

FORMATION OF POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES (CASE: GEORGIAN AND RUSSIAN NARRATIVES AFTER THE AUGUST 2008)

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ABSTRACT

A friend is one who has the same enemies as you have’ – these words of Abraham Lincoln can easily be applied to the position of Georgian Policy-makers of such post-soviet country as Georgia. Georgian policy-makers actively started to search for friends by creating the image of ‘shared enemy’, especially in 2009-2012. This shared enemy was the Soviet Union. States united in Soviet Union should have higher solidarity towards each other than the others. This became clearly seen during the August War 2008 when Georgian politicians underlined the influence of Soviet Union stating that opposing country could not overcome the memory of past glory. It is not the secret, that the policy-makers have big impact on society. Especially on the society which was traumatized by the war. For Georgian community political myths became the main source of belief. Policy-makers became the main storytellers. And society became the target audience.

We can easily imagine the condition of society, which was in depression thanks to the war. Then, new tendency took the lead: policy-makers started to tell the ‘truth’ which people wanted to hear. Deeds of heroes, Violence of enemies, Struggle for freedom – all those stories can be found in speeches made by Georgian politicians after the war of 2008. Our aim is to investigate those speeches and to see how the icons of ‘heroes’/‘enemies’ were created.

KEY WORDS

Collective Trauma, post-traumatic, stress, recovery, monument, hero.

1. INTRODUCTION

While the world was watching the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, a five day war took place in Tskhinvali, Georgia. During the five days, the Georgian side lost more than 300 people and the war left thousands displaced and homeless. This chapter argues that the 2008 August War, as it has been named, may be perceived as cultural or collective trauma. The chapter analyses the speeches which have been created in order to address the war and the consequences for understanding the military actions took by both sides. Consequently, this chapter has two aims. The first is to better understand ‘collective’ trauma in order to analyse ways in which to overcome the fear and problems associated with trauma. The second is to highlight the role of policy-makers in creating the contextual background for understanding of the situation.

As my observation shows despite the importance of overcoming trauma, research into conflicts in Georgia to date, has focused mainly on the events, and results of these events, rather than on the

collective trauma experienced by the Georgian people. To address this, I will use a variety of trauma theorists to inform primary research conducted in Georgia. In particular, I focus on different cultural narratives that attempt to reconstruct Georgian identity in the face of trauma. Finally, I will suggest several comparisons for observing the similarities/ differences between Georgian and Russian policy-makers.

2. NARRATIVES, COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND SOCIETY

There has been significant research attention on trauma and the individual. The term ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ was first coined by Mardi Horowitz in 1978 when working with Vietnam War veterans. Horowitz concluded that despite differences between traumatic events, the results and effects on individuals were similar. Addressing post traumatic stress disorder is often attributed to communication. That is, talking about a traumatic event helps an individual see his/her involvement. It also helps in the re-creation of memories and placing one’s own identity in the context of collective responses. Individuals are then reconnected to the traumatic event and this time the memory of actions is seen from the result, or ‘consequence’ position.

Memory is the medium between past and present and collective memory is an attempt by individuals, as well as an attempt by societies, to define their origins by interpreting history, reflecting upon shared experience and memorialising important events; thus, this paper shifts analysis of trauma from the individual to the collective. Collective memory represents a very important part of culture which needs to be studied in the context of responses to trauma and this is because ‘collective memory’ creates a frame for interpreting the past which influences perceptions of the present and planning for the future. In the last decade, studies of collective memory became especially important and popular; this is caused by the assumption that collective memory is the basis for the formation of national identity and remembering the past helps the society understand who they are and what their values should be.

Collective trauma is part of collective memory and it creates disorientation and confusion when it comes to national memories and values. It is a psychological effect shared by groups or members of society. In this context, events or processes are, or become, sacred for society, with a fixed interpretation of their meaning. That is, the process of making something sacred means that the event and its invisible consequences are associated with elements that are “set apart” from ordinary society. Their status has extra-significance.

As a rule, a traumatic event is not only sudden and causes shock but also has immense meaning for the integrity of a particular society, which requires a response from the individual and the society. Victims have a feeling that ordinary, habitual practices do not work anymore, which in turn creates even more depression as every habitual action and experience is questioned. In contrast, the most important effect of collective trauma is a break down in the psychological structure of an individual. As a psychological disease, trauma appeared in textbooks only in 1980’s and was considered to be caused by wars, natural disasters and catastrophes. Individuals might overcome this condition through rehabilitation and continue their life under new circumstances or he/she might refuse to create new patterns, psychological structures and completely ignore what is happening. Of course, the second result has dangerous consequences for both the individual and for society. Collective trauma that results from an event that affects the whole society (such as a war) needs responses at both the individual and the collective level to fully address the implications of fear and trauma.

While a traumatic event can be easily seen, collective trauma is an invisible phenomenon within society. The responses of society to the invisible trauma come later. The deep psychological effect of collective trauma changes the inner structure of society, a new system of values is created. On the collective level, trauma can be made visible in narratives, commemorations and material artworks. This helps to ensure the life changing experience is not forgotten. It is an action which includes the whole of society attempting to stay linked to the negative event and recognising its significance in order to construct new patterns of everyday life.

In this sense, collective responses can include narratives to which people respond, giving them a collective place in history/life. This is the reason post-war narratives and art, which make trauma visible, have special meaning. They help individuals in finding their place in trauma and in regaining lost identity. Narratives, art, and commemorations can promote creation of new identities as well. Traumatic experience is very well seen on the examples of the narratives created by trauma participants. Narrative is “A representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.” In this sense narratives are extremely important for traumatic event study.

Scientist James Wertsch underlines the importance of Narrative Templates and gives an example of Georgian and Russian narratives. He underlines the meaning of particular repeated patterns in different narratives. For example “The villain receives information about the victim. Villain attacks the victim and finally villain is defeated”. Of course policy makers need to justify their own actions in the war. With this idea in mind they approach the nation giving them the ‘trustworthy’ explanation of events. In next chapters we will explore if August war of 2008 can be perceived as Collective Trauma and what narratives were created after that.

3. CRITERIA FOR DEFINING COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

How do we decide whether an event can be discussed as collective trauma? According to La Capra, there are 4 criteria that must be satisfied to classify an event as traumatic:

- 1) A traumatic event happens suddenly and ends quickly;
- 2) A traumatic event has impact on many people and it is clear to everyone (it does not need specific knowledge);
- 3) A traumatic event is accompanied by radical, profound and fundamental changes. They occur in every social circle and often are expressed as disorientation and destruction of old values.
- 4) A traumatic event is shocking: it is unimaginable, sudden and unbelievable.

According to these criteria, the 2008 August War can be considered as a collective trauma for Georgian society.

First of all, the 2008 August War happened very suddenly. The Georgian government, as well as people were not preparing for war. Second, the collective understanding of ‘everyone’ understood that the war started when Russian tanks entered Georgian territory on August 8. The war was occurring around us and it was not something remote. Third, the most obvious change brought on by the 2008 August War was the creation of refugees. People lost their homes and were left with feelings of fear; with no feeling of security. Other cities of Georgia started to doubt the effectiveness of government. I have witnessed that feelings of fear and insecurity and deep

depression became the leading forces in Georgian society. With these feelings came the creation of the iconic enemy. Georgian society changed its values. Russian language was despised and those who spoke fluent Russian were suspicious. It was not encouraged to read Russian authors. Lastly, the 2008 August War was unbelievable, because it was sudden and lasted for only 5 days. People had no time to realise that war had started. Many people chose to ignore the war and its results. They had problems in believing that the war was not a local conflict.

4. NARRATIVES AS RESPONSES - GEORGIAN NARRATIVE

After the 2008 August War Georgian society tried to recover from the ordeal and as a result the first narratives were created. If narratives are a sign of recovery, then the Georgian process of recovery moved quickly, as the first novel on the topic of war was created within two years. Others soon followed. Narratives are important in the study of collective trauma because they help individuals and groups create context for remembering, analysing and overcoming traumatic experience. Richard O'Kearney posits that traumatic narratives have specific features, including:

1. Emotionally fragile features;
2. Fragmented recall of events (disorder of structure);
3. Mixed time context (trauma causes fragmentation of memories, so it becomes impossible to keep clear structure);
4. Show who bears the responsibility (who is guilty in the things that happened); and
5. Self-perception of the narrator.

Below, I analyse two narratives to assess whether they can be seen as traumatic narratives and also how these narratives make visible the values that Georgian society is reconstructing as part of its recovery process. Narrative templates are seen not only in case of the war. They exist and frame perception of the societies/ particular events. This perception is preserved in every sphere of community life: from history textbooks to news bulletins.

Georgian policy-makers created the narrative with main attention to the victimization of Georgian nation. 'The trauma of victimization is a direct reaction to the aftermath of crime. Crime victims suffer a tremendous amount of physical and psychological trauma. The primary injuries victims suffer can be grouped into three distinct categories: physical, financial and emotional. When victims do not receive the appropriate support and intervention in the aftermath of the crime, they suffer "secondary" injuries.' Template of Georgian historical narrative has its scheme which is followed by the speech builders.

Scheme of Georgian narrative can be characterised as following:

- Georgia is a small country between Europe and Asia;
- Georgia is constantly attacked by much stronger and larger enemies which try to cancel its independence;
- Georgians never gave up to empire (stronger country);
- Georgia regained independence and re-established European democracy;

Georgian state policy-makers started to make speeches after 10th of August. War became the real shock for Georgian Society. That is why government needed justification of its actions and decisions. Reporting to people became extremely important. The first announcement after the August war came on August 12, 2008 by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili:

“Fighting of Georgians with Russians looks like fighting of biblical David with Goliath”.

“Georgia is a harbinger; it represents a border between Good and Evil”.

“I want to tell you that during the 5 days of confrontation the image of Russia was damaged. It was damaged more severely than in 1939 after the war with Finland”.

“Army of Georgian heroes stopped the enemy and protected Democracy as well as Georgian independence”.

The words and speeches made by Georgian highest authority fully support the narrative template followed by whole society. In their approach politicians used the same structure. Cultural theory believes that for consolidating the society and formation of collective memory community should follow the conventional or agreed model. State narrative is the main version of the events which everyone recognizes as the universal truth. Georgian policy-makers followed the established model and created the appropriate interpretation of events. Formation of collective memory happens through narratives and different historical justification of the steps taken. Examples of such strategies can be using of historical event which happened in past. Whether the outcome was the same or different, the aim of such analogues is to make the society feel linked to its historical experience. In his book “Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the past” Eviatar Zerubavel underlines all the strategies used by certain cultures in order to formulate the mnemonic (symbolic) union.

For example, Georgian society likes to underline their link with historical dynasties. According to Zerubavel, this can be connected to the tendency of historical continuity which every community has. It can be achieved by:

- Using the concept of Same Place
- Relics and Memorabilia
- Imitation and Replication
- “Same” Time
- Historical analogy
- Discursive Continuity

Bridging techniques are often used by different societies and Georgia as well as Russia is no exception. On August 12 Georgian politician David Bakradze said:

“Sokhumi and Tskhinvali became for Georgian people equal to what is Jerusalem for Jews. That is a place which stayed in their memory, place which made them strive for the better life and in the end they returned. And so we will return in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali no matter how long we will need: 10, 100, 500 or 1000 years”.

Common strategy used by Georgian politicians is connecting Georgia as a country to biblical analogues: sometimes country is compared to biblical David with reference to the fight with the Goliath. On the other hand Georgia is linked to Jews and occupied territories are connected with Jerusalem. President of Georgia also used the analogue of the Second World War and exactly the episode of the War of Finland stating that this historical episode did not put Russia in the limelight. The analogue was used to create the contrast between two countries. As a result,

Georgian society became less tolerant and more aggressive to Russians as a nation. But August War of 2008 had two sides so the narrative template theory refers to Russians as well.

5. NARRATIVES AS RESPONSES – RUSSIAN NARRATIVE

Russian narrative is designed and created around the uniqueness of Russian culture. Narrative template tries to analyse the historical events in its unique perspective. Russian narrative template is organized around the following ideas:

- Russia Develops independently and does not get in anyone's way;
- "Problematic situations" which cause Russians to defend themselves against the enemy;
- Firstly, Russians lose the war and the threat of losing independence becomes real.
- As Russia is chosen by the god, it manages to win the war and withdraw enemy from its land.

Russian template emphasizes the importance of the neutrality of the country. Russia is a big and strong country but not problematic for the region. Interestingly enough Russia also has a victim position in a conflict situation: it just defends itself against the enemies. Same can be seen in the speech delivered by the president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev who insists on the peacekeeping role of Russia in region.

"The night-time execution-style bombardment of Tskhinval by the Georgian troops resulted in the deaths of hundreds of our civilians. Among the dead were the Russian peacekeepers, who gave their lives in fulfilling their duty to protect women, children and the elderly. That was not the first attempt to do this. In 1991, President Gamsahourdia of Georgia, having proclaimed the motto "Georgia for Georgians" – just think about it! – ordered attacks on the cities of Sukhum and Tskhinval. The result then was thousands of killed people, dozens of thousands of refugees and devastated villages. And it was Russia who at that time put an end to the eradication of the Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples. Our country came forward as a mediator and peacekeeper insisting on a political settlement. In doing so we were invariably guided by the recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity.

The Georgian leadership chose another way. Disrupting the negotiating process, ignoring the agreements achieved, committing political and military provocations, attacking the peacekeepers – all these actions grossly violated the regime established in conflict zones with the support of the United Nations and OSCE.

Russia continually displayed calm and patience. We repeatedly called for returning to the negotiating table and did not deviate from this position of ours even after the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo's independence. However our persistent proposals to the Georgian side to conclude agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the non-use of force remained unanswered.

It stands quite clear now: a peaceful resolution of the conflict was not part of Tbilisi's plan. The Georgian leadership was methodically preparing for war, while the political and material support provided by their foreign guardians only served to reinforce the perception of their own impunity.

Tbilisi made its choice during the night of August 8, 2008. Saakashvili opted for genocide to accomplish his political objectives. By doing so he himself dashed all the hopes for the peaceful coexistence of Ossetians, Abkhazians and Georgians in a single state. The peoples of South

Ossetia and Abkhazia have several times spoken out at referendums in favor of independence for their republics. It is our understanding that after what has happened in Tskhinval and what has been planned for Abkhazia they have the right to decide their destiny by themselves.”

As we see, president Medvedev sees the conflict of August 2008 exactly in the light appropriate to the narrative template of Russia. Once again: the template says Russia is a peacemaker and it does not start the conflict. This exact point is underlined in the speech of the politician. Second very important part of the address is the analogue used by Medvedev mentioning Abkhazian war (which is also used by Georgian narrative while speaking about the August war) and Georgia’s ex-president Zviad Gamsakhourdia. Mentioning his slogan ‘Georgia for Georgians’ creates the necessary impression of Georgians as strong nationalists. Also, using the word genocide makes the speech more dramatic and underlines the nobility of Russians who help those in need.

Another famous interview about the August War 2008 was given by the prime-minister of Russia Vladimir Putin, who underlined the same tendency:

“Georgia’s acts have caused loss of life, including among Russian peacekeepers. The situation reached the point where Georgian peacekeepers opened fire on the Russian peacekeepers with whom they are supposed to work together to carry out their mission of maintaining peace in this region. Civilians, women, children and old people, are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation.

Let me explain why Russian forces entered Tskhinvali. I have explained the militaristic aspect not once. Now let’s remember how the Second World War started. In 1939 on 1st of September Nazi Germany attacked Poland. And in 1941 they attacked Soviet Union. How do you think Soviet Army should behave back then? Do you think they needed to achieve and stop by the border of Germany?”

As we see the historical event used for the analogue of the situation is the same: Second World War. Prime-minister of Russia uses the example of the Second World War and precisely the icon of Nazi Germany to explain the proportionality of the force used. It is clear that following to national narrative template is very important for Russian politicians as well.

6. COMPARISON OF TWO SOCIETIES AND THEIR TEMPLATES

Both cultures, Russian and Georgian are prone to representing themselves as victims of the situation. In other words, none of these societies confess having national ambition and attribute the beginning of conflict to the opposite side or the enemy. This, of course, causes more solidarity in the eyes of the world society but at the same time it puts the cultures in insecure situation. Georgians try to underline that our country is small; that is why it can fail to be effective during military actions. Russians, on the other hand, underline that they are big but very peaceful country in the region.

Narrative of Georgia develops around the concept of being strategically important territory for the other countries, while Russians put the accent on being peacekeepers in the region. Those two roles are pretty different. However, both narratives victimize their societies: Georgian politicians try to underline the problems delivered from historical importance: ‘Georgia is a small country which everyone wants to conquer. It is equally interesting for big imperial forces: Persians, Arabs, Russians.’ While Russian narrative underlines the peaceful existence of their country in

the region until the enemies try to invade and create problems. In this sense Russian narrative also points out the ambitions of neighbours and their conspiracy with other allies against Russia.

Another important similarity between those two narrative templates is that both of them use the method of 'Bridging' or connecting current event with historical analogues. Interestingly enough both countries use the same historical event: Second World War. But each side uses different episodes of the war. Georgians underline the war of Finland which is used to judge USSR. But policy-makers connect here USSR and Russia. In war of Finland we can discuss the actions of USSR and not Russia separately, however the distortion or generalization is acceptable while creating the narrative template. Same can be said about Russian narrative template as well. They use the Second World War as well putting more accents on the commonalities between Georgia of Mikheil Saakashvili and NAZI Germany of Hitler. Again and again: Georgia is the aggressor which attacks Osetia exactly like Hitler attacked Poland. Russian policy-makers here also associate Russia of 2008 with the Soviet Union of 1939. They insist that Russia protected the victims like USSR protected Europe during WW2.

In addition to World War 2, Georgians and Russians remember the war of Abkhazia which happened earlier in 1990's. Both sides underline the importance of this historical event while considering the beginnings of the war. Russians blame Georgia's president Gamsakhourdia (was mentioned in the speech of Russian president) in the beginning of ethnic genocide leading both sides in a war. As a result, Russia needed to act as a peacemaker in the region. Georgians on their part also mention Abkhazian war drawing the parallel between Sokhumi and Tskhinvali (capital of South Osetia). Georgian politicians also use the symbolical bridging by naming both, Tskhinvali and Sokhumi a Jerusalem. For Georgian narrative both territories represent Jerusalem (land of Promise) which they constantly remember and where they hope to return one day.

One more similarity can be seen in describing the process of war itself. Both narratives underline that the first stage of the war is not successful for either side. Georgians as well as Russians start by losing the war and having a large number of casualties. As both nations underline the holy mission which they have and the concept of blessed community, in the end they win. Georgians consider keeping of freedom and independence as winning, whilst Russians believe they won the war because they protected those in need. Both narrative templates underline heroic deeds of war participants.

The biggest difference between two narratives can be seen in perception of war cause or the war beginnings. Each side believes the opposite is responsible. Therefore, each tries to justify their actions representing the guilt of the other side.

7. CONCLUSION

I have argued that the August 2008 War was a collective traumatic event. I have revealed some of the criteria which help us understand the nature of collective trauma. I have also analyzed the responses of Georgian and Russian societies to traumatic experience which helps us understand the ways in which Georgia and Russia interpret the war. Looking at the criteria, we can say, that recognition of the 2008 August War as collective trauma is not only correct but also necessary. It is hard to recover from post-traumatic stress, but it is possible if people and societies' are able to identify the main post-war narrative templates. They give us the truthful view of war perception on both sides.

Narrative template formation is very important due to the historical interpretation of events. New generations get education based on textbooks and other narratives using the same template over and over again. Narrative template study is a common practice nowadays, however exploring of post-war traumatic narratives requires non-biased approach and further detailed analysis.

Trauma can enable Georgian and Russian societies to construct new values and patterns of behaviour that allow it to visibly move past trauma. And study of similarities and differences of two narrative templates can be helpful in overcoming the traumatic stress and moving further in the direction of conflict resolution.

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