

SEMIOTICS OF SOCIAL MEMORY IN URBAN SPACE: THE CASE OF VOLGOGRAD (STALINGRAD)

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Abstract. Social memory as a kind of collective memory is connected with the strategies and practices of perpetuating the memory about important events, and city as a commemorative space can be viewed as a sign and as a text. The semiotic means encoding social phenomena and events represent the system of denotation, while the ways of place naming represent the culturally conditioned system of connotation operating behind the denotation code. The semiotics of social memory was examined by the example of the city of Volgograd (Stalingrad), the landscape of which appeals to a most significant historical event – the Great Patriotic War (World War II) – and can be conveniently described by means of Ch. S. Peirce’s classification of signs in which icons include signs denoting war heroes and represented by their sculptural images; indices include signs denoting artifacts associated with the war events; symbols are represented by toponymy signs characterized by the connotations of heroic deeds; all these signs representing cultural and political values specific for the Volgograd society. The semiotic density of social memory representation may be considered a ground for shaping the city’s ‘imagined community’ (the term suggested by B. Anderson, 1983) of a particular kind.

Keyword: *Social memory, Historical memory, Imagined community, City-text, Semiotic code, Toponymy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article is to analyze the means of representation of social memory and cultural values in the urban space using the semiotic approach.

Semiotics as the study of signs grouped into systems of codes analyzes the processes of constructing and understanding meanings based on the denotative correlation with the cultural values of a given society. Speaking

about the semiotic approach to urbanistic studies two directions can be taken into account: the structural analysis of sign systems which focuses upon their interrelationships in the semiosphere of the city, and the phenomenological analysis of sign processes emphasizing the role of the human environment (*umwelt*) in the use of signs which causes changes in the urban landscape. The semiotic approach to the urban landscape studies in various aspects is regarded fruitful in the research of many scholars (Barthes, 1982; Greimas, 1986; Jachna, 2004; Kostof, 1991; Rose-Redwood et al. 2009; Singer, 1991). Thus, T. J. Jachna (2004) describes the connection between urban space and digital communication technologies and argues that the digital layer of a city’s infrastructure is causing re-formulation of ‘the urban’ as a complex, multidimensional semiotic system. In Rose-Redwood et al. 2009 semiotic approaches are applied to the examination of commemorative toponyms. Linking semiotics to politics, the authors indicate that the interdisciplinary study is especially rewarding because it allows exploring place naming in its interrelation with political power throughout the course of history. In that way, commemorative priorities influenced by certain ideology can be recognized through toponymy.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Urban landscape can be described as a particular system of communication where places, buildings, architectural styles, urban rites and ceremonies, the very lay-out of the city, as well as the names of its streets code meanings in shapes, forms and words. Big cities, in particular, concentrate principal national sets of signs representing cultural values of local societies. Significant historical changes result in the changes of urban semiotics when many old sign systems carrying

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old meanings are supplemented by a number of new symbols standing for new values. The old and new signs are interwoven into semiospheres of new cities. As [D. Stevenson \(2003, 93\)](#) states,

“Cities are stages for the great triumphs and tragedies of humanity – sites for the events and interactions which define the ages. <...> In the city, the result has been a change in the relationship between its material and symbolic aspects”.

The semiotic relations in semiosphere manifest themselves as the relations between the interpreting system and the system interpreted. Signs used by a society can be fully interpreted by means of language signs, but not vice versa. Thus, language turns out to be an interpretant of society and involves society. So, when speaking about codifying social experience by language, the term ‘sociosemiotic code’ seems to be appropriate.

Semioticians state ([Никитина, 2006](#)) that a sign standing for a unit of human experience reflected in human’s consciousness is connected with the two basic forms of perception of the environment: space and time. Three spatial vectors set up the coordinates of a sign referring it to name, object, and meaning. The fourth coordinate – that of time – links it to other signs in a linear chain providing it with sense. The process of coding experience perceived by man underlies the classification of signs according to the time axis, that is, classifying is connected with spiritual activity and cognition which operate with senses. The space of senses is connected with material world which, when being reflected in mind and transformed into spiritual nature, objectifies senses in various forms: nature and society phenomena, objects of material culture, behavior, oral speech and its written form, thereby representing texts or signs. All these commonly recognized forms represent social meanings; they are always communicable and socialized.

The store of social meanings is social memory consisting of a materialized (retrospective) part and a live (current) part. The materialized part comprises two kinds of meanings: 1) functional – the meanings of artifacts which represent their purport, and 2) sign – the meanings of texts representing the plane of content. As is put in ([Соколов, 2002](#)), live memory deals with non-imprinted meanings which are represented by knowledge, beliefs, and social feelings. These mental meanings are invariants of sign meanings which are free from the material form.

Modern scholarship defines social memory as a complex intertwining of public morals, values and ideals; it is a phenomenon which can be subject to philosophical, sociological, historical, psychological, and linguistic research. In the works of scholars belonging to the cultural-semiotic approach ([Лотман, 2004](#); [Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995](#); [Rüsen, 2005](#)) social memory is considered in the cultural aspects through its relation to the means of mass-communication which are able to transform in the course of time and, consequently, to give rise to different types of thinking about past. These scholars state that cultural memory has ‘text’ nature and represents a combination of two basic elements: canonic texts and the means of their decoding which ensure the topicality of these texts regardless of the stage of the society progress. The structural approach ([Levi-Strauss, 1963](#), [Foucault, 2002](#), [Barthes, 1982](#)) is connected, by its methodological premise, with the cultural-semiotic one; it emphasizes the out-of-time structures which penetrate all the strata of social reality. The post-structural approach ([Baudrillard, 1994](#), [Nora, 1989](#), [Анкерсмит, 2003](#)) examines the dynamic changing of social phenomena (including social memory) in spatial aspects and thus introduces the notion of ‘the topology of social memory’ which accentuates the idea that places and landscapes laden with cultural significance prevent social ‘amnesia’.

A French sociologist M. Halbwaches ([Halbwaches, 1950](#)) has convincingly demonstrated that the main function of collective memory consists in upholding the cohesiveness of the society and its reproducing by way of transmitting the commonly shared history rather than preserving its past. This is the reason why the collective memory is frequently embellished, falsified, and mystified. M. Halbwaches connected social memory with the work of social power mechanisms. Social memory as a kind of collective memory deals with the knowledge of the past and the present, about historical events and historical personalities, and includes emotional experience. Social memory keeps up group identities and is understood as a history of ‘collective mentalities’ (metaphorically defined by P. Nora) which may coincide neither with each other nor with the official discourse. Social memory results from social constructing (the term suggested by P. L. Berger & T. Luckmann, 1966), therefore, the way in which the past is called up depends on the power of the group which creates the memory of its own.

Historical memory as a kind of social

memory arises from the time or spatial 'bundles of memory' (or 'lieux de memoire', according to Nora) with which the society associates its memory: memorials, celebrations, museums, anniversaries, and so on. These 'places of memory' are constructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the present. After such social tragedies as World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, Stalin's repressions the collective memory has acquired ethical connotations, besides social and religious ones. Social memory represents such kinds of events as a certain system of images, opinions, symbols and myths and often imparts symbolic meaning to the events and personalities: it recognizes in a certain event or an individual the embodiment of the spirit and desires of the whole epoch endowing them with the intrinsic features of the events and people of the past. By citing as examples the events from the historical past of the people, the society is imposed on with a certain set of values, and the transmission of social norms, morals and rules of conduct takes place, i.e., in the broad sense, the reproduction of culture is fulfilled, and on the basis of the proper image of the past the national or group identity is shaped. Nowadays none of the political elites of the world can but influence social memory transmitting through the mass historical education and other channels a definite system of values and notions regarding the historical heritage of its country, thereby manipulating its present and future and constructing an imagined community.

'The policy of collective memory' is associated with the strategies and practices directed to the shaping and reproducing identities, first and foremost, national and ethnical. Among the ways of implementing 'the policy of memory' there can be found out constructing memorials and monuments, celebrating historical events and significant dates which are important at the state or regional levels, stimulating historical research and publications on socially relevant issues, commemorating significant events and noted people. In urban landscape these practices include building up memorials and naming streets, parks, squares, etc., with appropriate names, thereby creating a special urban space rich in references to the event to be remembered. From this point of view city as a commemorative space can be viewed as a sign and as a text, that is, within the semiotic and linguistic paradigms. Sociosemiotic means encoding social phenomena and events represents the system of denotation, while the language code represents the

culturally conditioned system of connotation operating behind the denotation code.

As is well known, the connection between a signifier and a signified which is obligatory for any sign can be motivated (conditioned in this or that way and, thus, explicable), and non-motivated. In human's mind, motivated connections (or associations) are of two kinds: by contiguity and by resemblance of phenomena. Charles Sanders Peirce proved that in semiotics the said relations embrace all possible kinds of connections between the signifier and the signified of any sign. In accordance with these three kinds of connections (by contiguity, by resemblance, and non-motivated) Peirce postulated the existence of three classes of elementary signs: indices, icons, and symbols. The proposed classification of signs allows to see the essential processes of semiosis; moreover, it correlates with the three ways of perceiving time by a person. In his work "Existential Graphs" (Peirce, 1973), Peirce describes such correlation:

"Thus the mode of being of the symbol differs from that of the icon and from that of the index. An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience. <...> The value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future".

Pivotal here is that all the three types of signs being connected with social memory and belonging to different paradigms allow using their coding potential for creating denotative-connotative space which marks an individual city as whole and unique.

I will examine the interaction of these paradigms and signs by the example of the city of Volgograd (Stalingrad) in which social memory about the important historical events is very strong. Social memory can be considered a ground for shaping the city imagined community of a particular kind. Departing from the idea of B. Anderson that an imagined community is a community of fellow-members united (or, rather, they are imagined to be united) by common ideological dispositions, and, to a great extent, by commonly shared cultural priorities and social behavioral patterns, and taking into account his idea that "word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind" (Anderson, 1983, 48), I will use semiotics as a tool for analyzing the connections between cultural and political processes having their roots in the historical past of the city of Volgograd.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two significant components of the historical past have influenced the social memory of the Volgograd imagined community, shaped the city landscape and represented its image on the political map of Russia: twice in its history the city performed the frontier post – first, as a former Cossack military settlement in the XVI c. (it was called Tsaritsyn from 1589 to 1925, from the Turkic name of the river Sary-Sy ‘Yellow Sands’, the Volga River nowadays) and second, as the dead stop in the Nazi army offensive in 1943. I will focus on the means of commemorating the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and show how the big community of Volgograd keeps up social and cultural values of a modern city in connection with its historical heritage.

The study of cities as texts draws attention of various scholars. They consider the city as semiotic layering of material facts (architectural styles, materials for designing buildings of various destination, the city lay-out, museums, monuments, statues, and so on) representing the city landscape which can reflect social and political structuring of the city, ideological grounds and social priorities in the life of its dwellers (cf. political semiotics as one of the possible approaches in [Rose-Redwood et al. 2009](#)). Thus, much of the recent scholarship has touched upon large cities of the world and the capitals of the states which underwent geopolitical changes resulting from the changing of power regimes, the contestation of the local authorities, or the nationalistic aspirations ([Azaryahu, 1997](#); [Gill, 2005](#); [Light, 2004](#); [Palonen, 2008](#); [Rose-Redwood, 2008](#); [Vuolteenaho and Ainiala, 2009](#); [Yeoh, 1996](#)). However, as M. Azaryahu rightly points out, of much interest can be the study of provincial cities and even small towns ([Azaryahu, 2011, 29](#)) as they do not undergo significant changes owing to the sluggishness of their authorities and to the stability of social memory about important events.

Volgograd as one of the provincial cities (though with the population exceeding one million people) can be considered a commemorative city because most of its memorials and 15 % of street names appeal to one historic event – the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

The semiotics of the city can be adequately described by means of Peircean classification of signs. Thus, icons (a ‘picture’ of a thing or a person; physical resemblance of what it stands for) include signs denoting war heroes whose images have been preserved in

the collective memory and are represented by their sculptural images, e.g. marshals V. Chujkov and G. Zhukov, division commander V. Kholzunov, Severomortsy (the North Sea soldiers), the war official of Cheka (security officer), a soldier of the Pavlov’s detachment who defended the central city square, soldiers in the Mamaev Hill complex, Komsomol members in the Komsomol Park, seaman M. Panikakha, and the panorama “The Defeat of the Fascist Army near Stalingrad” which is performed on canvas and installed in a building of 120 meters round and 16 meters high. A special monument in honor of the demolitions dogs is going to be constructed in Volgograd: it will commemorate their great services during the war.

Indices (signals correlating with and pointing to something) include signs designating artifacts associated with the war events. These are armaments being out of use nowadays, put on pedestals and having become monuments: 18 tanks of famous T-34-76 series of 1942 indicating the first line of defense, Yak-3 interceptors, a U-2 fighter-bomber, a BK-13 armored boat, a special fire-boat participating in transporting food and ammunition to besieged Stalingrad, a soldier’s helmet with a shot hole in it. In miniature, these ‘indices’ can be seen at the exhibitions of the war armament models made with great verisimilitude by the hands of young citizens. As a new tradition in commemorating the Great Patriotic War with special artifacts, on 9 May 2011 all the participants and spectators of the events in honor of the Victory Day could take away khaki field caps which were given them by the members of the city youth organizations.

Symbols (an arbitrary representation of the thing in the world), connoting signs, are represented by artifacts (e.g. the statue of the Motherland calling to fighting; the Eternal Flame symbolizing eternal remembrance of the fallen for the country; it has been carried to other cities suffered from the War; the figure of Mother mourning over her Son by the Lake of Tears; an old poplar enclosed in red granite as the only tree in the center of the city which survived the Stalingrad battle). Since 2005, by the initiative of the youth organization “The Students’ Society”, a new tradition has become part of the Victory Day: a Georgian ribbon (originated from the ribbon to the Order of St. George the Victorious, the highest war award of the Russian Empire, since 1769, with narrow black-and-yellow stripes – ‘smoke and fire of the battle-field’) is given freely to those who wish; it is received as a

symbol of national unity and of the pride in the national past and is bound to bags, cars' antennae, tied on arms and lapels.

All these material structures are placed in urban space according to definite patterns to construct a semiotic fabric of the emotionally laden city.

Symbolic function is also performed by language signs denominating streets and city squares in honor of the war heroes and characterized by the connotations of their heroic deeds. These signs can be divided into two sets: proper names of heroes (the onomastic signs) and place names (the toponymy signs). The set of onomastic signs includes:

- names of famous persons: marshals (Marshal Rokossovsky Street), generals (General of the Army Shtemenko Street), young Guards heroes (Oleg Koshevoi Street), young pioneer heroes (Sasha Chekalin Street), war heroes – soldiers of various war crafts (streets named after: radio operator Zina Maresieva, tank man Markin, sniper Chekhov);

- collective denominations of heroes named after their commander (Gorokhovtsev Street – the detachment under Colonel S. F. Gorokhov);

- denominations of divisions (51st Guards Street) and armies (8th Air Fleet Street) distinguished themselves in the war events.

Toponymy signs having connotations of the heroic confrontation with enemies include denominations of streets, avenues and squares connected with the places of battles (Stalingrad Heroes Avenue) or the defense of cities (Sevastopol Defense Street), and with the completion of the war events (Stalingrad Victory Square, the Revival Square) as well as with the names of the cities which participated in the war (Port Said Street, Prague Street).

Part of city streets and squares names accentuate the connotations of collective heroism displayed by the representatives of various war crafts: Signalers Street, Rifleman Street. The semantics of heroism is manifested through the direct evaluative denominations (Heroic Street, Guards Street) and the indirect ones based on the symbolism of war artifacts having positive evaluative connotations in the context of war (Red Stars Street, Red Banners Street). The emotionally laden streets of Volgograd might be compared with the streets of some cities of the world, which have no names but are numbered. The absence of street naming does not impede the cognitive process of identification in the urban space; however the fact that the city locations are not bound to the social experience of their inhabitants

and devoid of evaluative connotations hinders their interiorizing of these locations and sharing common social feelings and emotions.

During the years after the Great Patriotic War none of the streets named after the war heroes were renamed; moreover, for the last two decades some old streets have received new names connected with the war events and heroes. New streets in new-built quarters have been named after the painters, artists, composers, writers and poets who have glorified the heroes of the Stalingrad Battle; these people have been chosen by the city community's voting. Members of the City Expert Committee think this will favor the patriotic feelings among the youth.

Experts are sure that street naming should follow historical tendencies, and they receive support from most of the city dwellers. Thus, in the summer of 2011 the members of the regional youth organization "The New People" put forward the idea of renaming Lenin Street into Sergei Bagapsh Street (the second President of Abkhazia who had died just by that moment). The idea was discussed on the Internet forum of the city site, and the participants of the discussion opposed this idea on the ground that historical names should be kept untouched. Vladimir Lenin has turned out to be not decommemorated as belonging to the period of nation-building and state-formation and, in general, as being part of the historical heritage of the country (once called the USSR) which is now being slightly prettified and romanticized. In line with the above-mentioned opinion, there is a point of view to which a vast majority of both the city community and the local authorities adhere – it concerns returning the city streets their traditional historical names though in the form of doubling them by modern names. This action is considered to help people maintain generic memory and foster moral values.

Social memory relating to such a complex event as the Great Patriotic War is coded with the help of complex (mixed) signs. To these the following signs can be referred:

- memorial plaques as a combination of a sign artifact (a decorative plate commemorating a famous person or an event) and a language sign (a description), e.g.

"Here, November 24th, 1942, after three months of fierce fighting against the German-Fascist aggressors, the group of forces under Colonel Gorokhov of the Stalingrad army met the forces of the Don army under General Rokossovsky. Glory to the heroes of the Stalingrad battle!"

– rituals represented by:

a) theme guided tours around the places connected with the war (characterized, as well as rituals, by a definite order of actions), including a sign text rich in the vocabulary related to the domain of war (a guide's story), and toponymy signs (names of the places connected with the war events);

b) celebrations of the war anniversaries (military parades) combining sign artifacts (banners, medals, photos of war heroes and veterans), signs denoting time (dates of war events or heroes' life and death), toponymy signs denoting places of meetings or commemoration of the fallen heroes, signs denoting persons (heroes' and veterans' names), sign texts (war songs, speeches rich in special vocabulary), sign actions (marching, the order of speaking of the local authorities at the meeting on the city square, the ceremony of wreath-laying); on May 9, for the first time after the war, an old tank T-34-85 took part in the military parade in Volgograd; in April it was raised up from the bottom of one of the Volgograd region rivers and restored at the Volgograd tractor works.

The most complex signs are war memorials (the Museums of War Glory; the Mamaev Hill; the Stalingrad Battle Panorama; the Museum of Memory, also known as the Museum of Paulus, – the place of field marshal F. Paulus's capture; the Rossoshki war cemetery of the Soviet and German soldiers fallen in the Stalingrad Battle), the semiosis of which combine icons, indices and symbols represented by all kinds of signs considered above.

Material signs used for commemorating important historical events are backed up by some behavioral patterns based on the appropriate feelings of people in these environments. Thus, the so-called Post No 1 has been popular among Volgograd schoolchildren since 1965: dressed in the war uniform, training guns in hands, boys and girls perform symbolical guard duties near the Eternal Flame on the Square of Fallen Heroes in the center of the city. The educational policy of the local authorities has made participation in this action prestigious, and many schoolchildren of the city do their best to be honored with it.

Such semiotic density of material culture, activities, rules and social codes of behavior influences the minds of the citizens in creating their imagined community. In this respect, the imagined community of Volgograd is characterized by the patriotic orientation and by the

political stability, if not passivity. Volgograd is part of the so-called 'red belt' (including, besides Volgograd, some other regions of Central Russia, mostly agricultural where the mentality of the dwellers is highly conservative): the Communist Party (CPRF) though of a new type is a frequent winner in the elections of the city administration. But the local authorities representing the Communist Party neither exert pressure on the people nor support the cult of Stalin's personality as the latter is required by the old communists. For the last two decades the debates on renaming Volgograd back to Stalingrad have been held not once but each time this action failed to succeed: the amount of those who wish to raise Stalin's name from the past does not exceed eight per cent. In 1961 the city received a politically neutral name 'Volgograd', and two of the three monuments to Stalin were pulled down and the third one – on the embankment of the Volga-Don canal – was replaced by the statue of Lenin as a less cruel leader. Stalin's personality is frequently referred to in anecdotes (Lenin's name is much less frequent) – in this way fearful phenomena are "carnivalized" (the term suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin), i.e. made fun of, to neutralize the negative connotations. Nowadays the name 'Stalingrad' used as a brand in, for example, advertising is related to the Stalingrad Battle rather than to Stalin himself.

The local authorities persistently shape the image of the hero-city (the information site of Volgograd on the Internet is called 'Altitude 102' (www.v102.ru); it is the height of the Mamaev Hill), they do not object against setting up youth pro-communist societies, and rely on other city organizations, for example the Cossacks, which support them. On the whole, the population of the city is loyal, if not indifferent, to the CPRF; moreover, the citizens approve of the patriotic orientation of its activity and par-take in the youth camp "The Patriots of Volgograd", Centers for patriotic education, youth patriotic clubs which, besides other activities, hold role plays based on the historical events on the territory of the former city of Stalingrad.

Volgograd is a city of the commemoration of the War, and the semiotics of the whole city serves this purpose. Everyday life of the citizens goes on amid the monuments to the War which cannot but influence their world-view. By the words of Rose-Redwood *et al.* 2009, the official discourse of history passes into a shared cultural experience that is embedded into practices of everyday life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Social memory becomes one of the key elements determining the present state-of-affairs of the society and actively shaping its future. It can foster some social and political processes, but at the same time hamper or block others. Social memory as well as historical memory has been used for the purpose of manipulating the minds of the people. Historical memory becomes quite a remarkable characteristic of people's mode of life, in many respects determining their intentions, mood, general feeling and behavior and indirectly influencing their minds thereby constructing an imagined community.

In the city of Volgograd the past is living in the cultural memory of the society being superimposed on the ideological values of the present. The imagined community of modern Volgograd can be described as patriotic, orthodox, and patriarchal. Based on the historically significant past, these social values are not recognized as politically charged and are shared by most citizens. Young people, members of the Internet social networks, often indicate their views as orthodox and patriotic, sometimes communist. But this is a general understanding of order and patriarchal character typical of the Russian identity and intrinsic to those young people who are brought up within the historically approved Russian cultural traditions maintained by social memory.

The imagined community of Volgograd built into the urban landscape is shaped by semiotic means including signs of material culture and symbolic rituals reflecting social and cultural values of this community.

Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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