the core question that informs this analysis: how memory organizations respond to the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, I narrow down the corpus as follows: I create a subcorpus of tweets that either mention the keyword "Ukraine" (translated into in 34 languages to capture variations) or were authored by Ukrainian memory organizations, resulting in a subset of 26,571 tweets.[16]

Figure 1 shows the distribution of these tweets over time. It becomes evident that the two war events, February 2014 and February 2022, trigger the most debate about Ukraine among memory organizations on this platform. When examining the impact of these events on the tweet activity of individual organizations, it becomes apparent that the reactions vary: some organizations tweet significantly more, while others much less than in a typical week during the four weeks following February 24, 2022 (see Online Appendix A).

[13] There are, of course, numerous memory organizations that do not have a presence on Twitter/X, and therefore do not appear in the sample. Many of the larger organizations (in particular, museums with staff and institutional resources, in contrast to small sites that are maintained by civil society groups), however, do. A significant number of organizations have been using the social media platform for quite some time, with about half established before Russia's initial attack on Ukraine in 2014 (see Online Appendix A). In recent years, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, memory has increasingly moved toward digitization (see for example Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2021), a trend that remains controversial, especially for memorial sites and sites of mass murder, where ethical and educational concerns shape how history is represented online. Still, many organizations do not maintain a social media profile. For Ukraine, Kasianov (2021, p. 157) notes that there are up to 2000 non-governmental organizations in one way or another "involved in activities related to historical memory". The sample reveals that Ukrainian organizations are less active on Twitter/X compared to Polish or German organizations.

[14] The list in Online Appendix A also provides an overview of how much each organization in the sample tweeted during the four weeks following February 24, 2022, compared to a typical four-week period. This offers a basic sense of how the event altered activity levels in purely quantitative terms.

[15] Museums or organizations with different focuses are excluded, as the scope of this article is specifically to study organizations that work on the political violence of 20th-century European history. To assess whether this overlooks alternative memory frameworks, an analysis of follower networks reveals that organizations centered on other historical themes, such as colonialism, are present but marginal within the network (see Online Appendix B).

[16] The entire subcorpus was translated into English using DeepL to facilitate computational as well as comparative qualitative analyses (a substantial number of tweets were already in English; they were left unchanged).

Method of analysis

The methods employed in this study combine text statistics (Benoit et al. 2018; Grimmer et al. 2022; Lane and Dyshel 2023), qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2014; Krippendorff 2018), and network analysis (Kadushin 2012). This interplay between formal and qualitative methods reflects the aim to use computational tools for qualitative ends (Mohr et al. 2015; Bonikowski and Nelson 2022). Three steps are taken: First, I employ a Named Entity Recognition (NER) model that automatically identifies dates and historical events in text (see Online Appendix B for an in-depth discussion). Second, I conduct a qualitative content analysis to understand how events in the past are linked to the present.[17] Third, I employ network analysis.[18] This final step allows us to ask whether the event of February 2022 has changed network connections among these organizations, with a particular focus on whether individual actors respond by adopting or amplifying the narratives of specific others. The network connections can then be interpreted alongside the findings about the historical events mentioned in tweets, as well as the hermeneutic reading of how historical events may be linked to the 2022 invasion.

Results

Patterns of referencing events

Which events are mentioned and by whom? Before approaching this question through a computational model, it is useful to consider it in relation to the overall communication activity of the organizations in this sample. When examining who is mentioning the keyword "Ukraine" in their tweets, it becomes apparent that Polish

[17] This combination proves particularly useful as the NER model can be applied to the entire corpus. The SpaCy Named Entity Recognition (NER) (Lane and Dyshel 2023) model is a component of the SpaCy Natural Language Processing (NLP) library, designed to identify and classify named entities in text into predefined categories such as person names, organizations, locations, as well as, particularly relevant for the present analysis, events and dates. SpaCy's NER model employs statistical machine learning to make predictions based on the patterns it learns from training data. This model is used to identify language patterns in the corpus of all 26,571 tweets that mention the keyword "Ukraine" (or are authored by Ukrainian organizations; for the validation of the model, see Online Appendix B). I complement the model with a qualitative close reading of the text. I examine tweets issued in the first four weeks following the February 2022 invasion (from February 24, 2022, to March 23, 2022), creating a subsample of 2,471 tweets. I selected this timeframe, immediately following the event, based on the assumption that it is critical for capturing organizations' responses to it.

[18] I compute and visualize a "mentions" network. It uses mentions as an indicator of a directed tie. A mention entails any retweet or tweet that includes a reference to another user, indicated by the @-sign. Each mention by one organization of another in a tweet is considered a connection (a directed tie, running from one organization to the other). Since each tweet is time-stamped, it is possible to analyze mentions over time. This allows for an investigation into whether the practices of citing others have evolved or remained consistent.

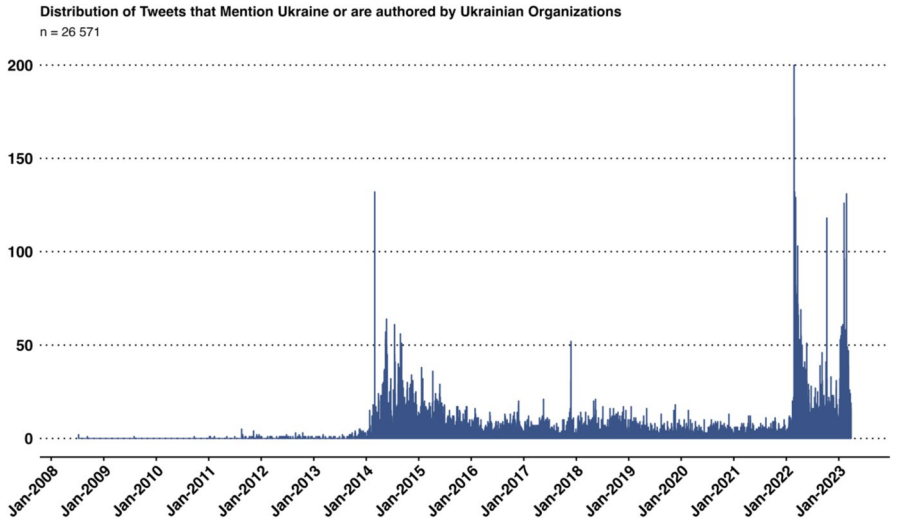


Fig. 1 Distribution over time

organizations frequently mention Ukraine. Before the February 2022 invasion, German organizations rarely mentioned Ukraine; after it, their mentions increased significantly. In the following, I present the results of the NER model both before and after February 24, 2022 to identify shifts in the discourse surrounding this event.

Figure 2 shows the results of the NER model by organizations from the three countries. Comparing the main events mentioned by these organizations reveals a marked difference in focus: German organizations primarily discuss the Holocaust, while Ukrainian organizations focus predominantly on the Holodomor. Polish organizations fall somewhere in between, mentioning Soviet crimes like Katyn or the massacres carried out by Ukrainian nationalists against Poles in Volhynia, as well as more recent events like the Euromaidan. The Polish discourse contains a broad range of references to historical events. A comparison of the main dates highlighted by these organizations shows distinct patterns. Initially, German organizations focus on the years 1941–1943, the period of Nazi Germany's occupation of Ukraine. However, after the 2022 invasion, this attack itself becomes the most frequently referenced point in time, as is also the case with Polish and Ukrainian subsets. For Ukrainian organizations, the years 1932–33, the peak of the Great Famine, are notably prominent. The year 2018 is also significant, marking the 85th anniversary of the Holodomor, which was widely commemorated in Ukraine.

The data underpinning these visualizations, the counts of events and dates mentioned alongside the keyword "Ukraine" before and after February 24, 2022, are provided in brackets below each text plot. The frequencies highlight how little German organizations engaged in historical discussions related to Ukraine

prior to the invasion on February 24, 2022. In contrast, Polish organizations were significantly more active in referencing historical events and dates in relation to Ukraine. However, there is a change immediately after the invasion, with German organizations becoming more engaged and starting to talk more often about events and dates related to Ukraine. Still, German organizations continue to mainly reference the Holocaust in their tweets about Ukraine. Ukrainian organizations, in contrast, continue to primarily reference the Holodomor.[19]

Formal ways of linking past and present

The first finding is that memory organizations do in fact mention historical events when commenting on the February 24, 2022 invasion. But do they also draw a connection between past events and the current war? This is not something the NER model can determine in this analysis. I employ a qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2014; Krippendorff 2018), focusing on a 4 week period following the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. This timeframe yields a subcorpus of 2,471 tweets from 75 organizations.[20]

Of the 2,471 tweets analyzed, over 10% invoke a historical event and connect it to the current war.[21] These are the tweets selected for the final qualitative and hermeneutic analysis. For each of them, I differentiate between elements of content and elements of form: Content (*what*) refers to historical events that are mentioned, as well as the actors and circumstances involved. Form refers to the manner in which the link between the past and the present (the past being the event, the present being the 2022 attack) is established (*how*). The main historical events referenced include Nazi terror, liberation from Nazi rule, the Holocaust, Soviet atrocities, the Holodomor, and Soviet oppression. References are also made to World War I and several significant battles in Ukrainian national history.[22] The analysis reveals four recurring patterns of how the past and the present are linked: Analogy, Continuity, Contextual Reference, and Rectification. Table 1 provides a summary of these forms.

[19] Of course, the sample from Ukraine is much smaller than the Polish and German ones, and among the organizations included in it, one is explicitly devoted to the memory of the Holodomor.

[20] Another important question addressed by the qualitative analysis is whether, in this data, any mention of "Ukraine" also refers to the 2022 full-scale invasion. The analysis shows that, with very few exceptions, in the subsequent weeks after February 24, 2022, this is indeed the case.

[21] The tweets that do not reference a historical event focus on the developments of the unfolding war after the invasion. They report on Russian attacks, civilian suffering, tragedies occurring in various parts of the country, and the international response to these atrocities. Many of these tweets call for solidarity and action to support Ukraine's defense.

[22] While not captured by the NER model above, the qualitative analysis reveals that references to the Nazi past are the most frequent in the initial weeks following the full-scale invasion.

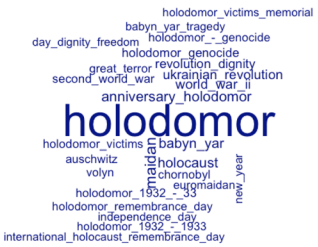
EVENTS		
	Before February 24, 2022	***After February 24, 2022***
German organizations	 (26)	 (219)
Polish organizations	 (558)	 (91)
Ukrainian organizations	 (1922)	 (531)

Fig. 2 Pre- and post-February 24, 2022, comparing references to events, and references to dates (total frequencies in brackets)

DATES		
	Before February 24, 2022	***After February 24, 2022***
German organizations	 (87)	 (128)
Polish organizations	 (559)	 (185)
Ukrainian organizations	 (1060)	 (582)

Fig. 2 (continued)

Table 1 Forms of linking past and present

Type (form)	Characteristics	Example
Analogy	Comparing as a key tool. Direct Analogies suggest that we are re-living the past, there is nothing that separates past and present. They express trans-temporal notions of victimhood, sometimes heroism. More indirect analogies emphasize striking similarities	Holodomor of 1932/33 and Russian attack of 2022 as two analogous events
Continuity	Observing how elements persist or re-appear in different shape. Continuity of vulnerability: A person/group/place from the time back then finds him or itself self today under threat again. Can also be a continuity of ideology	Ukrainian survivors of Nazi terror at risk of being harmed in the war today
Contextual reference	Referencing a historical context to imbue something that happens in the past with symbolic meaning (without suggesting similarity or continuity)	Decrying the immorality of bombing sites with great historical and symbolic significance, such as the Babyn Yar memorial site near Kyiv
Rectification	Correcting a view on history, flagging the act of falsifying and weaponizing the past for political purposes. Rejecting the act of drawing analogies can also be considered a rectification claim	Rejecting the Kremlin's "denazification" of Ukraine propaganda

Additional examples are provided and discussed in Online Appendix B

Historical analogy

Historical analogies compare two different historical events or periods and are drawn to highlight similarities in patterns, causes, or outcomes (Ghilani et al. 2017; Khlevniuk and Noordenbos 2024). There are many examples that reference 20th-century events, in particular, Nazi and Soviet terror, as the foil against which Putin's actions are interpreted. Some analogies draw direct parallels suggesting a repetition or recurrence of history, while others use past events to contextualize or explain current occurrences without implying a literal repetition. There are gradual differences in how analogies are drawn: The most direct version asserts that the past and the present are identical, that we are literally re-living the past in the present. One common version compares historical battles from centuries ago and the current war, suggesting that Ukraine has the capability and resolve to achieve military victory:

> We won in 1514—we will win in 2022! Russia is our historical enemy. Our common history is proof of this. But there is good news: Ukrainians have repelled attackers before, even with a smaller army. The Battle of Orsha is a great example https://t. co/ G7El6 jrbne https://t. co/ U8b6f 1iARU
> Uinp_gov_ua, 2022-02-27T15:55:07

The author of this statement is the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINP), which can be classified as a mnemonic warrior, promoting nationalist interpretations of the past (Kasianov 2021: p. 121). In these narratives categories of trans-temporal victimhood are frequently articulated by directly associating past suffering with present threats. Ukrainian organizations that link their nationalism to an anti-communist stance, like the UINP or the Holodomor Museum, often draw analogies to Soviet terror, specifically referencing Stalin's systematic murder of millions of Ukrainians during the Great Famine, or draw parallels between the Russian invasion and the terror and violence perpetrated by the Nazis:

> RT @TerrySzuplat: Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a Second Holodomor In the 1930s Stalin killed millions of Ukrainians with a deliberate famine, The Holodomor—"death by hunger" Now Ukrainians are being slaughtered again--death by Putin This isn't war, it's genocide.
> HolodomorMuseum, 2022-03-04T07:03:12
> Putin's army is bombing Ukrainian cities just as Hitler's troops did during World War II. #StopRussia https://t.co/9FqL55TNCw
> Uinp_gov_ua. 2022-03-04T12:00:46

Analogies are frequently drawn between the intended outcomes of the means employed, likening Russia's attacks on civilians to the Nazis' genocidal campaign and assaults on civilian populations. The following example, also by UINP, draws a parallel between two historical events: the 2022 full-scale war and the war crimes trials held in Kharkiv in 1943, where Nazis were convicted of war crimes:

> "The barbaric shelling of peaceful cities with rockets and MLRS is a war crime. It will be fair if a special international tribunal is established in

> Kharkiv. It was in Kharkiv in 1943 that the first trial took place, as a result of which the Nazis were convicted of war crimes." - @oleksiireznikov https://t.co/yUtO3Rmpng
> Uinp_gov_ua, 2022-03-01T08:54:57

The comparison implies a similarity in the nature of the acts committed during both periods and suggests that a similar legal response (a special international tribunal) would be appropriate now, as it was then. This use of a historical event to suggest a parallel course of action in the present is characteristic of a historical analogy.

The following example from a Polish nationalist organization illustrates how Poland's historical suffering can be meaningfully connected to Ukraine's current situation:

> There is no doubt in my mind that the Kremlin's actions and intentions in Ukraine mirror those of its Soviet predecessors in Poland from September 1939 onwards. It has only reaffirmed my belief that the Katyń massacres were a form of ethnic cleansing with hallmarks of genocide. https://t.co/6XbXG8zbqA
> katyn1940, 2022-03-05T09:13:23

This tweet refers to the Soviet terror against Poland, specifically Stalin's massacre of Polish officers and civilians in Katyn in 1940, which was long suppressed. It is a historical example of Soviet mass atrocity targeting national elites and suggests that a similar occurrence is happening today in Ukraine. While Ukrainian and Polish memory organizations frequently employ analogies, German organizations tend to avoid them. Moreover, drawing such analogies is typical of mnemonic warriors (Kubik and Bernhard 2014), organizations that promote nationalist, often exclusive, interpretations of history.

Continuity

Continuity statements link the past and the present by emphasizing a sequential or enduring aspect, suggesting an ongoing process or a persistent pattern across different time periods (see also Khlevniuk and Noordenbos 2024). These statements often involve personal narratives or collective experiences that span across different historical contexts, implying that certain elements remain constant or evolve. In the present analysis, continuity statements frequently foreground the historical experience of specific groups:

> Ukraine is home to around 10,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors and even more Nazi forced laborers. Many are dependent on home care and medical assistance. These very elderly people are at great risk from Russia's war of aggression.... https://t.co/ml6w71njID
> evzfoundation, 2022-03-03T10:30:10

The tweet, by the German foundation EVZ "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future", a state-sponsored but pluralist mnemonic actor (Hense 2011),

emphasizes that the vulnerability of survivors of Nazi atrocities is not new, but an extension of past threats. The historical context of their suffering during the Holocaust and forced labor is linked to their present vulnerability in the face of a new context of war. The statement also conveys a distinct ethical message, calling for recognition of the needs of groups that have been subject to mass violence in the past.

In this context, continuity statements often emphasize survival. They draw a connection between surviving past instances of mass violence and facing similar challenges today. These statements differ from analogies in one crucial aspect: rather than suggesting the situations are identical, they emphasize that the individuals or groups enduring these experiences are the same (or are connected through familial or communal ties). Continuity statements frequently mention survivors of the Holocaust or Stalinist terror. In March 2022, when a Holocaust survivor was killed by the invading Russian troops, his death served as a terrible reminder that these threats are not merely theoretical. Numerous memory organizations, like the German memorial site at the former concentration camps Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora, shared the news about Boris Romantschenko's tragic death on Twitter/X:

> Boris Romantschenko survived the concentration camps #Buchenwald, #Peenemünde, #Dora and #BergenBelsen. Now he has been killed by a bullet that hit his house in #Charkiv, #Ukraine. He was 96 years old. We are stunned. https://t.co/ZZIK2OdbAu
> Buchenwald_Dora, 2022-03-21T11:59:03

There is often a specific ethics of responsibility derived from continuity statements that are infused with a notion of victimhood, implying a continuity of vulnerability. This is a prominent theme, in particular, among German memory organizations. They emphasize their connection to Ukraine through a sense of responsibility toward Holocaust survivors and survivors of Nazi forced labor, especially following the February 24, 2022 invasion. The continuity theme can also refer to a pattern of thought:

> Russian thinking on Ukrainians doesn't seem to have moved on from 1953. They still think the East will willingly accept Russian rule. Totally ignoring the National rebirth of Ukraine https://t.co/mhIkdRZafn
> KresySiberia, 2022-02-25T06:46:15

This statement from Kresy Siberia, a Polish organization that is devoted to the country's mythical, "lost" borderlands (Traba 2012; Clarke et al. 2023), suggests that the aggressors' mindset is mired in the past: Russian imperialism behaves as though Ukraine does not exist, driven by a historical misconception and an inability to distinguish past from present. It is an example of how Polish nationalist organizations make an expression of solidarity across national boundaries by acknowledging Ukrainian victimhood under Soviet rule and during the current Russian invasion. Continuity themes are particularly common among

German memory organizations, which use this theme to make references to the victims of the Holocaust, though not in reference to victims of Soviet terror.

Contextual reference

A contextual reference is a statement or mention that places current events in the Russian full-scale invasion within a broader historical background. This type of reference does not draw a direct parallel or suggest a continuity of events, but rather provides additional historical context to better understand the present circumstances:

> In Warsaw we know all too well what the war is about to remain indifferent. Today we stand in solidarity with Ukraine. From the Warsaw Rising Museum we send the message of support to the Ukrainians—innocent people who have faced Russia's unjustifiable attack. Be strong! https://t.co/cBVikLpPuz WarsawRising44. 2022-02-24T11:19:50

This statement by the Warsaw Rising Museum emphasizes solidarity and the decision not to remain indifferent, sentiments deeply influenced by the city's historical experience (likely as a primary site of destruction during WWII, though this is only alluded to). Contextual references may also mention the historical significance of a location where the current event is unfolding, without suggesting that past events are repeating or continuing in the present. Similarly, they are evident in tweets that characterize 2022 as marking the end of an era that began in 1945, signifying the conclusion of the post-war peace order. Such statements typically come from Western European organizations. They also appear in cases where the link between past and present is subtly maintained. For example, memory organizations might use a tweet to highlight the story of an individual during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, linking elements of this person's biography to the current war simply by including the hashtag "#StandWithUkraine".

Rectification: rejecting the distortion of history

Numerous tweets in the initial hours and days following February 24 address the misguided propaganda claim used as a casus belli, specifically the alleged "de-Nazification" of Ukraine. Rectification frequently, though not exclusively, focuses on the Holocaust and the Nazi past.[23] In rectification statements, the connection between past and present is redefined by correcting propagandistic distortions of the past-present connection, effectively debunking it. This redefines the link by re-establishing historical context: some tweets achieve this by ironically highlighting the absurdity of the "denazification" claim, especially given that Ukraine's President, Zelenskyy, is Jewish. For memorial sites and historical

[23] In the initial hours and days following the February 24 attack, and particularly in efforts to counter the Kremlin's "denazification" claims, events related to Nazism are frequently mentioned. As the war continues and participants in the discourse seek to make sense of the violence, especially against civilians, references to Soviet terror become increasingly prevalent.

institutions, like in this example, Gedenkstättenforum (a network of German memorial sites) invoking their historical authority lends credibility to these claims:

> "Cynical and treacherous lie". Holocaust survivors and former prisoners of German concentration and extermination camps are following the news from Ukraine with "horror and great pain," according to the International Auschwitz Committee. https://t.co/V2hJwiQ3hs
> Gedenkstttenfo1, 2022-02-27T17:28:54

Rectification statements counter false, propagandistic portrayals of the relationship, doing so from a position of commemorative and historical, in terms scholarly authority. When doing so, they do not necessarily articulate a counter-narrative explicitly.

There is one special form of a rectification statement: it calls into question the use of analogies altogether, as in this example by the Berlin-based Anne Frank education center:

> There is war in #Ukraine - & the world is concerned with the aggressor #Putin. Comparisons with Hitler are often drawn, also by politicians & journalists. Are comparisons appropriate - or are they #historical revisionism? To the blog: https://t.co/EjwPN417Ro https://t. co/ l2FO3 5pQeH
> BS_AnneFrank, 2022-03-23T16:00:03

This criticism of using analogies, arguing that they misrepresent history, is frequently voiced by German organizations. Overall, a pattern emerges in terms of who draws on what narrative form: Ukrainian and Polish organizations frequently use analogies. In contrast, German organizations avoid analogies, preferring instead to use (selective) continuity themes and contextual references.

Networks of affiliation: interrogating dynamics of continuity and change

In the final part of the analysis, I ask how the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022 affects the status of Ukrainian organizations in the network of memory organizations. Examining network ties can clarify the extent to which German and Polish organizations engage with Ukrainian narratives by giving voice to Ukrainian memory organizations before and after the disruptive event. Are Ukrainian memory organizations becoming more central, and their references to the past more prominent, after February 24, 2022? Unlike the four-week window used in the qualitative analysis above, the second network covers a period of a little more than a year after the event, providing a broader window of analysis to understand potential changes (Figure 3 below).[24]

Examining the number of mentions for each of the four Ukrainian organizations in these two networks reveals that, both before and after February 24, 2022, these

[24] For this step, I return to the full corpus of 740,720 tweets. I divide them up into two corpora, one of pre- and one of post-February 24, 2022 communication (the first contains 691,735 tweets, the second 120,985). The second network is based on all mentions recorded between February 24, 2022, after midnight, and March 28, 2023. For a systematic comparison of the two networks, see Table B3 in Online Appendix B.

actors tend to remain peripheral. The notable exception is their interaction with Polish organizations: The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is frequently mentioned by Polish partners before the invasion. Territory of Terror (a nationalist Ukrainian memorial site) is mentioned by Polish organizations pre-invasion, but it disappears from the network afterward. After February 24, 2022, there are some small changes: Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, not mentioned previously, is referenced by four organizations after this date, indicating increased attention. Additionally, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is cited for the first time by a German actor, marking a new development, though it remains an isolated instance. There is significant Polish engagement with Ukrainian organizations, particularly from one active Polish organization, Kresy Siberia.[25] Overall, Polish organizations assume a broker role in the network, acting as intermediaries between otherwise loosely connected communities (Kadushin 2012), even more so after the February 2022 invasion (see Online Appendix B for details). The insights gained from analyzing network ties do not indicate that Ukrainian organizations have become more central as individual nodes in the network. Rather, organizations continue to engage within their existing memory communities even after February 24, 2022. This is true despite the fact that there is a substantial increase in the volume of tweets after the invasion. The primary axis of interaction is defined by the existing community: organizations focused exclusively on the Communist past do not typically engage with those centered on the Holocaust and vice versa (although there are overlaps among Polish organizations). Notably, the post-invasion network (Figure 3) is based on a twelve-month period, in contrast to the four-week timeframe examined in the qualitative analysis. Yet, rather than major realignments, continuity prevails, as memory organizations largely remain embedded in their established communities.

Discussion: the persistence of memory frameworks of meaning

Studying how actors respond to external events allows cultural sociologists to trace how structures of meaning are applied, mobilized, and potentially transformed in the process. This article has pursued this line of inquiry with a focus on social memory in digital environments, exploring how actors employ references to past events to make sense of a present, eventful crisis situation. It offers two contributions: First, it documents the power of existing frameworks of meaning for how actors make sense of an external, disruptive shock. The persistence of existing meaning structures accounts for the differences in how Polish and German memory organizations relate to Russia's 2022 full-scale attack on Ukraine, as well as to Ukrainian narratives, shaped by the distinct contours of their national memory traditions rather than entirely novel interpretive frameworks. The similarity of network ties before and after the

[25] Kresy Siberia is the most active memory organization responding to the Russian invasion on Twitter/X, yet its content is not widely shared or commented on by other memory organizations, and therefore, it does not hold a particularly central status in the overall network.

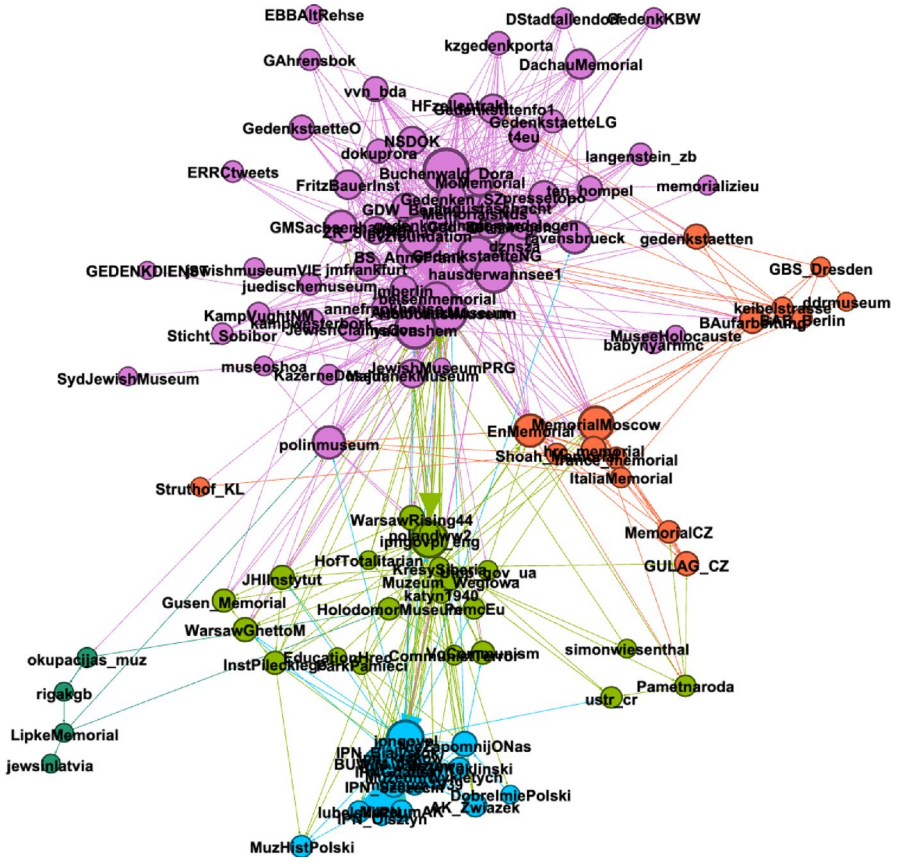


Fig. 3 Mentions network post-February 24 2022 (Colors: Louvain Communities)

event further corroborates this point. It validates the assumptions of structuralist conceptualizations of mechanisms of meaning-making (Alexander 2012; Norton 2014) as well as of hermeneutic perspectives in eventful sociology (Mast 2006; Wagner-Pacifici 2017).

A second contribution is the identification of four ways in which actors connect past and present in digital communication. Similar to Khlevniuk and Noordenbos' (2024) recent contribution to the sociology of memory, I have argued for a more systematic interrogation of *how* references to the past function in large text corpora. While my findings align with aspects of their typology, my focus is more specific: I examine how past events are explicitly linked to a present event. Additionally, my analysis offers a granular examination of how eventful references function in social media communication. These references take four distinct forms: historical analogy, continuity, contextual reference, and rectification. Constructions of victimhood (Alexander 2012), tied to specific

historical events, are narrated through these styles to establish their relevance in the present.

Substantively, I found that, indeed, past events are referenced to make sense of present shocks. On these grounds, I explored both the content (*what kind of event*) and the form (*how is it referenced*) of historical references together. Ukrainian and Polish memory organizations reference both Soviet and Nazi crimes, whereas German organizations focus exclusively on the Nazi past. Historical analogies (drawing direct links between past atrocities and present events) are common in Ukrainian and Polish institutions but largely absent in the responses of German memory organizations. This distinction extends beyond digital platforms into broader public debate. For example, in response to Russian attacks on Ukrainian grain storage facilities in 2022, Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko invoked the Holodomor, calling it "repeated genocide" (Zhurzhenko 2022). The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance promotes a narrative of a "hundred years war" against Russia, linking 20th-century mass violence to the present war. Such understandings resonate in Polish discourse, where Soviet atrocities like Katyn are commemorated as ethnic traumas. Institutions such as the Polish and Ukrainian Institutes of National Remembrance act as mnemonic warriors (Kubik and Bernhard 2014), deploying national victimhood narratives (Kasianov 2021; Kończal 2022; Barton Hronešová 2024). German memory organizations, by contrast, are more likely to emphasize continuity narratives, noting the persistent vulnerability of historical victim groups, particularly Holocaust survivors, Jews in Ukraine, and Roma and Sinti communities. In early March 2022, over thirty German memorial sites launched aid efforts for the 42,000 survivors of Nazi persecution living in Ukraine to signal Germany's commitment to historical responsibility. The network analysis further corroborates these findings, revealing that German (and other Western European) organizations rarely engage with Soviet-era memory, and indicating a gap in how Central and Eastern European historical experiences beyond the Nazi past are understood in the Western European context (Mälksoo 2009; Stone 2012; Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2013; Hilmar 2016, 2020; Radonić 2018; Subotić 2023).

Analyzing how memory actors respond in the immediate aftermath of the February 24, 2022 invasion reveals foundational elements of "commemorative trajectories" of national cultures of memory (Simko 2016). Tracing early interpretive patterns that emerge in the wake of an eventful rupture (Wagner-Pacifici 2017), cultural sociologists can gain insight into patterns of understanding that shape processes of meaning-making in the longer term. Actors do not create entirely new interpretations from scratch; rather, they articulate existing understandings of the past, and it is through these articulations that new elements of meaning can emerge over time. When adaptations or shifts occur later, they are likely to develop within or in response to these initial frameworks—a process Jeffrey Alexander, drawing on Kenneth Thompson, describes as a "spiral of signification" (2012, p. 17). In this case, as demonstrated earlier, much symbolic power comes with the construction of

understandings of collective victimhood. For German memory actors, the challenge lies in recognizing Ukrainian victims of mass violence as "their own." Later in 2022, this perspective evolved, with German political actors increasingly acknowledging the Holodomor in the policy arena as part of Europe's contemporary history. In November 2022, the German Bundestag passed a resolution recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide. A month later, the European Parliament adopted a similar resolution, revising its earlier stance.[26] In advocating for these novel understandings, German policymakers (with the exception of politicians from the far right) seek to deepen public understanding of Ukraine's historical experiences. An important turning point in this context was arguably also the Bucha massacre in March 2022, which revealed the scale of Russian atrocities against the civilian population, and for which evidence emerged in April of that year. For the German public, the massacre in Bucha made the Russian attack intelligible through the language of crimes against humanity, a category central to German memory culture that enables mobilization around the "never again" commitment (Kalhousová et al. 2024; Tkocz and Stritzel 2024).

For Polish memory actors, solidarity with Ukraine has enabled a gradual reinterpretation of historically divisive events, strengthening an orientation toward reconciliation in memory politics (Stryjek and Konieczna-Sałamatin 2021). After the 2022 full-scale invasion, Polish officials and memory actors increasingly sought to ease longstanding historical tensions with Ukraine, notably over the divisive memory of the mass violence against Poles perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists during the Volhynia massacres between 1943 and 1945. A significant moment arguably came in January 2025, when Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy agreed to allow exhumations of Polish victims, as a move toward "mutual understanding" (The Guardian 2025). The shared animosity toward Russia has brought Ukraine and Poland closer together in their efforts toward memory reconciliation.

This integration is shaped by shared narratives of Soviet crimes, a theme prominently invoked in both countries' memory regimes. The fact that such references are often drawn by nationalist actors such as the influential Polish Institute of National Remembrance—actors of the kind that Kubik and Bernhard call mnemonic warriors (Kubik and Bernhard 2014)—also poses a challenge for pluralist memory actors in both Poland and Germany. On one hand, pluralist actors seek to extend recognition to Ukrainian memory actors; on the other, they must contend with nationalist organizations that promote narratives of "purity" around national and ethnic victimhood and employ historical references in ways that pluralist actors tend to reject. These are arguably critical tensions for the future of the European memory landscape: Does the Russian invasion of Ukraine (and, in 2025, the Trump administration's withdrawal of U.S. support for Ukraine) further legitimize nationalist memory actors in Central and Eastern Europe? Their assertive stance against the Russian threat may enhance their credibility, while civil society

[26] While a 2008 resolution by the European Parliament described this event as an "appalling crime against the Ukrainian people, and against humanity" (EP 2008), the resolution passed in December 2022 recognizes the Holodomor as a genocide (EP 2022).

and pluralist actors, who dominate for instance the German memory landscape, remain more inclined toward peace negotiations with Russia, operating under the assumption that the Kremlin will uphold international treaties.

Finally, this discussion has brought together eventful cultural sociology and digital memory studies (Hoskins 2018; Jensen et al. 2023), which offers promising avenues for further research. Digital memory is a vast archive of cultural patterns and an active arena of memory contestation, where historical narratives are mobilized and renegotiated in light of present concerns. The digital sphere actively shapes social memory by enabling certain actors to amplify specific eventful references, while marginalizing others. The findings suggest that digital platforms play an important role in shaping how historical meaning structures persist or shift, particularly in moments of crisis. Looking beyond the Eastern and Central European context, future research could explore how transnational, digital memory networks function in other contested spaces, such as postcolonial contexts or the Global South, where digital memory serves as both a tool for historical reckoning and a site of geopolitical struggle.

Conclusion

Today, we see how profoundly international relations, geopolitical conflicts, and war are influenced by social memory and how references to the past can be weaponized for authoritarian and reactionary conservative purposes. Some claim that an overemphasis on memory prevents societies from moving forward, leaving them increasingly stuck in the past. But this presumes that we can somehow escape memory altogether. As I have argued here, the pertinent question is not whether societies can rid themselves of memory, but how it is mobilized, how past events are connected to the present, and what implications those connections carry. In this light, it is crucial to ask how memory can also be a tool for civic ends and democratic objectives (Alexander 2006; Xu 2012). The way forward, both for sociological inquiry and civil society, lies in engaging with the past, with both history and memory. “Without history”, Tony Judt remarked, “memory is open to abuse. But if history comes first, then memory has a template and guide against which it can work and be assessed” (Judt and Snyder 2013, p. 278).

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Declarations

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