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Forced Oblivion: Cancel Culture and Historical Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines cancel culture as a form of enforced forgetting that shapes the social and historical identity of large communities. Focusing on cases in Russia, the analysis explores instances where historical events or periods have been deliberately rejected. As a tool of memory politics, cancel culture operates through public denunciations of the past, serving as a mechanism for political actors to legitimize themselves and construct identity. The article also explores ways of mitigating the negative effects of this culture. The first section discusses cancel culture in relation to the erasure of specific historical periods or events, arguing that it is a distinct form of the politics of forgetting that extends beyond it, involving violations of historicism, presentism, and universalism. While claiming to restore historical justice and inclusivity, cancel culture ultimately opposes meritocracy by undermining individual achievements. The second section examines strategies to counteract cancel culture, highlighting the fact that since decontextualization is central to its operation, the primary corrective mechanism should be recontextualization, which involves restoring historical context through a comprehensive narrative and an appropriate descriptive framework. Additionally, the discussion shifts from an ethical approach to memory politics toward an instrumental one. Finally, the article advocates for an agonistic memory framework that acknowledges the multi-actor nature of political and social processes.

Introduction

"Where are you rushing off to? You expect Botvinnik to watch your steps for you?" the grim cleaner shouted right in my ear (Konakov, 2024, p. 112; Trans. by Oksana Golovashina & Roman Batishchev).

What happens if Russia is deprived of one of its main sources of pride—its literature? If we stop teaching poems at school, stop reading the classics, and no longer see familiar names on street signs? This is exactly the Russia Alexey Konakov portrays in his novel Tabiya 32, depicting a country about 50 years after the "cultural code of Russians was corrected" (Konakov, 2024, p. 7; Trans. by Oksana Golovashina & Roman Batishchev—O. G. & R. B.). Literature is accused of introducing into the minds of Russians

sloppiness and irresponsibility, disdain for elementary logic and minimal order, neglect of the rigor of thought; introducing a belief in one's own exceptionality ("Russia cannot be understood by the mind") and admiration for wild, destructive power ("We are the Scythians! We are the slit-eyed Asians!"); and, finally, a dark passion for expansion, for growth, for conquest. (Konakov, 2024, p. 30; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.)

Thus, literature is replaced by chess, which is also a source of pride, though, with the light touch of the ideologists of the Restructuring, free from associations with war, making it worthy of being called the "new Russian culture" (Konakov, 2024, p. 19; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.).

The cancellation of Russian literature in the novel leads to a change in language: absurdity is called "boncloud," problems are solved in "two moves," and a failure to understand something is described as "not hitting the square." People are also changing:

Thanks to chess, Russians have become responsible, kind, and rational; now they are a people foreign to any aggression and any expansion ... the chess factor of time pressure, the limited time resource, helped in the gradual eradication of traditional Russian slackness, the dismissive attitude towards any deadlines and time management in general. (Konakov, 2024, p. 53; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.)

Leaving aside the literary and genre characteristics of this book, *Tabiya 32* offers an interesting illustration not only of the now widespread culture of cancellation but also of the interactions between language, oblivion, and identity, "the strange and complex relationships developed in our societies between individuality, discourse, truth, and coercion" (Foucault, 2015).

These topics have been widely explored in academic literature. In the 19th century, the rethinking of European Romanticism and Hegel's philosophy of the "spirit of the people" led to the idea that language is the quintessence of this spirit (Hegel, 1817/2015). This perspective can be traced back to the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836/1988) and Johann Herder (2002). In 19th-century Russia, Slavophiles, when discussing the Russian national spirit, emphasized that during periods of heightened national activity (for example, during war), language serves as a consolidating discourse for the nation (Aksakov, 1995).

In the 20th century, linguistics formulated the principle of "idioethnicity" of language (a continuation of Humboldt's ideas), which suggests that language forms the worldview of each people and serves as a unique repository of the distinct epistemological experience of a linguistic community (in this sense, language comes close to merging with collective memory). The theory of linguistic relativity by Edward Sapir (1921/2014) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) absolutizes the role of language, proposing that different national communities essentially inhabit different worlds shaped by their languages. In other words, for a nation to emerge, there must be a national language capable of transmitting national mythology. Language is standardized, creating a sense of belonging to a single group, even among people who do not personally know each other; this idea was widely discussed among nationalism scholars in a somewhat modified form (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The linguistic fixation of historical experience creates intersubjective connections, allowing individuals to share their experiences, emotions, and images with others: "Because we are in the world and are affected by situations, we try to orient ourselves in them by means of understanding; we also have something to say, an experience to bring to language and to share" (Ricoeur, 1985/1998, p. 96; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.).

However, the issue of language in identity politics should not be reduced solely to the national language. A nation does not communicate solely in its own language (Russian, English, German, etc.) but also reproduces certain discursive figures. The linguistic worldview serves as a means of legitimizing the social order. Moreover, an individual's sense of identity and the way they express it stem more from the discourses of the group they identify with than from their own cognitive activity. This idea aligns, on the one hand, with Antonio Gramsci's view of memory politics as a specific instance of the ruling class's cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and, on the other, with Michel Foucault's notion of knowledge as a product of disciplinary power operating through a mediated network of agents. Under these conditions, language becomes a reflection of the complex interactions between various agents and an expression of cultural hegemony.

This study examines language in the context of cancel culture, which we interpret as a practice of excluding an individual, brand, or company—a modern form of ostracism rooted in the prioritization of ethical forms of identity. The article focuses

on the relationship between identity and cancel culture. Therefore, issues related to the impact of canceling on freedom of speech or cancel culture as a new form of social justice, which have already been addressed in prior research (Dershowitz, 2020; Donnelly, 2021; Kovalik, 2021; Ng, 2022), remain outside our scope of attention. Setting aside the diversity of practices that allow identity to be used as a symbolic resource (David, 2014; Goffman, 1968; Moran, 2018; Sherlock, 2020; Syrov, 2023), we propose to focus on the influence of cancel culture discourse and practices on historical consciousness and, consequently, on identity.

In this article, "identity" refers primarily to social (historical) identity, focusing on communities rather than individuals. While cancel culture practices may target specific individuals, they trigger a communal response, as only a community—not an individual—can act as an agent of cancellation. By emphasizing social (historical) identity, this analysis excludes considerations of racial, gender, or other specific differences in cancel culture practices. Moreover, any collective identity can be regarded as social. Identification is shaped not only by the efforts of actors involved in memory politics but also by the community's own historical experience. In other words, identity is more than just a product of discursive strategies, it is grounded in lived history, which helps explain how communities can resist interpretations of the past that clash with their experience.

The discussion examines cases in Russia where historical events or periods have been deliberately rejected, exploring how practices of enforced forgetting shape the identity of large communities. It also considers ways to mitigate the destructive aspects of cancel culture as a form of forgetting. Central to this analysis is the role of language as an indicator of change. To achieve this goal, the authors will primarily draw on works that explore the mechanisms of social memory and forgetting (Assmann, 2013/2016; Connerton, 2009), as well as studies which approach historical identity as a function of social memory and historical experience (Ankersmit, 2001; Ricoeur, 1985/1998, 2000/2004). The phenomenon of cancel culture will then be examined through the lens of fragmented historical consciousness and the reinterpretation of efforts to erase certain periods of Russia's past.

Cancel Culture as Forced Oblivion

> Every culture is closely tied to politics, to a society's attempts to remember something or, on the contrary, to forget something (Konakov, 2024, p. 22; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.).

In his article on history and memory, Antoon van den Braembussche (2000) argued that historical truth embodies a constant dialectical interplay between remembering and forgetting the past. Certain events in history can trigger a radical rupture between the past and the present (or future), leading to the loss of a civilization's identity and the formation of a new one—shaped primarily by the awareness of the previous identity's loss. Frank Ankersmit (2001) discusses "the kind of forgetting taking place when a civilization 'commits suicide' by exchanging a previous identity for a new one" (p. 295).

A community that has been treated in such a way can be compared to a person who, due to an accident (e.g., being hit by a car), has also lost their identity. The new identity will largely stem from the painful realization that they were once a different person.

Cancel culture is defined here as forced forgetting that impacts the identity of a community. Canceling, in this context, represents a form of memory politics, expressed through public negative assessments of a historical event, used by political actors to legitimize themselves and shape their identity. Moreover, cancel culture, as a specific form of forgetting strategy, is used by political actors during times of radical revision of the past, which are often linked to historical and political upheavals. The coercive nature of canceling does not mean it should be equated with censorship. Unlike censorship in contemporary society, canceling as a form of historical forgetting manifests in specific discursive strategies and practices circulated among the population, as well as in various technologies, including manipulative ones, used to influence public opinion.

Russian history reveals at least two periods where elements of cancel culture emerged through state or political actions. In the first half of the 20th century, the Soviet state sought to erase the pre-revolutionary past. By the century's end, the Soviet era itself became the target of similar practices. These "cancellations" were quite different from the type of canceling of Russian literature and the entire "imperial" history described by Konakov, where the cancellation took place both within the country and with the country itself isolated by a century-long quarantine. However, in these periods, streets were renamed, textbooks were rewritten, and new words and idioms appeared in the Russian language. We will further examine cancel culture in this context in more detail.

First, cancel culture is a specific case of the politics/strategy of forgetting. Paul Ricoeur viewed forgetting as a natural property of collective memory; however, he suggested that it is this very property that enables political actions—namely, the selective exclusion of certain images of the past by those in power (Ricoeur, 2000/2004). Some studies describe this selection in terms of Gramscian cultural hegemony of the ruling class (Popular Memory Group, 1982/2007; Thomson, 1994). In its essence, canceling is closely related to what Paul Connerton (2009) described as prescriptive forgetting, as opposed to forgetting as social consensus (pp. 32–34), while Aleida Assmann (2013/2016) compared forgetting to punishment aimed at morally evaluating the past in pursuit of historical justice by excluding the guilty. In this context, changes in language can serve as an indicator of the success of the politics of forgetting.

Second, cancel culture is characterized by a violation of the principles of historicism, presentism, and universalism (Anikin & Batishchev, 2024, pp. 175–176). When describing morally condemnable events from the past, cancel culture decontextualizes these events, forcing their evaluation through the lens of the current "agonistic" mode of remembering, disconnected from the context and causes of the events. Another aspect worth noting is cancel culture's attachment to the so-called cosmopolitan model of memory politics (which appeals precisely to universalism), and stemming from this, the focus on the theme of universal victims, the legitimization of supranational identity (cosmopolitan memory has become one of the founding principles of the European Union), a general distancing from the substantive discussion

of traumatic past events (such as wars and repressions), or more precisely—from the analysis of their causes, due to an extreme reluctance to disturb the supposedly existing moral consensus. Drawing ideological support from Popper's ideas of the "open society" (Popper, 1945/2013), cancel culture serves as a tool for destroying "historicism" and a mechanism of radical constructivism.

Third, cancel culture is a highly controversial practice, even within the framework of liberal-globalist discourse. While it declares the restoration of historical justice and inclusivity, in practice, canceling fundamentally opposes meritocracy, nullifying the achievements of any individual caught in its grasp, and essentially reproduces new class hierarchies among actors, including in the digital space. As such, the "openness" of such a society remains highly questionable. By manipulating guilt, canceling is used by canceling actors to achieve their goals: "The concept of guilt is convenient because it's hard to quantify: who determines whether your guilt has been redeemed or not?" (Konakov, 2024, p. 79; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.). This trend also comes to the fore if canceling targets large communities or historical periods. The cancellation of the imperial period led to the emergence of a new social hierarchy with corresponding sanctions against previously dominant classes; in the 1990s, the denial of the Soviet period resulted in a rejection of the old value system. Language responded to this with the emergence of Soviet Newspeak in the USSR and a change in rhetoric in the new Russia. Thus, language serves as the environment in which "canceling" takes place, as described by Konakov in *Tabiya 32* (2024). Language can become a battleground between proponents of "progressive" vocabulary and those who see it as censorship. While the former insists on removing stigmatizing terms as part of the struggle for equality and reevaluate historical terminology, the latter argue for the necessity of natural language evolution. However, it is impossible to deny, for example, the disappearance of class-based forms of address after revolutions or the negative marking of undesirable elements in the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the cancellation of "cancellation," manifested in the return to continuity across various historical periods of the Russian state, has far less impact on language: the inclusion of works from Russian classical literature in school textbooks did not lead to a rejection of Soviet Newspeak; pride in the achievements of the victorious people or space exploration, typical of modern Russia, does not result in a return to class rhetoric. In other words, language not only reflects the practices of canceling but also has the capacity to resist them.

Thus, cancel culture functions as a form of memory politics, expressed through negative assessments and the rejection of specific historical periods or events. It can be seen as a distinct form of forgetting—whether as legitimization (Connerton, 2009) or as punishment (Assmann, 2013/2016). By violating the principle of historicism, canceling resorts to decontextualizing historical events, forcing them to be evaluated through the lens of current ethical "agonistic" mode of remembering. In addition to extreme presentism, cancel culture declares universalism and the ideas of Popper's "open society;" in practice, this results in a transformation of social hierarchy and a shift toward a cosmopolitan model of memory. In this case, language acts as both an indicator of the success of forgetting policies and a means of identifying counter-memory (in Foucault's terms).

Overcoming Cancel Culture Amid Fragmented Historical Consciousness

The features of historical consciousness in contemporary Russia and Russian historical identity have become the subject of numerous studies by Russian scholars. Here we will only present the most general considerations. In modern Russia, historical consciousness and the formation of national identity represent a complex synthesis of continuity, political instrumentalization, and ambivalence, shaped by both internal transformations and external challenges. The central idea is the continuity of Russia's historical path, linking the Russian Empire, the USSR, and modern statehood, which is emphasized in official rhetoric and educational programs, despite the claimed ruptures in different periods of Russian history, as mentioned earlier. The sacralization of key events, such as the victory in the Great Patriotic War, serves as a unifying myth (Golovashina, 2017; Golovashina & Anikin, 2018), while the traumatic chapters of the past, including political repression in the USSR, remain somewhat sidelined, reflecting a strategy of selective memory (Miller, 2009). The ambivalent attitude towards the Soviet legacy, combining nostalgia for social stability and superpower status with criticism of the mass repressions of the 1920s and 1930s, shapes contradictory public narratives, where the heroization of some aspects coexists with the silence about others and their postulated oblivion or denial (Koposov, 2011). The politicization of history is manifested in the active construction of "official" interpretations, which are contrasted with Western approaches, turning the past into a field of ideological struggle (Miller & Lipman, 2002). The politicization of history is seen in the active construction of "official" interpretations, which are positioned in opposition to Western approaches, turning the past into a field of ideological struggle (Malakhov, 2014). Meanwhile, the fragmentation of historical consciousness, caused by the conflict of interpretations between conservative, liberal, and nationalist groups, exacerbates social tensions.

Given the overall fragmentation of historical consciousness in contemporary Russia and the ability to synthesize relatively disparate historical and political myths, the practices of cancel culture may weave into this patchwork, thereby undermining the few connecting threads in the historical consciousness, creating new rhetorical figures and linguistic constructions. Proceeding from the premise that a narrative is not only the logic of memory but also a mechanism of forgetting (Ricoeur, 2000/2004), we will explore ways to overcome cancel culture in the context of fragmented historical consciousness and address the question about the role played by the language environment in this process.

As mentioned above, cancel culture can be implemented through the strategy of decontextualizing memory, which rejects the principle of historicism and encourages evaluating events from the perspective of the present day. The task of cancel culture creators is somewhat facilitated by the relative chronological proximity of the canceled event to their time. For instance, the Bolsheviks "canceled" the pre-revolutionary heritage immediately after the Revolution, and liberal media in the 1990s "canceled" the Afghan War almost immediately after its conclusion. These events, however, sharply contrasted with the newly declared values. Interestingly, decontextualization can both disrupt continuity, as seen in cancel culture, and create new connections

between loosely related events. Such decontextualization can be illustrated by the way Western countries commemorate modern armed conflicts. Local wars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries were often seen as "non-heroic" and brought the public's attention to uncomfortable issues, such as the motives behind these operations and widespread human rights violations. As a result, at the level of state memory policy, images of modern military conflicts were framed around decontextualized representations of military valor and bravery, symbolically linking the "heroic" wars of the past to contemporary "non-heroic" ones. The latent function of such historical imagery was to subtly manifest support for the political system—for example, through the symbolism of the red poppy in the United Kingdom (Danilova, 2015).

A similar strategy of decontextualization was used in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s in relation to the Soviet military's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. For example, in August 1995, during the inauguration of the Black Tulip Memorial[1] in Yekaterinburg, President Boris Yeltsin made the following statement about the war: "Far from home, under a foreign sky, the lives of 13,833 of our young men were cut short[2]. People of combat valor, honor, and dignity, they remained faithful to their military duty despite everything. Their memory is sacred" (Prezident RF El'tsin B.N., 1995; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.). His words lacked any contextual framing or evaluation of the war itself—whether it was just or unjust—focusing solely on the soldiers' personal virtues and mourning the fallen, although the rhetoric itself corresponded to the model used to describe participants of the Great Patriotic War. It should be noted that at the same time and regarding the same event, decontextualization was used to serve different purposes: the state sought to establish continuity, while mainstream liberal media promoted cancel culture—in the latter case, rhetoric of military duty, valor, and sacred memory was avoided. As the most influential mnemonic actors decontextualized the memory of the Afghan war, its representations were found in various local commemorative contexts, ranging from integration into Soviet-style heroic narratives (continuing the discourse of "international duty") to being fused with Orthodox imagery or even stripped of any national symbolism, presenting the soldier as an abstract figure in an "abstract" war (Rabush, 2022; Rozhdestvenskaya & Tartakovskaya, 2011).

It may, therefore, seem obvious that the main way to overcome cancel culture— since it is a specific case of decontextualization—is to restore context. Paying tribute to Jörn Rüsen (2005), we may call this phenomenon "recontextualization," meaning the creation of a specific descriptive language that restructures an event's place within the relevant narrative. In this case, language will serve not only as the environment in which canceling is performed but also as a tool of historical politics. There are, however, two fundamentally important methodological considerations that should be highlighted here. First, cancel culture still places the canceled event within some kind of context. The Bolsheviks, in canceling pre-revolutionary history, framed those

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[1] The Black Tulip Memorial in Yekaterinburg honors the soldiers who died in the Soviet military operation in Afghanistan 1979–1989 and was named after the military transport planes that carried home soldiers' bodies.

[2] Later estimates put the number at 15,052 of killed.

events as part of a centuries-long class struggle and the oppression of the common people. Liberal media in the 1990s, in canceling the Afghan War and internationalist soldiers, placed these events in the context of Soviet (or eternal Russian) imperialism and the gradual triumph of human rights over the dark times of communism. Extreme factualism is unacceptable both in academic history and in public history, where a "pure fact" is devoid of any emotional or logical content. Second, when discussing recontextualization, it is crucial to consider not only the diachronic aspect (that is, constructing a narrative) but also the synchronic one—relating the event in question to other events of the same era, to the state of society, and to prevailing moral norms. As we mentioned above, decontextualization does not eliminate narratives entirely; rather, it produces superficial, diachronic narratives that create a story without delving into cause-and-effect relationships. It can be said that this is the kind of narrativity characteristic of any myth, including historical myths (Syrov, 2011).

Furthermore, the prevailing structure of historical memory regarding many events makes it impossible to fully separate them from their context. For instance, most commemorations of events such as political repression or Cold War-era military conflicts typically take place at the local level and are the product of regional or community initiatives. These actors lack the capacity to construct a unified memorial space in the way that a state can, by building memorial complexes or establishing an extensive memory infrastructure. As a result, local commemorations must navigate a highly complex landscape—both physically and in terms of information. Such memorial coexistence can be analyzed through the lens of actor-network theory, where the specific configuration of locations, events, and information triggers can generate new symbols and meanings around existing commemorations (Anikin, 2022). For example, in many Russian cities, monuments to internationalist soldiers have been repurposed since the start of the Special Military Operation to honor Russian servicemen and fighters of the Wagner Group[3] (Razgruzka Vagnera, 2023). In Lipetsk, a monument to children who perished in the Great Patriotic War is officially used for commemorative events marking the anniversary of the Beslan school siege — a notorious terrorist attack on a Russian school that left more than 300 people dead (Trofimova, 2024). Similarly, monuments to victims of Soviet political repression serve as sites for activities organized by the modern opposition.

Thus, recontextualization must take all these factors into account, shaping a comprehensive narrative and an appropriate descriptive language that establishes context in both a synchronic and diachronic dimension.

Another seemingly obvious way to overcome cancel culture is to shift from an ethical framework of memory politics to an instrumental one. In fact, memory politics itself pursues purely pragmatic goals, which are also characteristic of the numerous mnemonic actors who implement their latent functions through commemorations. In this case, language also becomes a tool of memory politics. Examples of successfully overcoming cancel culture practices in Russian history include the memory politics of the Soviet Union starting in the late 1930s and the creation of a "patriotic consensus"

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[3] Wagner Group is a mercenary group, private military company that has conducted military operations around the world on behalf of the Russian government.

in modern Russia around events of the Soviet period. For instance, in the 1930s, the re-evaluations of figures like Alexander Nevsky had a purely instrumental purpose in the context of the impending war with Nazi Germany. The language used to describe the events of the Great Patriotic War reflects models that were already established in the Soviet period (partially developed in the portrayal of "Red" heroes during the Civil War). It should be noted that Soviet memory politics here almost mirrored Nazi historical policies: Nazi ideologists placed medieval German rulers at the forefront of their memory politics, who led conquest campaigns against Slavs (Yakovlev, 2021). A similar instrumental approach is seen in Russian memory politics regarding the assessment of the Afghan War: the term "internationalist warriors"[4] places the events of the Afghan War within a broader "agonistic" mode of remembering—understood as part of a larger geopolitical confrontation, addressing threats from Afghanistan due to the rise of radical Islamism and Western interference, highlighting the military successes of the Soviet forces, and discussing aid to the Afghan people. All these narratives were formed in the second half of the 2010s and were linked to Russia's military operation in Syria (Safranchuk et al., 2020).

However, a complete rejection of ethics in favor of instrumentalism leads to the transformation of the narrative transmitted in the spirit of pure positivism into a dull recounting of chronology (leaving aside the extremely complex discussion of historical responsibility, which is unthinkable without accepting some ethical framework). The other extreme—ethico-centric narration—is demonstrated not only within the framework of cancel culture but also within the "patriotic consensus" and ideas of continuity. For example, clear violations of the principle of historicism can be seen in attempts to view the activities of Alexander Nevsky or the heroism of Russian warriors at the Battle of Kulikovo as expressions of patriotism, or to consider the flight of Prince Andrei Kurbsky as unpatriotic, since the concept of patriotism is difficult to associate with the era of feudal fragmentation and the feudal mindset of the Russian nobility of the 16th century. If these events are evaluated without focusing on patriotism, it doesn't diminish the effectiveness and wisdom of Alexander Nevsky, the heroism of Russian warriors at the Battle of Kulikovo, or the betrayal by Prince Kurbsky. Such an evaluation adds multiperspectivity to the narrative, providing an ethical basis for nuanced discussions about the turbulent 20th century, including the traumas of revolutions and repressions. It also helps address contemporary sociopolitical disputes. In other words, these cases highlight the crucial role of ethics in assessing the past—an aspect essential for understanding and analyzing practices of historical oblivion.

Another framework for overcoming the cancel culture may be, alongside re-contextualization, an agonistic framework of memory. Agonism in politics emphasizes the inherent multiplicity of actors in the political process (Mouffe, 2013). While cosmopolitan memory often suppresses political content in favor of ethics and a frequently illusory moral consensus, agonism, on the contrary, focuses on highlighting different political interests and emotional perceptions, including images of the past (Bull & Hansen, 2016).

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[4] In Soviet history, the term "internationalist warriors" refers to Soviet soldiers who served in conflicts outside the borders of the Soviet Union, often under the banner of supporting socialist or communist movements, with the most prominent example being the Soviet military operation in Afghanistan 1979–1989.

The agonistic framework of memory is fundamentally opposed to the memory format of cancel culture in its key positions: radical historicism instead of the universalism and essentialism of cancel culture, multiperspectivity instead of the new hierarchy and moral leadership of a single subject in cancel culture, open dialogue instead of the actual cancellation of opponents, emotionality as a path to solidarity rather than emotional condemnation of those presumed guilty. Agonistic memory avoids labeling specific groups or actors as victims or criminals, creating space for discussion and legitimizing opposing viewpoints. Importantly, agonistic discourse (unlike the antagonistic memory framework of several Eastern European states) is not viewed as a zero-sum game where the opponent must lose and leave the memorial space. Agonistic memory helps preserve a sense of consensus in society about its history.

The problematic issues of our recent history, especially memory of the Civil War and political repressions, highlight this multiperspectivity perfectly. The same social groups, in different contexts, acted both as perpetrators and as victims. For example, within a purely victim-centered memory framework and influenced by post-Perestroika liberal discourse, it is impossible to objectively assess the events that took place in the Russian countryside in the 1920s–1930s in the struggle against the *kulaks*. Both the Bolsheviks and the *kulaks* were willing to use terror against the activists of their opponents. The position of social groups that were opponents of Soviet power also remains problematic, with some of them joining collaborationist formations (Cossacks, national movements, emigrants, etc.). It is impossible to objectively examine the security agencies of the USSR in the 1930s–1940s in the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator, as their image remains highly contradictory.

In relation to language, the agonistic framework manifests in the preservation of different discourses as reflections of various memory frameworks. Although both the USSR and contemporary Russia have downplayed the scale of repressions, the widespread presence of prison-related discourse indirectly reflects how many people experienced life behind bars. Many pre-revolutionary prison idioms remain in use today. Nikolay Chernyshevsky, a Russian revolutionary democrat, materialist philosopher, and literary critic, in his novel *Chto Delat'?* [What Is to Be Done?], preaches atheism and rational egoism through the voices of his characters, but he does this using conceptual categories inherent in Orthodox Christianity. Language can serve as a means of transmitting counter-memory in Foucault's terminology and as a framework for re-coding memories in the currently dominant language of description, meaning it serves both as a way to remember and a way to forget.

Undoubtedly, the agonistic framework of memory is not a universal methodological cure for cancel culture or memory wars. As we see it, the state and civil society should combine different memory frameworks to address various issues. The current foreign policy context is such that when cancel culture from Western countries becomes a repressive practice aimed at combating Russian culture, Russia must shift to a more "militant" approach in addressing memorial issues (including through the concept of antagonistic memory and legal regulation of memorial matters). However, in order to conduct discussions about our domestic historical past, particularly the Soviet era, the agonistic framework of memory seems to be the most fitting. Within this framework,

"Red" and "White" Russia can at least acknowledge each other's legitimacy, and at the regional and local levels, agonism will allow all actors to "play" with a positive sum, uniting efforts to study and preserve historical memory in the broadest sense. Moreover, the theorists of agonism themselves admit that agonism "emerges in specific constellations of objects, images, texts, and audiences but hardly in the form of a full-blown agonistic memory landscape" (Bull et al., 2019, p. 625).

It is also important to highlight the trend of emphasizing continuity, which can be seen in certain aspects of contemporary memory politics. Despite the declared cancellation of the previous periods of the country's development—after the 1917 revolution and in the early 1990s—continuity, though redefined in different terms, was soon restored. Interestingly, the protagonist of *Tabia 32* also believed that "history is continuous, and Russian culture is as old as Russia itself" (Konakov, 2024, p. 57; Trans. by O. G. & R. B.). The Russian Empire period was portrayed, within the framework of the class struggle model, as a preparatory stage for the construction of a new world under the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat. Modern Russia, despite rejecting Soviet values (without which these achievements would have been impossible), considers the first human flight into space and the victory in the Great Patriotic War as key parts of its history. This also applies to the cancellation of bourgeois or capitalist culture, which allows exceptions for authors who align with the narrative of class struggle, criticize the old orders, or express disdain for the "Soviet," yet none of these factors hinder the popularity of Soviet-themed museums or cafes. The discourse of continuity thus restores the authority of the principle of historicism, enhancing the effectiveness of the instrumental approach to memory politics.

To conclude, the practices of cancel culture can indeed act as a destructive factor for Russian historical identity due to its fragmentation, the lack of a value consensus in Russian society, the large number of mnemonic actors, the overall trend toward digitalizing memory, and the presence of numerous cultural traumas related to the recent 20th-century history. Cancel culture rejects the principles of historicism, and under the guise of inclusive revision, it constructs new hierarchies, including those in the digital space. It extracts certain moral assessments of past events from their context (both causal relationships and other events, attributes, and meanings of the era). To overcome the practices of cancel culture, the idea of recontextualizing events is proposed, with an emphasis on restoring both synchronous and diachronic connections in the image of these events. Another mechanism for overcoming cancel culture, especially for discussions on cultural traumas of the 20th century, is the agonistic framework of memory, where the emotional and political components of memory are not denied, and the goal is not to avoid conflict, but rather to highlight social and political contradictions. This framework acknowledges the legitimacy of other mnemonic actors and supports a broad democratic framework for discussion. At the level of local and regional communities, where actors cannot construct a cohesive memorial landscape, this memory regime seems most appropriate. In this context, language, while remaining the environment where canceling takes place, acts both as a way to resist the politics of forgetting—by preserving the words and concepts of the community and period being erased—and as a tool of that politics, creating a new linguistic framework that shapes how past events are described.

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