



REVIEW

The role of historical memory in the formation of national identity: a study of the Ukrainian case

El papel de la memoria histórica en la formación de la identidad nacional: un estudio del caso Ucraniano

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the formation of historical memory in modern Ukraine is an important stage in the fight against Russian aggression, which has both military and ideological components.

Objective: the purpose of the article is to analyse the role of historical memory in the formation of national identity (in the example of the Ukrainian experience).

Method: the study is based on the PRISMA approach. The criteria for including literature were based on content, thematic relevance, and methodology. The languages of the literature are English and Ukrainian. A total of 50 items were selected. We used software such as Excel and VOSviewer to create graphs and tables. The methods of comparative analysis and synthesis were used in the study.

Results: an important aspect of contemporary historical memory in Ukraine is the appeal to key historical markers that have a significant impact on the formation of national consciousness. Russian aggression has generated a demand for Ukrainian historical symbols and narratives that influence national identity through public relations channels. Conflict is important, and it can lead to a conflict of “memories” that is reinforced by certain political speculations. At the same time, addressing historical issues in political debates (politicisation of historical memory) and the lack of a generalised national narrative on the history of Ukraine are urgent challenges to the further influence of historical memory on the consolidation of Ukrainians.

Conclusions: historical memory is an important tool for overcoming the spread of Russian propaganda, which openly spreads myths about the revival of the Soviet empire.

Keywords: Collective Memory; National Consciousness; Cultural Heritage; Historical Politics; Social Cohesion; Mass Media.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la formación de la memoria histórica en la Ucrania moderna es una etapa importante en la lucha contra la agresión rusa, que tiene componentes tanto militares como ideológicos.

Objetivo: el objetivo del artículo es analizar el papel de la memoria histórica en la formación de la identidad nacional (tomando como ejemplo la experiencia ucraniana).

Método: el estudio se basa en el enfoque PRISMA. Los criterios para incluir la literatura se basaron en el contenido, la relevancia temática y la metodología. Los idiomas de la literatura son inglés y ucraniano. Se seleccionaron un total de 50 artículos. Para crear gráficos y tablas, utilizamos programas como Excel y VOSviewer. En el estudio se utilizaron los métodos de análisis comparativo y síntesis.

Resultados: un aspecto importante de la memoria histórica contemporánea en Ucrania es la apelación a marcadores históricos clave que tienen un impacto significativo en la formación de la conciencia nacional. La agresión rusa ha generado una demanda de símbolos y narrativas históricas ucranianas que influyen en la identidad nacional a través de canales de relaciones públicas. El conflicto es importante y puede conducir a un conflicto de “memorias” que se ve reforzado por ciertas especulaciones políticas. Al mismo tiempo, el abordaje de cuestiones históricas en los debates políticos (politización de la memoria histórica) y la falta de una narrativa nacional generalizada sobre la historia de Ucrania son desafíos urgentes para la mayor influencia de la memoria histórica en la consolidación de la identidad de los ucranianos.

Conclusiones: la memoria histórica es una herramienta importante para superar la difusión de la propaganda rusa, que difunde abiertamente mitos sobre el renacimiento del imperio soviético.

Palabras clave: Memoria Colectiva; Conciencia Nacional; Patrimonio Cultural; Política Histórica; Cohesión Social; Medios de Comunicación.

INTRODUCTION

Given that the phenomenon of historical memory is a fundamental part of the formation of national identity, studying the peculiarities of its functioning in Ukrainian society is an important topic. Historical memory determines how a society perceives its past and uses it to shape its future. In the Ukrainian case, this research problem becomes even more important and relevant given the long historical periods of external influence and the struggle for independence.

Thus, given the current geopolitical challenges (shaped by the Russian-Ukrainian war), the importance of historical memory as a tool of national self-identification is particularly important in order to ensure state stability and cultural resilience. In addition, understanding how historical memory influences the formation of national identity is relevant not only from the point of view of scientific interest, but also for the purpose of forming a powerful and effective state policy in the field of humanities.^(1,2,3)

Modern scholars have identified a strong connection between history and the formation of collective memory as a factor in the formation of national identity.^(4,5,6) These studies reveal a strong connection between knowledge of the past and the formation of a stable self-identity.^(6,7,8)

Modern studies have also shown that memory plays the role of a social construct that is formed within certain communities and is characterized by their interests and core values.^(9,10) However, despite this, the key research problem is how historical memory affects the formation of the national identity of Ukrainians, taking into account the milestones of complex historical periods of state formation.

Against the backdrop of the centuries-long struggle for independence and transformational geopolitical circumstances, the phenomenon of Ukrainian national identity has often been influenced by external forces. An important research question arises: how this historical experience is reflected in the contemporary collective memory of Ukrainians and how it contributes to the development of national self-identification. Modern scholars have characterized various components of the formation of historical memory. According to R. Bodei, Europe is the place of “birth of memory” and the weight of the past is especially great here.⁽¹⁾

In addition, the author proved its importance for the formation of political identity.⁽¹⁾ A study by A. Eriksen has shown that history and memory are different in modern society.⁽²⁾ In particular, while history is an academic discipline with its own methodology, specifics of study, and sources, memory is individual, subjective, and unstable.⁽²⁾ Besides, contemporary scholars have determined that history plays a significant role in public and political life.^(3,4) Z. Wang described the key difficulties in using historical memory as a variable for study in the social sciences.

The author also discussed why the functions of historical memory are not taken into account as variables, as well as the reasons for the lack of comprehensive integrated research on the phenomenon of memory.⁽⁵⁾ According to contemporary scholars, history also plays the role of an important value in current states, as it forms identity and belonging.^(6,7) E. Perra’s work shows the complex path of history, memory, and European identity.⁽⁸⁾

The researcher drew attention to the current transformational stages of its formation. The role of colonialism and its importance for the formation of cultural memory was described by G. Oostindie.⁽⁹⁾ At the same time, the

study of the relationship between historical memory and national identity is part of modern political science. According to modern research, national identity is formed on the basis of common perceptions of the past, which are reproduced in the mass consciousness through historical narratives. Education and symbols also play an important role in this system.^(10,11) The peculiarities of the functioning of cultural memory and its formation are described in detail in the study by M Sichert.⁽¹²⁾ According to U. Lebel, historiography and national memory are not just social institutions that have developed in an uncertainly democratic or pluralistic way, but they are “rational projects with power relations” and key actors (subjects).⁽¹³⁾

K. Mereniuk and I. Parshyn described the significance of symbols of the past, in particular of Rus, in the formation of collective memory in the context of the current Russian-Ukrainian war. This study is important in that it dismantles the functioning of the memory of the past on the battlefield.⁽¹⁴⁾ Another powerful aspect present in the works of contemporary authors is the influence of the Soviet past on the formation of national identity.⁽¹⁵⁾ In particular, a number of contemporary works have identified the role of decommunization on the formation of national identity.^(15,16,17) They characterized certain processes of dismantling Soviet symbols and establishing new narratives through rethinking history and introducing new symbols into public space.^(18,19)

However, despite these numerous studies, this topic needs to be clarified and studied, especially given the Ukrainian realities. A research gap is the lack of comprehensive studies of the relationship between history and memory through the prism of the Ukrainian case study. The current challenges caused by the information war make this issue particularly relevant for study. The main aim of this research is a determination the Ukrainian case of historical memory and its impact on the formation of national identity. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the role of historical memory in the formation of national identity?
2. What are the mechanisms of influence of historical memory on contemporary Ukrainian society?
3. What are the problems in the formation of historical memory on the example of the Ukrainian case?

METHOD

Research design

A scoping review was carried out. This study is a mixed-methods research that combines qualitative and quantitative data. In particular, the Prisma approach made it possible to identify and process qualitative data. All statistical data, including the number of keywords, the number of topics related to historical memory in the selected scientific databases, were processed using Excel and VOSviewer software.

Sample and Data Collection

The study’s sample included strictly scientific sources of various types: books, scientific articles, and chapters from scientific monographs. When selecting articles, the emphasis was on including papers from peer-reviewed scientific journals. The geographic focus was Europe and Ukraine. There was no specific date range. However, the emphasis was on selecting contemporary, relevant research.

To search for data, we first selected the main scientometric databases: Scopus, Open Alex, and Google Scholar. The keywords (history, memory, national identity, war, European countries, Ukraine) were entered into the search queries. A total of 5689 results were obtained. First, all duplicates were eliminated - 1121.

After that, based on the analysis of titles and abstracts, we excluded those works unrelated to the topic - 1234. Also, the emphasis was placed on works that dealt with the realities of Europe and Ukraine, and those that dealt with Asia were rejected - 756. The inclusion of the literature was then based on clear criteria:

1. The study deals with the peculiarities of the formation of national memory or self-identification
2. The study concerns the countries of Europe or Ukraine
3. The paper presents the research methodology
4. The study is written in English or Ukrainian

Figure 1 presents the main stages of literature search and selection and describes the main reasons for rejecting other sources.

Data analysis

The data analysis was carried out in a step-by-step and systematic manner. In particular, the selected papers (50 items) were entered into Excel software. Data such as author, year of publication, results and conclusions were transferred to this table. After that, another table was created to summarize the main data. This table covered such aspects as the formation of memory, the influence of external factors (including the war), the history of national formation, regional differences, decommunization, and theoretical aspects of historical policy making. After that, all the data were processed and entered into these columns to facilitate data analysis.

Using the VOSviewer software, the main concepts that can be found in memory studies were characterized. For this reason, two main conceptual figures were made: figure 2 deals with the general conceptual works on

the peculiarities of the formation of historical memory and national consciousness, while Figure 3 deals with the works that study the formation of historical memory in the context of Ukrainian realities. After that, the selected data were synthesized and generalized. A comparative analysis was also used to compare the data obtained with the data presented in other scientific works.

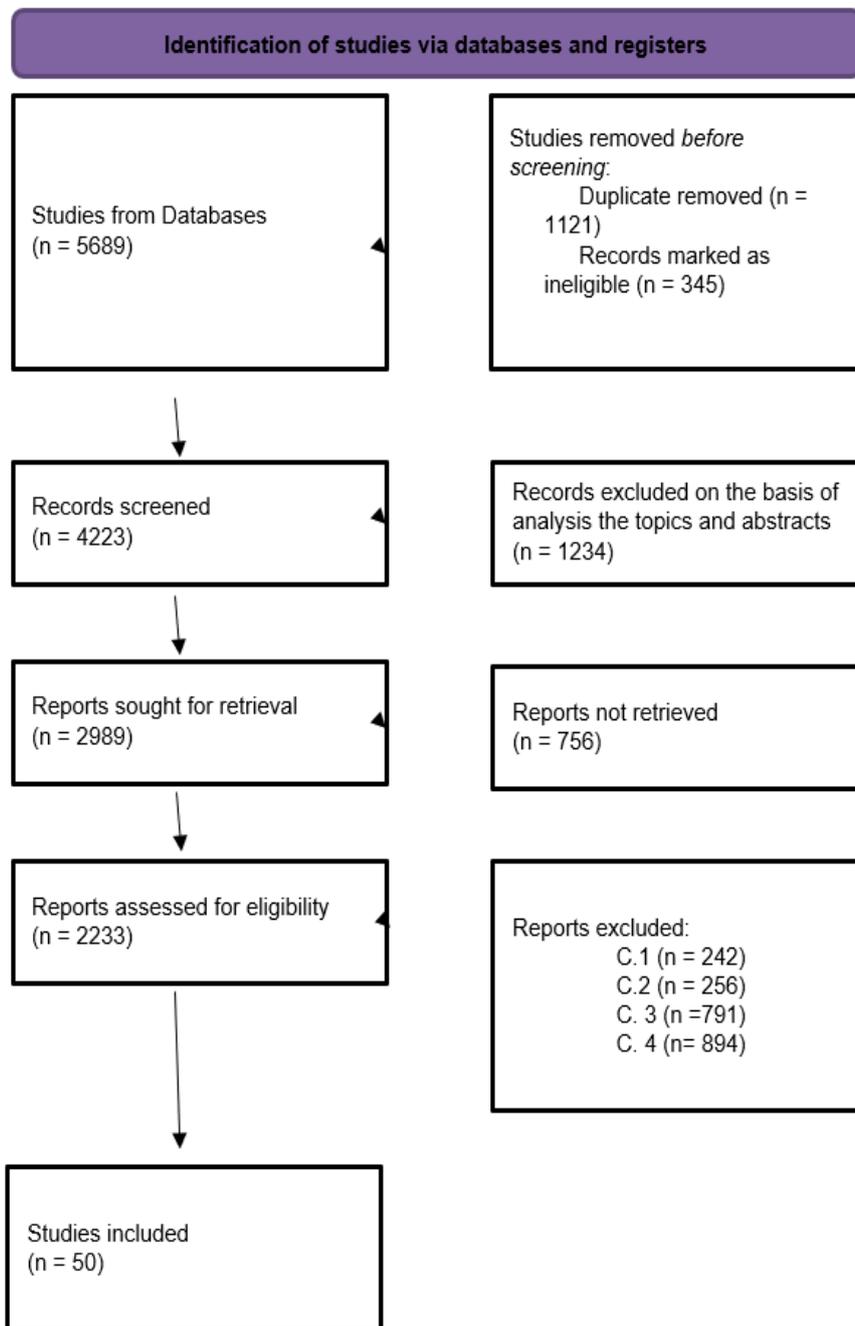


Figure 1. Using the PRISMA method for literature search and processing

RESULTS

Clarifying the role that historical memory plays in the complex process of creating a national identity is a relevant object of scientific knowledge. This process is especially important for citizens of countries that have gained independence relatively recently, so the role of the old imperial prism of history still retains its tangible influence.

In particular, this refers to the Ukrainian experience of development in the post-Soviet period, which clearly confirmed the importance of a common interpretation of historical progress for modern nation-building. The analysis of the Ukrainian case indicates the instrumental potential of historical memory in strengthening national identity, social unity, and self-determination, especially when it comes to special socio-political challenges.⁽¹⁸⁾

Russian aggression against Ukraine took place at both the military and ideological levels: attempts to revive

Table 1. Key topics of studying historical memory

Author	Formation of memory	Influence of external events	History of national revival	Regional differences in historical memory	Decommunization	Theoretical aspects of formation of historical policy
R. Bodej ⁽¹⁾	+	+	+			+
A. Eriksen ⁽²⁾	+	+	+	+		+
D. Bell ⁽³⁾	+		+			+
R. Esbenschade ⁽⁴⁾ , Z. Wang ⁽⁵⁾	+	+	+	+		
J. Liu et al. ⁽⁶⁾	+		+	+		
R. Wagner-Pacifici, J. Gillis ⁽⁷⁾	+		+			+
E. Perra ⁽⁸⁾	+		+	+		
G. Oostindie ⁽⁹⁾	+	+	+	+		
M. Tamm ⁽¹⁰⁾	+		+	+		
T. Marković ⁽¹¹⁾ , M. Sichert ⁽¹²⁾	+	+	+	+		
U. Lebel ⁽¹³⁾	+	+	+	+		
K. Mereniuk, I. Parshyn ⁽¹⁴⁾	+	+			+	+
P. Kisiel ⁽¹⁵⁾ , M. Kubow ⁽¹⁶⁾ , S. Riishøj ⁽¹⁷⁾	+	+	+	+	+	+
O. Gnatiuk ⁽¹⁸⁾	+	+			+	+
C. Preda ⁽¹⁹⁾	+			+		
R. Braham ⁽²⁰⁾ , G. Gyáni ⁽²¹⁾ , K. Kończal ⁽²²⁾	+	+	+	+		+
Belavusau et al. ⁽²³⁾	+	+		+	+	
J. Hackmann ⁽²⁴⁾ , M. Bucholc ⁽²⁵⁾ , K. Wezel ⁽²⁶⁾	+	+	+	+	+	+
G. Kasianov ⁽²⁷⁾	+	+	+		+	+
M. Mälksoo ⁽²⁸⁾	+			+		+
D. Andrejevs ⁽²⁹⁾ , H. Cvijanović ⁽³⁰⁾	+	+	+	+	+	+
T. Trošt, L. David ⁽³¹⁾	+	+		+		
A. Milošević, H. Touquet ⁽³²⁾	+			+		+
S. Đurašković ⁽³³⁾	+			+		

When analyzing the Scopus the following keywords were identified as the most frequently used in the context of shaping Ukraine’s historical memory policy: propaganda, Russian-Ukrainian war, historical memory, national identity, etc. As can be seen from figure 3, there are three large blocks of keywords that are interrelated. The first deals with propaganda, memory, national identity, myths, Donbas, and Ukrainian literature. The second deals with propaganda, the Middle Ages, Kyivan Rus, military formations, the Russian-Ukrainian war, and memory. The third block deals with propaganda, national memory, decommunization, the Russian-Ukrainian war, historical memory, and state power (figure 3).

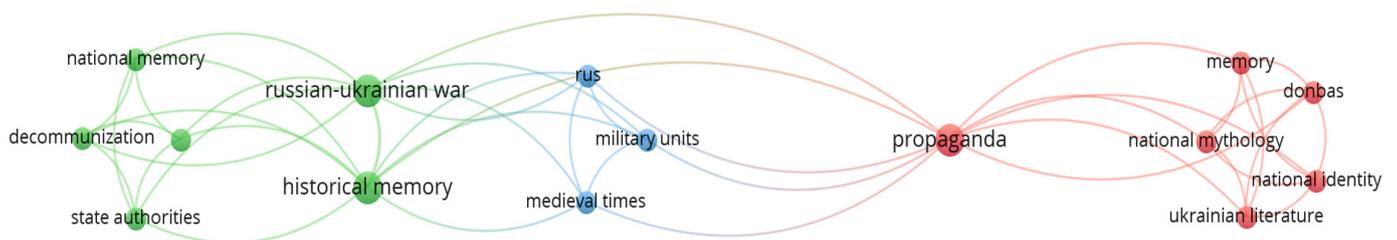


Figure 3. The main markers of historical memory (based on works by Ukrainian authors in Scopus)

It is obvious that further interest in the Ukrainian past will lead to the fact that historical figures, as symbols of their eras, will receive more publications. Thus, Prince Volodymyr the Great, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, national heroes of the twentieth century, and even the heroes of the Ukrainian war of the twenty-first century will form the basis for the formation of modern narratives about the history of Ukrainian statehood.⁽³⁴⁾ For this reason, national historical symbols are powerful factors for the further consolidation of Ukrainian society.

Understanding the historical past is not without conflict, as interpretations of certain historical events may not be limited to academic circles, but can also be used in political debates, shaping public attitudes, etc. In

particular, historical memory can become a tangible source of conflict in the process of creating a national identity.

A kind of confrontation between “memories” can be seen in the analysis of Ukrainian ethnic processes, interpretations of the events of World War II (the confrontation between the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and Soviet security forces, the Polish Operation Vistula in western Ukraine, etc.), the Soviet period of Ukraine’s development, problematic aspects of the formation of Ukrainian statehood since 1991, etc.

Addressing these problematic aspects can lead to a struggle between certain national narratives, so the desire to develop a unified view can consolidate the collective consciousness around a common identity.^(35,36) On the other hand, such an approach is distinctly undemocratic and could push Ukrainian historical scholarship back into a time of bipolar understanding of “Soviet-style” history. It is important to take into account the balance between discussion, facts, and the possibility of ambiguous interpretation of sources, which will enrich historical science and better present the results of research to the wider public.

Specialized state institutions have a role to play in shaping Ukrainian identity. The work of institutions such as the Institute of National Memory has a significant impact on this process, supporting a unified vision of the historical process, which contributes to the consolidation of society. Equally important are changes to educational programs aimed at developing in-depth knowledge of the history of Ukraine and the world.⁽³⁷⁾ This is not only about higher education, but also about learning and teaching history at school. Thanks to integration elements, the history of Ukraine is demonstrated against the background of pan-European development, which contributes to the formation of national identity and the idea of Ukraine’s independence as a European state with a deep history.

The formation of historical memory also has a completely utilitarian aspect, which manifested itself during the Russian military aggression. The Russian side has resorted to outright propaganda and manipulation of historical memory. The Ukrainian case shows that in the context of information confrontation, appealing to history is a very productive tool on the way to countering manipulations and falsifications.⁽³⁸⁾ The actualization of historical topics blocks opportunities to undermine perceptions of national identity, spread disinformation and destabilize society. This indicates that historical memory today is not only an element of cultural heritage, but also an important mechanism for Ukraine’s socio-political development, even in the face of the Russian military threat.⁽²⁷⁾

At the same time, there are certain challenges to the further development of historical memory as an integral part of the formation of national identity. During the Russian regime’s military aggression against Ukraine, there is an unofficial ban on open discussions and political debate. However, after the end of hostilities, when such an unofficial ban ceases to be in effect, it will be possible to address historical issues in political debates.^(27, 39) The politicization of historical memory can lead to the use of historical arguments to prove certain ideological narratives, which will not contribute to the consolidation of society.

Another problematic aspect is the lack of a generalized national narrative on the history of Ukraine.⁽¹⁵⁾ This situation is ambiguous for the formation of a holistic picture of the past. On the one hand, there is talk of preserving democracy in research, but there may also be some speculation that will not contribute to the further formation of a common national identity based on historical memory. Such problems indicate that the issue of the development of historical memory is quite complex, in particular because of the process of rethinking history that is taking place today.

DISCUSSION

The formation of Ukrainian historical memory in the context of Russian armed aggression indicates the importance of knowledge of the past for national development, consolidation of citizens, and further evolution of state-building. The purpose of this article is to analyze the role of historical memory in the formation of national identity (based on the Ukrainian example of the present). To accomplish this task, the author proposes to define the role of historical memory in the formation of national identity, to review the mechanisms of influence of historical memory, and to take into account the problems that exist on this path.

The proposed results show that historical memory is involved in several important mechanisms of national identity formation. It is noted that the revival of historical memory took place against the backdrop of opposition from Russian ideological forces that have emphasized and continue to emphasize the artificiality of Ukraine.

This confirms the results of research by other scholars who point to the active opposition of Russian ideologists who used various arguments. In particular, they pointed to “half-truths” that were partially based on objective data, but had a significant ideological effect.^(27,40,41) The role of historical memory for national identity in Ukrainian realities is turning into an important element of countering Russian influence, even before the outbreak of Russian aggression in 2014.^(15,18,42)

At the same time, in the Ukrainian case, it was characteristic to refer to several key historical markers (Trypillian culture, Rus, Cossacks, the liberation struggle of the twentieth century, the Holodomor of 1932-1933, etc.) that significantly influenced the national consciousness and became part of the modern cultural and

political discourse.^(14,43,44) Such topics were partially banned in Soviet times, when history was in line with pro-Russian ideology, as other scholars have rightly pointed out. On the other hand, researchers note the importance of military history for the further formation of national identity.⁽¹⁴⁾ This observation can be considered fair, since this vector of historical knowledge will organically continue the previous one. The military history of Ukraine was also banned for a long time, so combining this aspect with the existing research markers is quite possible.⁽¹⁴⁾

The interest in the historical past has created a certain demand for relevant historical symbols and narratives: scientific and journalistic literature, publications on the Internet, content for online resources and YouTube channels. The results show that national historical symbols are powerful factors for the further consolidation of Ukrainian society. This confirms the conclusions of researchers who have noted an increase in the share of scientific and journalistic literature on the history of Ukraine (the last time such an explosion occurred was in the early 1990s, when Ukraine regained its independence).^(45,46,47) We should also agree with the scholars who consider content on Ukrainian history a trend that is promising for the future. Although this is partly a result of Russian aggression, history has a direct impact on the national unity of Ukrainians.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The results show that the understanding of the historical past is not without conflict, as interpretations of certain historical events may not be limited to academic circles, but can also be used in political debates, shaping public attitudes, etc. In general, this confirms the results obtained by other researchers who note serious challenges on the way to overcoming such conflict.⁽¹⁸⁾

Besides, some scholars note pressure from the government, society, or certain institutions that does not contribute to the objectivity of research. They note that attempts to make a “correct” narrative may result in censorship or isolation of certain facts from public discussion.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Perhaps more reasonable are the views of other researchers who have noted that in Ukrainian realities, the politicization of history has not led to censorship. For this reason, the conflict in historical memory is more of a research challenge than a danger of censorship.⁽⁵⁰⁾

It is also noted that specialized state institutions (the Institute of National Memory, educational institutions, etc.) have a relevant role in the formation of Ukrainian identity. Thanks to the integration elements, the history of Ukraine is demonstrated against the background of pan-European development, which contributes to the formation of national identity and the idea of Ukraine’s independence as a European state with a deep history. These conclusions are confirmed by the work of other scholars.⁽²⁷⁾ At the same time, in Ukrainian realities, there are cases of superficial attitudes to history in the curricula of higher education institutions. In the context of Russian aggression, this can lead to the spread of stereotypes, misconceptions, and myths about history. We should agree with scholars who consider the transformation of the Ukrainian education system an important element in the formation of a proper memory policy.⁽²⁵⁾

Historical memory is also of practical importance during military operations. While the Russian authorities resort to open propaganda, the Ukrainian case demonstrates that the actualization of history blocks opportunities to undermine ideas about national identity, spread disinformation, and destabilize society. Scholars have also emphasized this point more than once. The truth (including historical truth) is a valuable weapon against propaganda in the context of the outbreak of hostilities.^(9,27)

The results indicate that addressing historical issues in political debates (politicization of historical memory) and the lack of a generalized national narrative on the history of Ukraine are urgent challenges to the further influence of historical memory on the consolidation of Ukrainians. The researchers noted that, along with these difficulties, it is important that historical research be conducted by specialists.^(14,18,27) This will help to avoid the spread of false information and generalizations. Although this statement lacks concrete evidence, the idea of strengthening the professional training of historians needs to be supported.

The methodology used in this study has its limitations. First of all, the analysis was based on the selected scientific literature. The selection process had certain criteria, in particular, primarily English-language scholarly literature was taken into account. On the one hand, this approach is fair, since the analysed publications are primarily in peer-reviewed journals, which makes it impossible to have outright false or biased results. However, there is a possibility that the study overlooked some relevant scientific views presented in non-English-language scientific literature. This creates grounds for a future broader study of this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

Historical memory is an important cementing factor of the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation. One of the main roles of this tool in modern Ukraine is to oppose the spread of Russian mythologists who openly promote the revival of the Soviet empire and deny the right of formerly enslaved peoples to self-determination. In modern Ukrainian realities, it has become important to refer to several key historical markers (Trypil culture, Rus, Cossacks, liberation struggles of the 20th century, the Holodomor of 1932-1933, etc.), which have a tangible influence on the formation of national consciousness at the level of the political and cultural discourse of modern times. Interest in the historical past has created a certain demand for relevant historical symbols and

narratives, which directly influence national self-awareness through available channels of communication with the public. At the same time, addressing historical problems in the framework of political debates (politicization of historical memory) and the absence of a generalized national narrative on the history of Ukraine are actual challenges on the way to the further influence of historical memory on the consolidation of Ukrainians.

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