Features of the institutionalization of collective memory in the post-conflict period in the Chechen Republic

_Evgeniya Goryushina_1,2,*

1 Southern Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 41, Chekhova Ave., Rostov-on-Don, 344006, Russian Federation  
2 Complex Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 21a, V. Alieva Str. (Staropromyslovskoe highway), Grozny, 364051, Chechen Republic, Russian Federation

Abstract. The paper is devoted to the study of the institutionalization of collective memory features in the Chechen Republic after the completion of a full-scale military operation in 2000. However, armed and terrorist attacks took place in the context of the formation of a new republican government that sought to change the memorial space of Chechnya. The regime abolition of the counter-terrorist operation (CTO) on the republic territory on April 16, 2009 led not only to the end of the acute phase of the guerrilla war. It simultaneously updated the issue of the need to overcome the conflict in the memory of the republic population, associated with active stages of hostilities in 1994–1996 and 1999–2000. The lack of historiographical sources highlighting changes in the collective memory of the Chechen Republic territory increase the study relevance. Three main features of the institutionalization of collective memory have been revealed in the region, and its hegemonization specifics has been identified.

1 Introduction

The institutionalization of collective memory in the post-conflict Chechen Republic is an insufficiently explored process, often ignored by many researchers for various reasons. To a greater extent, this is due to the fact that the armed violence memory of the post-Soviet period is an array of sources that has not yet fully formed, which almost completely exclude the presence of archival documents by virtue of their secrecy. Meanwhile, the formation of at least two types of sources took place, mainly consisting of English-language foreign studies, where the narrative about the Chechen struggle for independence from the federal center dominated, and Russian-language memoirs, claiming to be documentary authenticity from the federal forces of the Russian Federation who had fought on the side of the federal forces. Generally, memoirs are most often found in the public domain on the Internet. On the one hand, this is not enough to implement a comprehensive study of the collective memory institutionalization in the Chechen Republic. On the other hand, it requires an appeal to a particular scientific approach.

1.1 Research approach

M. Halbvaks, the founder of scientific research on collective memory, argues that the collective memory is a fundamentally social phenomenon, literally expropriated by historical discipline, which leads to an inevitable conflict between memory and history. The study of collective memory implies work using the methods of sociological research (in particular, observation, survey, interview, biographical method). This often requires interdisciplinarity, which involves the application of not only traditional historiographic methods, but also structural institutionalism (according to T. Parsons) and discursive institutionalism developed in political science.

If the first allows us to consider the memorial process as an interaction of stable forms of social roles, then the second one permits us to study the collective memory institutionalization as a clash of discourses, when new meanings are generated and subjects are constituted that renew the institutional context of the memorial field of post-conflict Chechnya. Existing institutions guide above clashes, thereby facilitating own change. The approach of V. Shmidt and M. Karstensen [1] is extremely significant for the study. Scholars believe that discursive institutionalism assists to single out ideological and discursive power and define their distinctive features instead of ignoring the idea or subsuming them under the classical comprehension of power as coercive, structural, institutional, and productive. The power can be conceptualized in three forms: power of persuasion through ideas and discourse, coercive power over ideas and discourse, and structural/institutional power in ideas and discourse. Power over ideas is the ability of actors to control and dominate over the meaning of ideas through discourse. This is similar to how the authorities directly monopolize public discourse and actions in order to change the collective memory in the post-conflict period in Chechnya.
2 Key features of institutionalization

2.1 A political agenda

The features of the collective memory institutionalization in the Chechen Republic are conditioned by the current political agenda of Russia’s fight against terrorism in 2000. During that period, the memory politics in post-Soviet Russia was characterized by eclecticism, where the past, associated with repressions and traumas, was forced to be removed from the official narrative. This is reflected in the so-called substitution of the commemoration day of forced eviction victims. The Day of National Remembrance and Sorrow for the Deportation in Chechnya (February 23, 1944) in 2011 was moved to May 10 (the date of the funeral of A.A. Kadyrov as a result of the terrorist attack on May 9, 2004), since it was not supposed to violate the all-Russian structure of memorial space (February 23 – Defender of the Fatherland Day). Besides, on an unofficial level, February 23 is fixed as the commemoration day of forced eviction victims of 1944 in the collective memory of the Chechen Republic population. It is celebrated annually in most Chechen families. The ritualization of memory is expressed in the fact that Movlid is performed on February 23 and May 10.

2.2 The memorial landscape de-Sovietization

De-Sovietization of the memorial landscape of Chechnya [2], begun under J. Dudayev, was continued under the new government of A.A. Kadyrov (since 2000), and after his death – by his son and current head of the republic R.A. Kadyrov.

In particular, Kommunisticheskaya Street in Grozny, which was renamed in 2008 to the street named after Solsa-khazhi Yandarov, a well-known religious figure who lived in the republic in the first half of the 20th century, became a case in point. This is actually the first case of renaming a street in Grozny in honor of a spiritual head.

A number of other streets in the Chechen capital were renamed: Rosa Luxemburg Street became a street named after 23-year-old policeman Khamzat Orzamiyev, who died during the terrorist attack on Grozny Day. Pervomaiskaya Street became the street of the religious figure Sheikh Ali Mitaev; Pionerskaya Street was named after the speaker of the Parliament of the Chechen Republic, Dukuvakha Abdurakhmanov, who died suddenly; the street of the Red Front-line soldiers received the name in honor of the Hero of Russia Saipuddin Lorsanov, who died in 2007 during the apartment storming where the criminals were hiding; Lenin Square, which was traditional for Soviet cities, became known as A.-Kh. Kadyrov. The streets, associated with the revolutionary movement or symbols of Russian culture, were renamed. For instance, Lermontov street became Achkhoi-Martan street, Herzen street – Ramzan Khaszhiev street, Karl Marx street was named after Umar Kadyrov, a relative of Ramzan Kadyrov, who died during the attack on the city. Nikolai Chernyshevsky street got the name in honor of the Soviet and public figure and statesman Muslim Gairbekov, Stakhonovtsev street was renamed after Ahmad Arslan, the only twice Hero of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Doctor of Geographical Sciences A.A. Golovlev analyzes the urban toponymy of Grozny on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the Chechen capital. He emphasizes that its space has changed beyond recognition, having formed “a bizarre onomatic conglomeration consisting of the names of holy sheikhs and mullahs, the highest statesmen and military leaders of the Russian Federation, Heroes of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, heroes of the national liberation struggle of the Chechen people against the Russian Empire and many names of Chechens, completely unknown outside the republic” [3].

The historical continuity in the formation of the local settlements toponymy was finally eliminated in the Chechen Republic of the post-Soviet period. However, such a toponymic policy is not historical and unique, but contains risks when the political situation changes. Updated urbanonyms can be changed in the same way with the parish of another elite to power. Open sources publish data that 346 streets of Chechen cities and villages have been named after the head of the republic Ramzan Kadyrov and his relatives at the end of 2020. The formation of new political narrative can be fixed in the space of the urban/rural landscape of the republic. Therefore, fixing memory of the current leader of Chechnya is correlated depending on the proximity of settlements to the ancestral village of the Kadyrovs (the village of Tsentaroy, Kurchaloevsky district, now renamed as Akhmat-Yurt): the closer the settlements are to the ancestral village, the more streets are named after them [4]. By the end of 2021, there were 48 out of 53 villages and farms having streets with this surname in the Nozhai-Yurt district (Kadyrov’s taip). And in the Shelkovsky district in the north-east of the region, there are only four such streets in 25 settlements. Such a strategy of ousting the past memory of the republic, which is strongly associated with the Soviet period of its development, simultaneously performs two functions: it de-Sovietizes the toponymy of the post-conflict territory and consolidates the status of the current leader in the sociocultural and memorial space of Chechnya through a system of politically significant markers (updating street names, etc.).

2.3 Mobilization of national history

It is obvious that the collective memory in the post-conflict Chechen Republic turned out to be a consolidating force in the conditions of the republic restoration. The memory institutionalization is designed to perform a moralizing function owing to the fact that this process allows ritualizing those norms that look like they are specific to a particular group. The mobilization of the national Chechen history (including mythology and folklore) in the conditions of hostilities and after
their completion led to the dominant norm establishment in its extreme hegemonic form. Myths and national symbols in the post-conflict period in Chechnya crystallized the “new” or even “forgotten” national identity of the Chechens, allowing the national historical experience to become the basis of their self-awareness.

3 Hegemonization of memory: symbols and stigmatization

Typical manifestations of hegemonic forms of collective memory, including stigmatization (including sacrifice) and the leveling of communist symbols, were characteristic of general memorial processes in the Caucasus in the post-Soviet period. However, it was the symbols and stigmatization that were firmly institutionalized in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) during the governing of J.M. Dudayev from 1991 to 1996.

In particular, on April 23, 1992, Dudayev signed a decree on the creation of the National Committee for Islamic Religion under his apparatus. The semantic load of this step was, on the one hand, the integration of Islam into political processes and the model rejection of a secular state (which was supposed to take place on the basis of decommunization), and on the other hand, the decree did not at all initiate the interpenetration of religion and politics in Chechnya.

Maneuvering between the secular and religious components of power after the collapse of the USSR allowed Dudayev to involve various segments of the republic’s population in the socio-political process. Thus, in the long run, he secured a positive image for himself not only as a regular Soviet officer with a high military rank, but also was able to help build up his power potential [5]. The paradox of Dudayev’s figure is conditioned by the combination of the image of a Soviet man from the well-known socialist past and his transformation into a symbol of the “gaining strength of the secessionism movement” being relevant for that period. As the Soviet and American historical sociologist Georgy Derlugyan writes, “General Dudayev was not always taken seriously during his lifetime – largely due to endless loud statements that were in obvious contradiction with the realities of chaos and breakdown that followed the collapse of the USSR and the proclamation of Chechnya independence” [6]. The researcher believed that this contradiction was exacerbated during the hostilities of 1994–1996.

However, the true symbolism and significance of Dudayev’s figure appeared after his death on April 21, 1996. The Chechen leader in a short period of time turned into a martyr symbol of the Chechen national independence project of the 1991 model. In the collective memory, the image of Dudayev was fixed as a victim of the (Soviet) power, which raised and subsequently destroyed him. Its paradoxical nature is emphasized by foreign researchers. For example, A. Campana, professor of political science at Laval University in Quebec (Canada), notes the following: Dudayev, after his election as president in 1991, “not only faced fierce internal opposition, but also repeated Russian militarization, which led to the fact that the Chechen government was obsessed with militarization” [7].

Campana’s thesis that Dudayev neglected the civil society development in favor of its militarization can be partly explained by the historical value of retributive justice for the Chechens and the violence as a justified means of restoring order or liberation from oppressors [7]. Probably, such beliefs were formed as a result of a “long” collective memory of suffering and oppression, which endowed them with high social efficiency, as evidenced by the Chechens rapid mobilization to fight the Russian army in 1994.

Significantly simplifying, Campana reduces the perception of post-Soviet Russia to “the sword of Damocles over the heads of the entire Chechen people” [7]. It should be assumed that, first, imperial (during the Caucasian war), Soviet (during the period of forced migration), and later modern Russia, were inevitably perceived as oppressors. The researcher concludes: Dudayev managed to maintain the legitimacy of his power due to the fact that he constantly “called the Russians a threat to the Chechen people. This strategy constantly revived the tragic collective memory and made Russians a permanent danger to society” [7]. In a specific case, the word “Russians” acted as a historical constant, a collective image of the enemy, which appeared in various periods of history and remained unchanged.

Close attention to the Campana’s work is determined by the fact that foreign researchers study memorial processes in the Chechen Republic to a greater extent, forming a particular array of professional historiographic sources.

In the Chechen song “Defenders of the native village”, motives confirm the above thesis: “We will save, we will protect our people and kind/Villages of the native land...”, in which the poetic thought addressed to Imperial Russia consists in a call to protect “our” land from the claims of the “alien”, that is, the “imperial” oppressor. When examining the institutionalization of collective memory in the Chechen Republic, this approach reinforces the national narrative about the need for consolidation, the justification of military action, the threat from the enemy, and the willingness to sacrifice in the name of preserving independence.

Indeed, any references to the folklore and myths of the past of the North Caucasus peoples play a moralizing role in this region due to the fact that they ritualize those norms that look like they are specific to a particular group. The mobilization of national mythology and folklore in the post-Soviet period was aimed at establishing a dominant norm, but also turned out to be called upon to maintain the often illusory unity of the people in the face of danger. In other words, myths and national symbols crystallize national identity [8] because they construct variety and hence group boundaries. This is also stated by M. Halbwaks: thanks to the collective memory, “the group feels that it has remained the same, and is aware of its self-identity in the temporal dimension” [9]. Besides, the gap in the collective
memory, the loss of the group’s interest in part of its past means that we deal with two groups replacing each other.

The myths about freedom and equality in the Caucasus reconstructed after the USSR collapse can be compared to a universal recipe for identity, since they have become central to the perception of own collective identity. Myths are capable and even called upon to play a crucial role in a period of deep political crisis. Their recreation indicates how the past can be used in armed confrontation (in this case for territory and independence). However, against the disintegration backdrop of the barely born Chechen state of the post-Soviet period, separatist leaders actively borrowed politically significant constructs from the mythologized past “in order to legitimize power and raise the struggle for independence to the status of a just struggle” [9]. For this reason, in the post-Soviet period, a number of national heroes are reconstructed on the past basis (often mythologized), which grows as the Chechen intelligentsia revises the historical past in the Chechen collective memory.

The ideologists of separatism resorted to recreating the feelings associated with the sacrifice of the Chechen people, which inevitably proceeded from the tragic events of the “Lentil” operation in 1944 to reinforce the status of a just struggle for independence from the federal center. From a historical perspective, this can be justified by the rehabilitation of repressed peoples, which was protracted and ambiguous in the political and legal dimension [10]: “On the issue of passports to special settlers” (1955), “On the removal of certain restrictions on the legal status of special settlers” (1964), “On the rehabilitation of repressed peoples” (1991) and “On the rehabilitation of victims of political repression” (1993).

It should also be considered that the issue study of the repressed peoples’ rehabilitation is still taking place in each Caucasian republic separately and in accordance with the political agenda in each subject.

The modified self-sacrifice and symbolism of A.-Kh. Kadyrov, whose figure and activity is sacralized in line with the formation of a new politics of memory in the Chechen Republic, are significant in the study of the collective memory institutionalization. After his death on May 9, 2004, during the terrorist attack on the stadium in Grozny, the perpetuation of the name of Akhmat-Khadzhi takes place in the national narrative. This is manifested in the names of many large infrastructure facilities, streets, and schools. The football club “Dynamo”, created in Grozny in 1946, changed its name over time (for instance, in 1948 – “Netyanik”, in 1958 – “Terek”, in 2006 – the team was named after Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov), and the club received a new name of “Akhmat” in June 2017. Besides, a unique slogan for the contemporary memorial space of the Caucasus “Akhmat is strength” is constructed, which, on the one hand, is firmly associated with the football club, and on the other hand, is an essential political marker indicating its consolidation as a new national hero.

4 Conclusion

The institutionalization specifics of collective memory in the post-conflict Chechen Republic is confined to three key features. First, the political agenda of Russia’s fight against terrorism in the 2000s significantly has influenced the transformation of collective memory not only in the territory of the Chechen Republic, but also in the rest of Russia. In the given case, it is substantial to study the image of a “warring Chechen” perceived throughout the 1990s, how it changes in the 2000s, how the Chechen population conceives armed resistance in diverse periods from 1989 to the present days. This feature imposes a limitation on the study of the collective memory institutionalization through the events’ politicization of the early 1990s and their ambiguous interpretation in the official state narrative.

Second, the complex process of the memorial landscape de-Sovietization of the Chechen Republic, initiated by J. Dudaev, has now acquired other forms. Consequently, the historical continuity in the formation of the local settlements’ toponymy has finally been eliminated.

Third, the mobilization of national Chechen history in the process of post-conflict reconstruction of the republic played a fundamental role. It contributed to the dominant norm establishment in its extreme hegemonic form, incorporating elements of mythology and folklore.

Generally, the study of the collective memory institutionalization in the Chechen Republic will allow designating not only the existence of hidden multiple traumas of the past, but also revealing the dynamics and patterns of constructing a new memorial space with the official narrative dominance as a hegemonic form of memory about overcoming the difficult military past.

Separate traumatic memories, being socially institutionalized and lived from year to year, have become part of the individual and collective identity of the modern post-conflict Chechen society, largely determining its daily life. The study of the collective memory institutionalization in the Chechen Republic will contribute to the improvement of research methods for historical and memorial processes, the identification of successful experience in overcoming memory conflicts.

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