**Sheltering the Ghosts? Digitized Photographs of Political Victims and WWII Veterans in Online Databases in Russia[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In this article, I shell consider the online platforms that collect and digitize film-based photographs showing the victims and participants of the twentieth-century political cataclysms, primarily World War II and Stalin’s political terror in Russia. Most of these photographs are pre-World War II portraits from family albums. The article explores the use of digitized photographic heritage by organizations with different political platforms: the NGOs *Memorial* and *Sakharov Center*, *Immortal Regiment* and *Immortal barrack* projects, and the movement *Immortal regiment of Russia.* Through discussion of the structures of the databases, analysis of the ways in which they display the photographs and comparison between the online platforms, the article shows that the digitization of the photographs is able to offer political presence to missing people through the multiplication and maintenance of their appearances in public sphere.

**Keywords:**

Photographic heritage, digitization, political conflict, online platforms, Russia

**Introduction**

**Historical and political motives of digitization of film-based photographs**

During the last decade, photographs of Soviet citizens who participated in World War II and of others who were persecuted and murdered by Stalin’s regime have got unprecedented visibility in Russia’s physical and virtual public spheres. The increasing historical interest in these photographic records has led to the fact they are more and more actively sold, collected and exhibited in Russian galleries and museums. Creation of digital copies is another sign of interest in the visual documents of this period. The digitization of these photographs and placing them in an open access represents a certain legitimization of these records as historically significant, a kind of their recognition as historical heritage.

However, in case of digitization of such photographs and publishing them in the Internet, the interest in historical and documentary value of these representations is most often combined with political motives. The possibility to use the authority and documentary potential of historical photographs for promoting a political agenda is an important driver behind digitizing and placing them in public access. Being digitized and made available online, such photographs are employed in ongoing conflict between “liberal” and “patriotic” political organizations in Russia[[2]](#footnote-2).

Unlike in some other countries, conflict between liberal and conservative communities in Russia revolves around approaches to the memory of the twentieth-century past, so that current political life is to a large extent shaped by the memory about WWII and Stalinist repressions. All resources with digitized photographs are set up by organizations with different political platforms with the aim to advance their own version of historical memory and a corresponding political agenda.

**Two forms of historical memory in Russia**

Since the end of the 1980s, there are two main forms of historical memory which compete with each other in Russian public sphere – liberal narratives focused on the figure of the victim and official, patriotic narratives focused on the figure of the hero. Although the memory conflict between state and civil society is not specific to any country (Halbwachs 1992, Assmann 2008, Assmann 2012), it has its own characteristics in Russia. First, unlike in most post-communist countries where a public consensus about communism is reached and communism is considered an ideology imposed from outside, in Russia Marxist discourse merges with nationalist discourse and relation to communism remains controversial (Brandenberger 2002). The very process of recognition of political repressions is met with certain resistance from the Russian state and especially actual Russian authorities, which are reluctant to recognize the guilt for mass executions of citizens. Second, the heroic version of historical memory culminates in the state-supported cult of World War II (“Great Patriotic War”) which is an important source of legitimacy for Soviet and then Russian political leaders (Trumarkin 1994, Edele 2019).

After the rise of digital culture, this political clash of two versions of historical memory is transferred into the Internet space. Internet resources in Russia are expected not only to respond to actual political challenges but also to be a platform for overcoming or “relieving” historical traumas experienced by Russian society in the last century, the “age of extremes” (Hobsbawm 1995, Traverso 2016, Baberowski 2007). In addition to its usual functions, Internet in Russia has a particular mission, that of being a place of commemoration and mourning of victims who were killed or reported missing in twentieth-century political conflicts (Rutten, Zvereva 2013).

It is important that during the twentieth-century total wars, ethnic and political cleansing the repressive practices were directed not only at the living body of the enemy, but also at their dead body which was subjected to intentional destruction (Arendt 1973, Brossat and Déotte 2000, 2002, Anstett 2014, Skopin 2019). According to statistical estimates, the number of soviet soldiers reported missing and taken prisoners, which led to disappearance without traces too, was about 40 percent of all losses of the Red Army during WWII (Krivosheev 2001)[[3]](#endnote-1). Moreover, in Stalin’s era, all images showing the repressed “enemies of the people” were excluded from the public sphere: their portraits including photographs in family albums were destroyed, inked, excised or scratched (Skopin 2015, King 1997). Therefore, the function of the portraits that are posted on Internet resources is also to restore to missing people their lost visibility, bringing them back to the public sphere (Azoulay 2008).

**The goal of this research and its benefit**

In this article, digitization of photographic heritage and its further use in political context is addressed through the analysis of databases that create digital copies of photographs, collect and place them in an open access. I shell consider the databases that are the most important in terms of the number of users and entries and thus in terms of their impact on Internet audience in Russia: the online platforms created by the *Memorial* society, Sakharov Center and under the *Returned Names* initiative; projects *Immortal Barrack* and *Open List*, *Immortal Regiment* and *Immortal regiment of Russia.*

The purpose of my taxonomy of the databases is to assess, for each database, the role of photography in promoting a version of historical memory and a corresponding political agenda. In addition, I shell try to evaluate political consequences and perspectives of the digitization of photographic heritage. As I would like to demonstrate, the digital technologies applied to film photographs have modified their role in political conflict between liberal NGOs and patriotic, mostly pro-government organizations in Russia, transforming such photographs in the main tool of reaching their political goals. Liberal NGOs use such photographs as a kind of online memorials to the victims, missing people whose “ghosts” find relative peace in the digital space. For the pro-government organizations, the photographs showing the WWII veterans become precious political resource allowing to mobilize the dead along with the living electorate.

Although the split West/East seems not to exist anymore and Western scholars are allowed to travel to the countries of the former “Eastern bloc”, Western academy still remains poorly informed about photography and circulation of photographs in the countries of “Eastern Europe” (Pasternak 2019). To date, the existing anglophonic studies on Soviet and Post-Soviet photographic heritage are small in number and focus on its separate aspects – historical, political or memorial. In contrast to existing studies, I try to adopt interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together technological, political, memorial and historical issues. This research is based on the analysis of the online platforms mentioned above, interviews with the *Memorial* and *Immortal regiment*’s volunteers collected specially for this article, as well as the existing theoretical literature about politics and ethics of memory, primarily the work of Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1994, 2011).

**A first generation of databases**

Each of online databases dedicated to the memory of people killed in wars and repressed was created by an organization that has its own political program. Relationships between the databases are tangled. In some cases, the organizations that create them diverge or compete for ideological reasons. In others, they have similar programs and therefore provide links to others friendly resources or websites. Some of the projects have the same names, for example, the NGO *Memorial* and the Centralized Data Bank *Memorial* created by the Ministry of Defense, or the projects *Immortal Regiment* and the *Immortal Regiment of Russia*. The platforms themselves, containing information about missing or killed people, also have a quite complicated structure, which makes it difficult to work with them and requires considerable effort and patience from the user.

To date, the largest databases dedicated to the memory of people killed during Stalin’s political repressions are those created by the *Memorial* society, Sakharov Center and under the *Returned Names* initiative; one should also mention *Immortal Barrack* and *Open List* projects (<https://ru.openlist.wiki/>).

The most prominent role in commemoration of the victims of repressions is played by the *Memorial Society*. Created in 1989 by relatives of the repressed, the *Memorial* is not a centralized organization, but rather a network of local NGOs. One of the areas of the *Memorial*’s activities is systematic collection of information about political repressions in Soviet Russia. The NGO employs a group of highly professional historians who work on the replenishment of existing archives, their storage and digitization. On the other hand, the *Memorial* is a human rights organization that collects information about human rights violations. As a result, the *Memorial* is included in the list of undesirable organizations (designated as “Foreign Agents”) and is subject to political pressure from the Russian authorities.

The site of the *Memorial* is highly ramified and orientation on it is not easy. First, one can find the most complete online database of people repressed for political reasons. The resource *Victims of Political Terror in the USSR* has more than 3,000,000 entries providing textual information about repressed people, which the visitor can use for the search of a missing family member. As a rule, there is no photograph of the repressed. The representative of the *Mеmorial*, Jan Raczynski points out that:

Unfortunately, photographs are not always present in investigation files. Nevertheless, in many cases, maybe even in most, they are present. Indeed, often photographs have not been preserved in the families themselves, and such cases are not rare. It often happens that people who came to us see photographs of their dead ancestors for the first time. (<https://memohrc.org/ru/monitorings/bessmertnyy-barak>)

The effect produced by an investigation file with a photograph is strikingly different from that of an investigation file without a photograph: “files that contain visual materials are much more impressive and remain in the memory. […] A mug-shot in itself can also be incredibly touching and disturbing” (Baryshnikova 2020).

Historical artifacts and documents are the second component of the website. The *Memorial* has its own museum, many of whose pieces have been digitized. These digitized materials are organized into several archival collections that are not connected with each other. The photographic collection of the memorial is also present, but does not play any significant role. The online collection includes 803 photographs; these are portraits of the repressed, photographs showing everyday life in Gulag, photographs of the repressive organs’ staff, places of executions, exhumation of remains in the post-Soviet era, etc. The logic of this photo collection is that of a museum: the collection contains visual documents with historical value. The collection is scattered and includes different photographs taken at different times and places.

To summarize, photography occupies rather a marginal position in the digital projects of the *Memorial*. Visual documents coexist with other materials without being integrated into a united system with them. This is a traditional “tree-like” archive, the branches of which are fragmented. The function of photographs is rather auxiliary, namely, to illustrate text data. It is important that this situation is not due to the lack of competence of the NGO’s stuff. Conversely, it results from high professionalism of the *Memorial*’s stuff and their ethical attitude towards history and its victims. High professional “conservative” standards applied by the Memorial constitute a factor that rather slows down the process of digitization of photographic heritage from their archives. Complete digitization of rich photographic collections of Memorial society, which is still under the way, would greatly contribute to our understanding of the visual aspects of Stalin’s repressions.

Created later than the Memorial, in 1994, the Sakharov Center is an NGO whose mission is “to preserve and develop the heritage of Andrei Sakharov, to form historical memory of Soviet totalitarianism and resistance to non-freedom, and promote the values ​​of freedom, democracy and human rights” (<https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11647>).

If the *Memorial* is engaged mainly in historical research and human rights activities, the Sakharov Center focuses on educational programs.

In the framework of the *Memory of Lawlessness* project, several online databases were created. The most important of them is the base *Memoirs about Gulag and Their Authors*, a unique online library containing memoirs about Stalinist repressions.

The Museum by Sakharov Center possesses rich collections (about 8000 items) related to the political history of 20th century Russia. Many of the museum’s exhibits are digitized and made available online – on its website, one can find documents and photographs related to political repressions in Soviet Union. Together with Memorial, the Sakharov Center participates in the *Virtual Gulag Museum* project

(<http://www.gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=18446509&language=1>)

Even though the Center tries to use empathic potential of photography to promote democratic values[[4]](#endnote-2), photography does not occupy central place in the archives and online exhibition of the Sakharov Center. The photographs reflecting the history of political repressions in the USSR which are displayed online are relatively few. These are mainly prisoners’ mugshots taken during their detention, photographs from family albums of the repressed and photographs showing everyday life in the camps or soviet dissidents (<http://museum.sakharov-center.ru/fotodok/index.php?p=141605:141607,141607:141997>).

Like in the case of the *Memorial* society website, photographs here play a rather subordinate role in relation to text resources. They are presented side by side with historical documents and digitized works of repressed artists about or from the Gulag. The sections in which the photos are distributed are thematic. They do not form any united system and are not interconnected, although a thematic search in photographic collections is possible.

Another organization, the Center *Returned Names* by the Russian National Library, is well known in Russia as a publisher of the multivolume list of repressed *Leningrad Martyrology*. The policy of memory which the center adheres to is that “it is possible to bring together both branches of the national memory - about repressions and about wars” (<http://visz.nlr.ru/pages/centr-vozvraschennye-imena>). The center aims to return the memory of those who went missing in the historical catastrophes of the 20th century, be it political repressions, wars, the siege of Leningrad or other events. The main tool for returning and preserving memory is the *name* of the missing person, and there are no photographs on the site.

Another online resource belonging to this “first generation”, the centralized databank *Memorial* was created on the initiative of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation in 2007 and in contrast with the above-mentioned initiatives is an official, state-sponsored project. The goal of the project is to return the forgotten names of Soviet soldiers “erased from history”, to establish the names of the victims, the circumstances of their death, and therefore “pay them a debt of memory” (<https://obd-memorial.ru/html/>). Like the *Returned names* project, this database operates with people’s names. If the users find their family member in the roster, they are invited to add a “photograph of the hero”.

**A second generation of databases. *Immortal Regiment* and *Immortal barrack* projects**

In the 2010s, with the diversification of social networks and increased activity of Internet users, a new generation of databases appeared, which make an active use of photographs and their empathogenic potential. In the databases like *Immortal regiment, Immortal barrack* and *Immortal regiment of Russia*, the photograph of the dead ceases to be passive illustrative material or just an archival document. As a rule, these projects are viewed not as passive resources for information but as socially significant resources close to thematic social networks. The key role here belongs not to historians but to the users themselves who get the possibility to upload photographs of their family members. The fact that these databases involve the user offers significantly greater opportunities for enriching them with previously unpublished materials from family archives.

Such sites are not just online archives or museums but change into digital memorials to the victims. The photograph itself has memorial and not monumental significance. Unlike a monument that is made of eternal materials and obeys a logic of heroization of history, photography is a small-scale representational form, a modest image that does not heroize the represented person. Humanity of portrait photography, its smallness is in opposition to the size of totalitarian monuments, their inhumanity and grandeur. It is not by chance that photography’s role is central for a family history that does not recognize the heroization of death, being focused on the figure of the victim. The spontaneous use of photography by the victims’ family members in memorial strategies is based on this memorial potential of photography.

The *Immortal Regiment* platform can be categorized as belonging to this new generation of resources (<https://www.moypolk.ru/>). As declared on its website, the mission of the *Immortal Regiment* is to perpetuate the memory of a whole generation of people who went through the Second World War (not only to those who died, but also the veterans who returned from the war or worked in the rear).

To date, the *Immortal regiment* includes two elements. First, the Victory Day on May 9, people walk the streets with an enlarged portrait of a family member who participated in the WWII. Second, the digitized portraits of veterans are collected in a centralized register on the project’s website.

Initiated by local journalists Igor Dmitriev, Sergey Lapenkov and Sergey Kolotovkin, the first march of the *Immortal regiment* occurred in Tomsk in May 2012. According to the journalists, the *Immortal Regiment* movement was created to oppose the appropriation of the memory of the WWII by the Russian state, i.e. conversion of people’s sufferings into political capital. Although the memory about WWII was always controlled from above and was an object of a patriotic cult started and supported by soviet authorities since the 1960s (Trumarkin 1992, Edele 2019), this cult became unprecedented in the 2010s. The commemorative processions hold in all Russian cities on May 9th, the Victory day, were organized under the auspices of the ruling Party *United Russia* and were headed by local officials. The Tomsk journalists declared to be frustrated by the ongoing course of commemoration process and in need of new memory practices focused on the victims (Shakirov 2018). Their project was thought of as a kind of continuation of family history in the public space.

Their choice was made in favor of photography. According to popular Russian tradition, the commemoration procedure is accompanied by a photograph of the deceased that is displayed at home the day of the funerals, then 40 days and one year after the death. In addition, a photographic portrait of the deceased is necessarily reproduced on his/her gravestone. As the Tomsk journalists declare, they only borrowed spontaneous practices of commemoration based on the use of photographs and transferred them into a public space (Kolotovkin 2020, Dmitriev 2020)[[5]](#endnote-3).

The *Immortal Regiment* initiators are aware of ethical dangers behind evoking the memory of a dead. The movement’s moral code imposes a ban on any use of memorial practices for mercenary or political purposes. Addressing the dead should not disturb their peace, should not be their idealization nor glorification (Kolotovkin 2020). All this is the reason for turning to photographs. The modest act of displaying a photograph avoids ethical dangers of speech with its “high-sounding words”. In spite of using the language of computer science, Alexander Etkind who distinguishes *soft* and *hard* memory (Etkind, 2013) does not continue the discussion in the context of media theory and technology studies. However, since cultural memory takes shape in media forms, it is the choice of medium that, to a large extent, defines the success or failure of the work of memory. This advantage of photography as a tool of commemoration of political victims is referred by Solzhenitsyn (Solzhenitsyn 1975, 462, see also King 2003).

Second, photography plays the central role in family history (Bourdieu 1996, Hirsch 1997) which is promoted by the *Immortal Regiment* in the detriment of patriotic narratives. As Igor Dmitriev emphasizes, a photograph allows to identify oneself with an ancestor and to establish an intergenerational connection, opening a way from the state perspective on history to its understanding as a history of one’s own family. The users demonstrate a great interest in seeing a photograph of a missing ancestor in case no photograph of him/her has been preserved (Dmitriev 2020).

The IR team carries out a work of digitization of archives and creates a database with photographs, which, as Igor Dmitriev points out, should be seen as a fulfillment of a duty to remember and an alternative to the populist march organized by Russian authorities (Dmitriev 2020).

One of the project’s missions is to identify the missing soldiers. The section of unknown soldiers on the website was launched in 2017, when, Sergei Kolotovkin (2020) explains:

a girl from Moscow approached us […]. She bought an album at some flea market and did not know what to do with it. She said: ‘The faces of different young people are looking at me, filmed in the last months, in the last year before the war. And I don’t know what to do with it.’ By that time, we had already created a BP website and developed a search center by it, and so on. This became more important for us than May 9 itself. Then I realized that people have a lot of such albums in their hands and could want to throw them away, since they do not know who is depicted in the photographs. We decided to launch an “unknown soldier” section on the site, where people could upload digitized photos themselves with the caption on the back.

Although the website is used for a search of missing persons for a long time, as of today, the only possible search is by the name of the missing person. However, the section *How to find a photograph* (https://www.moypolk.ru/centr-poiskovoy-raboty-bessmertnogo-polka/news/poiskovye-hitrosti-chast-tretya-ishchem-foto) gives the users detailed instructions on how to find a photograph of a family member whose representation is not preserved in the family album. In August 2020, IT specialists should provide the *Immortal Regiment* team with a special image search system, making possible a search through the bank of pictures (Kolotovkin 2020). Ideally, after the user loaded an image, the system should recognize the depicted person and provide data from his/her biography. The system should also function in the opposite way, that is, it should allow searching for a portrait of a person by his first and last name. The integration of photographs into the search system opens up completely new possibilities. Modern technologies for processing large amounts of information, and above all dealing with visual materials, should lead to the creation of a centralized map of WWII participants, which would allow establishing completely new facts from the biographies of already dead people. For example, it could allow to identify their acquaintances, places of their meetings, and also to find their previously unknown images in group photographs.

In 2015, Moscow philologist and journalist Andrei Desnitsky came up with an initiative to create a popular action to honor the memory of victims of Stalin’s repressions. Named *Immortal Barrack* (an explicit reference to *Immortal regiment* movement), this project promotes “liberal” version of memory which opposes the official historical picture with its attempt to minimize or ignore the fact of Stalinist repressions. The project’s activities are also aimed at debunking Stalin whose popularity experiences a new rise in Russia since the 2000s.

Actually, the activity of the *Immortal Barrack* is limited to developing a website that contains information about repressed people. It is also important that, unlike the projects of the *Memorial* and Sakharov Center, this is a mobilization project: in other words, any visitor of the website is given the opportunity to become a participant in the project by uploading portraits and bio of their repressed relatives. As declared by the initiators,

“Our website has no analogues, it is a living history, this is the history that we make together and with our own hands. This is a real story, not a nomenclature-written story. It so happens that now our project is the largest living encyclopedia of repressions” (<https://bessmertnybarak.ru/about/>).

In other words, the website is run not by professional historians, but by volunteers.

Unlike the websites of the *Memorial* and the Sakharov Center, the central place on the site belongs to the photographs of the repressed persons. The main page of the site titled *Pamiatnik* (memorial or monument in Russian) imitates in virtual space spontaneous photographic memorials to the victims, namely, a wall of photos (<https://bessmertnybarak.ru/pamyatnik/>). The aim of the project is to show that the repressions were directed against ordinary, innocent people. Photography is an irreplaceable resource for such a task, since it allows to concretize the victim, to make the transition from the abstract historical fact of repressions to a concrete biography, which is necessary for realizing the entire tragedy of the terror.

Despite clear strategy of working with photographs and certain sympathy of liberal intelligentsia, this project does not attract really wide audience and cannot be called completely successful. The name of the action drew criticism within the liberal community itself, because the idea of ​​remembering and perpetuating the dead does not fit well with the word *barrack*, which has only nihilistic connotations (Rachinsky 2015). There is also an opinion that this project can lead to the ghettoization of the liberal community in Russia, since the project can be interpreted as opposing the popular initiative *Immortal Regiment*.

In 2010s, one can observe a tendency to deeper integration between ideologically close online memorial projects, like those of the *Memorial*, the Sakharov Center and the *Immortal Regiment*, which provide links to each other. In the nearest future, this consolidation should lead to the creation of centralized archives or register that would include not only data from various online databases (this is happening now, since many online databases contain links to each other), but also bring together text, visual, and other possible information within a centralized system. Such a register would give the possibility to find or identify, using special Internet search tools, representations of people who disappeared in wars or were repressed. On one hand, in case the users had at their disposal a very large online register of group photographs with captions identifying the depicted, they could find an image of the missing person whose portrait has not been preserved in one of group photographs (whose hard copies are in completely different family archives). The system would also help measure the probability of what the person in the picture is the person in question. On the other hand, as stated above, there are many “no one’s” photographs, snapshots showing not unidentified persons. One can imagine the situation of deanonymization of such photographs thanks to the centralized database.

What is more, the photos themselves will be combined into a united system with text data. This concerns not only official documents but also unofficial sources (memoirs, letters, books), which would disclose new facts in the biography of the missing person.

Information about the reported missing people can also be combined with data from the exhumation of the victims’ bodies and their DNA expertise, and, in the future, DNA databases of victims’ family members and potentially of other residents of Russia. The united system might include topographic data, such as maps showing concentration camps, prisons and burial sites with unknown remains (such maps already exist), as well as data from projects like the *Last address* set up by the *Memorial*, which specifies the address of political victims’ last residence. In case of the repressed people, the database with the names of the NKVD officers who falsified the accusation or participated in execution of each concrete victim can be integrated into the general database. The databases with the names and photographs of the repressive organs’ officers already exist but they are not connected to the databases of victims.

Such a centralized system would make it possible to discover new information about the victims, create the most complete maps of their biographies, with photographs, maps of acquaintances and meetings.

No doubt, the project of ​​a universal base of those who disappeared in twentieth-century political cataclysms is close to a technical utopia. However, it is precisely such a database, which unites all information about the victims, that is the place where the missing people’s “ghosts” could finally be “sheltered” (Derrida 1994). It is curious that on this point Jacques Derrida’s parascientific doctrine of “ghosts” coincides with the parascientific utopia of Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov who put forward the project of the resurrection of dead ancestors by means of science (Derrida 1994, Fedorov 1995, vol. 1, 290-292).

**Mobilizing the dead: *Immortal Regiment of Russia***

Although it opens up new possibilities for identification and commemoration of missing people, digitization of photographs also provides new opportunities for a different kind of operations with the memory of the dead.

Even in its simplest film form, photography opens up the possibility of “communication” between the living and the dead, being a form of the dead’s bodily presence (Bourdieu 1996). Since through photography the dead is endowed with a certain degree of visual presence among the living, he/she is no longer completely absent, no longer as radically different as he/she used to be. The presence of the deceased through the name alone (in the form of his/her name) does not provide such an opportunity, and the photographic image is characterized by a much stronger degree of bodily presence and concreteness. However, this “communication” between the living and the dead can be not only ethical relationship, not only an act of hospitality of the living towards the dead or their disinterested inclusion in the community of the living.

The famous Baudrillard’s statement that the dead are excluded from the community of the living since it is impossible to maintain commercial relations with them (Baudrillard 1993) does not accurately reflect the reality of digital era. New technologies can bring ghosts to life, include them into the community of living and open up ways to communicate with them and benefit from them. Digitation of photographs brings relations with the dead to a new level, allowing certain operations with the dead, in particular, turning them into a valuable political resource. Being endowed with photographic presence, the dead can be mobilized along with the living as the electorate.

What happened to the *Immortal Regiment* project illustrates this trend. Shortly after it appeared, the *Immortal Regiment* initiative faced the danger of seizure by pro-government political groups and transformation into official patriotic action. Supported by the authorities, Nikolai Zemtsov, at first a local coordinator of the IR in Moscow, seizes the initiative from the Tomsk journalists. The project headed by Zemtsov completely repeats the *Immortal Regiment* and uses a similar logo. At the same time, the original Tomsk organization *Immortal Regiment* continued its activities, so that in today’s Russia there are two organizations with the same name (*Immortal Regiment* and pro-government *Immortal Regiment of Russia*). “In fact, it was a hostile takeover, and the initiators of the initial movement admit that it was 80% successful. It became senseless to resist, since the financial and media resources of the Tomsk NGO and the state are incomparable” (Volchek 2020). Controlled from above, the IRR becomes an integral part of the existing WWII cult aimed at promotion of patriotic ideology and the legitimization of the ruling regime. Most of ordinary people interested in the initiative are unaware of the existence of two parallel *Immortal regiments* and do not distinguish them.

As Nikolai Zemtsov argues, being present in the form of a portrait, the dead join the march of the living:

“The 12 million participants in the *Immortal Regiment* march across Russia and half a million in Moscow will impress anyone. If we count the photographs of the soldiers that their descendants carried in their hands, then it will be more than 30 million of both living and dead participants” (Zemtsov2015).

If the IR focuses on remembering the veterans, the IRR can be interpreted as a mobilization project. In the context of weakening support from population, such mobilization plays more and more important role in internal policy of Russian authorities. By joining deceased veterans shown in photographs to the march organized by the ruling party, the government benefits from their imaginary approval and count them along with the living as their political adherents. Since the generation of veterans itself has already passed away, this inclusion can be made without their consent. As a result of such photographs-based inclusion of WWII veterans and into the number of participants of the official state-sponsored march, any opposition to the actual regime looks as an opposition to the WWII veterans and their victory over Nazism.

Although the IRR culminates in the march, the IRR website also collects photographs [<https://www.polkrf.ru/>]. The goal of the IRR is to surpass the IR, and ideally, to completely absorb the competing organization. In 2020 “the IRR reported an impressive success of the initiative: there are now 2,392,199 heroes on the website created specially for the “online march”, while the IR has only 768,352 ones” (Volchek 2020).

The IRR website itself is different from that of the IR in that it adopts explicit heroical rhetoric. The users are invited to add a portrait of “their hero”. The website includes several sections using photographs, for example, the *Chain of heroes*. The *Chain of heroes* is a traditional “portrait wall” commonly used in spontaneous practices of victims’ commemoration. The difference is that the practice traditionally used to commemorate victims is transformed into a practice of honoring heroes and is transferred to the digital sphere. Another project called *Standard-bearers of Victory* also makes an active use of photographs.

As declared on the website, this database also allows the search of missing soldiers. However, it is easy to find out that the database is not designed for this: for comparison, the same family name put in the search engine gives 57 results on the *Memorial* website (database of the repressed people), 214 results on the IR website, and only one result on the IRR website. IRR database imitates the projects of ideologically opposing organizations, such as *Memorial*, but uses their tools, primarily photography, for achieving concrete political goals, namely, bolstering поддержки действующего политического курса посредством

As a rule, due to its ontological properties, photography is viewed as an instrument of a non-state, spontaneous, private initiative to perpetuate a family member’s memory. Most often, such an initiative is rightly opposed to the policy of heroization that characterizes official narrative of fallen soldiers (Hirsch 2017, Sarkisova, Shevchenko 2014). However, as stated by Julie Fedor in relation to the IRR initiative,

“family photographs also offer themselves as tools for processes working in the opposite direction as we see here, where the state is attempting to use the power of these images in order to bolster and authenticate the official narrative of the past” (Fedor 2017).

The contradiction and tension between state and family history, which represent the two poles of historiography, is a universal phenomenon. The Russian feature of this conflict is that family history in post-soviet Russia is in serious crisis, which directly results from twentieth-century historical cataclysms. Post-Soviet society is not a traditional society characterized by stable and close family ties. Between 1917 and 1953, almost every family in Russia was deported or internally displaced, its members were arrested, went through labor camps or/and total wars. It is not exaggeration to say that the repressive practices of the Soviet state and primarily Stalin’s labor camps constituted the most important tool of shaping Russian identity in the twentieth century. This break of family ties and intergenerational connections, as well as political self-censorship in family narratives (Figes 2007) resulted in wide gaps in family history. The gaps in family history and memory diminished their significance in favor of the national history and made them easy to privatize and manipulate. The carrier of family history, the family photo album, has not been preserved in all families. In case the photographs are preserved, the lack of family narratives allows to easily frame them with official rhetoric.

**Conclusion. Photographic heritage and Russian collective memory in the digital age**

As already mentioned, in addition to its usual functions, digital culture in Russia is endowed with a special mission – working with the memory of those killed in the historical cataclysms of the first half of the twentieth century. In this article, I tried to review the most important databases engaged in digitizing photographs of victims and participants of political cataclysms in 20th century Russia and to evaluate political and ethical consequences of the circulation of such photographs.

First, the role of photography in working with the memory of the victims is more important than the role of the victim’s name, which is usually indicated in martyrologies and on monuments, or the role of literature and cinema. Due to its capacity to show the person, i.e. to offer him/her a more permanent presence in the public sphere, the portrait photograph possesses a greater potential as a means of mediation between the dead and the living. In a situation where the victim’s death was not witnessed, the victim was not buried or his/her burial place was not established, that is, the victim him/herself was reduced to a state of “ghost”, the portrait photograph becomes the only trace of the missing person and the last shelter of his/her “ghost”. After portrait photographs are digitized and made available online, their memorial potential comes to the fore. The photograph ceases to be an accompanying material or just a historical document, acquiring the significance of the leading medium for representing the dead.

Databases that work with historical photographs showing the victims and participants of the twentieth-century political conflicts can be divided into two generations. In the databases of first generation, those of *Memorial*, *Sakharov Center* and *Returned Names* project, photographs occupy a rather subordinate position, illustrating text data. In the new generation of databases that appeared in the 2010s, in particular in the *Immortal Regiment* and *Immortal Barrack* resources, digitized portrait photographs are turning into the main tool for working with the memory of the deceased. What is more, digitized historical photographs begin to play the key role in political competition and conflict between the state-promoted version of historiography and family narratives, which is transferred into virtual sphere. A simple portrait photograph changes into a tool of underpinning a version of historical memory and a political platform. The liberal NGOs use photographs to unite and mobilize their target group that considers the victims of Stalinist repressions as its own. The digitized photographs placed in the Internet become online monuments or rather sites where the missing political victims (reduced to a state of “ghosts” because of deprivation of burial) regain their visibility and citizenship. At the same time, this degree of presence the people shown in photographs are endowed with allows the IRR movement to mobilize the WWII veterans along with the living electorate, reinforcing the legitimacy of the ruling party.

In the nearest future, the introduction of new technologies in working with visual materials, primarily technologies for processing large arrays of photographs, can take the databases to a new level in terms of their opportunities. The photographs will be integrated into a centralized memory map of twenty-century mass killings, a universal database that will allow obtaining new information about a person from a data set uploaded by volunteers and Internet users. Such digital memorials are expected to be a place of remembrance for the survivors of last-century political conflicts but first of all for the victims whose graves have not been preserved, a place of their re-inscription in history and public sphere.

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**List of figures**

1. Unidentified Photographer. *M. M. Diterichs.* The photograph was taken in the inner prison of the OGPU (OGPU/GPU is the name of Soviet secret police in 1923-1934) in LVO after the arrest of M.M. Diterichs in 1929. It is kept in the investigation file № П-81782. The photograph has been scanned by the *Memorial* stuff when they had access to the investigation file. Inscription on the photograph: “20480” (Memorial society/Ioffe foundation, St Petersburg)
2. Unidentified Photographer. *Photograph of Rada Poloz from her investigation file*. Rada Poloz was arrested on April 23 in Moscow and detained in Lubianskaya and Butyrskaya prisons. The photograph was obtained by R. M. Poloz in the 1990s when she accessed her investigation file. The original of the photograph had been transferred by R. M. Poloz to the archives of the *Memorial* (St Petersburg) in 2003. Inscription on the photograph: “11961. Poloz, Rada Mikhailovna 1924” (Memorial society/Ioffe foundation, St Petersburg).
3. Unidentified Photographer. *Group photograph of 16 officers of Slutsk GPU department*. Photograph was purchased in an antic shop in St Petersburg in 2015. Inscription on the recto: “Slutsk GPU department, Bielorussia, October, 15 1925 (Memorial society/Ioffe foundation, St Petersburg)

1. Unidentified Photographer. *Meeting of a communist cell (partinaya jacheika). Second on the right is Motia Kofman. Ukraine, 1920s*. From a family archive of Lea Kofman, Motia Kofman’s daughter (Sakharov Center archive, Moscow).

Leon Trotsky’s portrait on the photograph was inked in the 1930s. In the 1990s, Lea Kofman tried to remove the ink but could not do it completely.

1. A screenshot of the Immortal regiment website. *Unknown soldier* section
2. A screenshot of the *Immortal barrack* website.
3. Immortal Regiment of Russia. A patriotic march on May, 9th.
4. Immortal Regiment of Russia. A patriotic march on May, 9th
5. A screenshot of the *Immortal regiment of Russia* website. The main page.
6. A screenshot of the *Immortal regiment of Russia* website. *Band of heroes* project.

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1. This article is the part of a research project («Historical Imagination and Resources of ‘Historical Past’: Forms of Symbolic Working Through») supported by Saint-Petersburg State University (ID 53363568). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although this distinction between the “liberals” and the “patriots” does not reflect the real complexity of distribution of roles across the political spectrum, it can be used here as an operational term. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The number of missing and captured soldiers is estimated at 4,455,620, while the total losses of the Red Army amounted to 11,285,057 people. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. The Center organizes an open photography contest *Direct look.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. As argued by Mischa Gabowitsch (2018), the *Immortal regiment* differs from both top-down and bottom-up social movements and can be categorized as a “copycat movement”. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)