

# Toxic Memories and Amateur Genealogy in Contemporary Russia

*Abstract:* This article investigates post-Soviet practices of amateur genealogy in relation to the politics of memory in Russia. Based on long-term ethnographic research into a popular genealogy club in a large provincial city, it explores genealogists' interpretive practices through which flat and unified historical narratives about the Soviet past, and especially about political violence, gain temporal, and spatial depth. The article argues that these practices have been informed by a growing presence of the therapeutic discourse in post-Soviet Russia, which resulted in genealogy becoming a means to reshape individuals' relations with the Soviet past. Positioning oneself on the genealogical grid and historicizing family narratives contextualizes the self and ensures a sense of inclusion in a broader community. It is by virtue of its transformative potential that amateur genealogy becomes a balm for post-Soviet memory.

*Keywords:* amateur genealogy, commemorative politics, genealogical imagination, political violence, post-Soviet memory, therapeutic discourse

## Introduction

In the popular television show *Watchmen*,<sup>1</sup> based on a much-beloved graphic novel by Alan Moore,<sup>2</sup> the heroine, Angela Abar, takes an overdose of "Nostalgia", a pill that contains other people's memories. The pill holds the memories of Angela's late paternal grandfather, an African American police officer, whose life history had been overrun by institutional racism and popular prejudice. The overdose entangles her personal memories of hardship with those of her late grandfather, whom she did not ever know growing up. His memories, enmeshed with her own, literally causes Angela prolonged and unbearable physical pain, during which she loses her consciousness and is fighting for her life. This episode of the show poignantly communicates the toxic effects of an intergenerational trauma. That is, family histories, when situated in larger historical and political contexts, can be toxic to an extent that they might imperil one's wellbeing.

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1 *Watchmen*, created by Damon Lindelof, HBO, 2019.

2 Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, DC Comics, 1995, [https://www.goodreads.com/work/best\\_book/4358649-watchmen](https://www.goodreads.com/work/best_book/4358649-watchmen) (9 February 2020).

I was reminded of this episode when recalling my conversation with Mila, a retired high school Russian-language teacher. Mila is a seasoned genealogist and chair of the local genealogy club in a large provincial city in Russia. “Genealogy has a soothing effect on memory” (“rodovedenie uspokaevaet pamat”), Mila told me when explaining her enthusiasm for genealogy. After following local genealogists and their practices for over a year, I was puzzled by Mila’s description of genealogy as “soothing”. How can it have a calming effect on memory when the club members’ stories that I had heard were painfully punctuated by the political violence and social cataclysms of the long twentieth century in the former Soviet Union? Narratives about families affected by state violence and events associated with collectivization campaigns, Stalin’s terror, population transfers, World War Two, and their aftermath figured prominently in amateur genealogists’ research and narratives.<sup>3</sup> For club members I observed during my research, discovering the ramifications that these events had for their ancestors exacted a real emotional toll. And yet, unlike Angela Abar, who literally almost died discovering painful and traumatic memories of her grandfather, Mila and many of her fellow genealogists perceived the social practice of reconstructing the past by means of genealogical research to have a *healing* effect on their personal and collective memory.

I take Mila’s statement about the calming effect of genealogy as a starting point to examine an inherent tension between the genealogical maps, fraught with signs of political violence, and the genealogists’ interpretations of their practices as having a “soothing” effect on their memory. Understanding this tension requires situating it in the context of state obfuscating and zigzagging interpretations of the Soviet political violence, which nevertheless continues to penetrate the post-Soviet present.<sup>4</sup> In the context of conflicting interpretations of Soviet history, characteristic of the current political moment, the social practice of amateur genealogy makes it possible to do what the “Nostalgia” pill did for Angela Abar – to identify the intimate links between political histories of violence and one’s own familial narratives, implicated in these histories. In the context of restrictive politics of memory, characteristic of the current moment, amateur genealogy becomes an alternative channel of recollection that brings these entanglements closer to the present, vivifying in the here-and-now the history of Soviet political violence.

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3 Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s–1940s*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50/1 (2008), 91–117, DOI: 10.1017/S0010417508000066. Although Soviet legislation around punishment avoided the explicit language of kinship, historical research demonstrates that Stalin’s terror policies targeted personal and familial networks, highlighting collective punishment as the main means of terror.

4 John Borneman, *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice, and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* (Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History), Princeton, NJ 1997; Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, Stanford 2013; Neringa Klumbytė, *Memory, Identity, and Citizenship in Lithuania*, in: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41/3 (2010), 295–313, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2010.498188; Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy”: Retrofitting the Past in Russia, in: *Russian Review* 66/3 (2007), 451–482, <https://scholar.princeton.edu/oushakine/publications/were-nostalgic-were-not-crazy-retrofitting-past-russia> (1 June 2021); id., *Second-Hand Nostalgia: On Charms and Spells of the Soviet Trukhliashechka*, in: Otto Boele/Boris Noordenbos/Ksenia Robbe (eds.), *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire’s Legacies*, New York/London 2019, 38–69, [https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/publications/post-soviet-nostalgia\(6f9cc674-751c-4cd7-8c96-42d7e708c063\)/export.html](https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/publications/post-soviet-nostalgia(6f9cc674-751c-4cd7-8c96-42d7e708c063)/export.html) (20 February 2020); Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, New York 1999.

How, then, is the social practice of amateur genealogy regarded as a form of healing? It is my argument that these interpretations are informed by a growing presence of the therapeutic discourse in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, I have written how, as part of a burgeoning self-help culture in post-Soviet Russia, genealogy has been mobilized as a psychological resource in people's quest for orienting oneself in the changing relationships with the post-Soviet state.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I demonstrate how the therapeutic reasoning that Mila and her fellow genealogists bring into their practices turns popular genealogy into an instrument capable of calming the agitated memory of the Soviet past.

It what follows, I first discuss how the post-Soviet case of popular genealogy with its particular stress on political violence relates and contributes to the scholarship on genealogy as a modern form of care and belonging. Second, I delineate the post-Soviet politics of memory and commemoration and show how obfuscating and often restrictive interpretations of the past turn amateur genealogy into an institutional channel for articulating conflicting memories of the past. Third, I discuss how this walk down the memory lane, either through archival research or through collecting testimonies from living relatives, reveals the notion of toxicity and potential harm embedded in these recollections and the reconstructions of family. Finally, I turn to the redeeming and therapeutic qualities of genealogy that transforms the toxic effects of historical cataclysms of the twentieth century into a symbolic device for healing the toxic and agitated memories of the past.

## Genealogy as a form of care in post-Soviet Russia

Genealogy is booming in Russia as it is in European and North American contexts. Such popular interest in genealogy is in itself a modern phenomenon. While traditionally it was the near-exclusive preserve of European aristocracy, concerned with registering and maintaining its inherited positions, in the nineteenth century, genealogy became popular among the newly emerging middle class and served to solidify their bourgeois pedigree and property rights.<sup>7</sup> It also played an important role in constructing the narratives of nation-building

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5 Julia Lerner, *TV Therapy Without Psychology: Adapting the Self in Post-Soviet Media*, in: *Laboratorium* 2011/1, 116–137; Julia Lerner/Claudia Zbenovich, *Adapting the Therapeutic Discourse to Post-Soviet Media Culture: The Case of Modnyi Prigovor*, in: *Slavic Review* 72/4 (2013), 828–849; Tomas Matza, *Moscow's Echo: Technologies of the Self, Publics, and Politics on the Russian Talk Show*, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 24/3 (2009), 489–522, DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1360.2009.01038.x; id., “Good Individualism”? Psychology, Ethics, and Neoliberalism in Postsocialist Russia, in: *American Ethnologist* 39/4 (2012), 804–818, DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01396.x; id., *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia*, Durham, NC 2018; Suvi Salmenniemi/Maria Adamson, *New Heroines of Labour: Domesticating Post-Feminism and Neoliberal Capitalism in Russia*, in: *Sociology* 49/1 (2015), 88–105; Suvi Salmenniemi/Mariya Vorona, *Reading Self-Help Literature in Russia: Governmentality, Psychology and Subjectivity*, in: *The British Journal of Sociology* 65/1 (2014), 43–62.

6 Inna Leykin, *Rodologia: Genealogy as Therapy in Post-Soviet Russia*, in: *Ethos* 43/2 (2015), 135–164, DOI: 10.1111/etho.12078.

7 Jason Tebbe, *From Memory to Research: German Popular Genealogy in the Early Twentieth Century*, in: *Central European History* 41/2 (2008), 205–227, DOI: 10.1017/S0008938908000319; Dallen J. Timothy/Jeanne Kay Guelke (eds.), *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts*, Aldershot 2008.

and promoting the importance of family research for national interests.<sup>8</sup> Today, along with roots tourism, genealogy is often cited as one of the most popular hobbies worldwide.<sup>9</sup> Augmented by virtual technologies and DNA testing through genetic ancestry labs, genealogy is experiencing another heyday.<sup>10</sup>

Social scientists have of course documented the important role genealogy plays in modern life.<sup>11</sup> As a hobby, genealogy is sometimes framed as a symbolic practice that provides individuals with an opportunity to rewrite personal identities outside the institutions and categories imposed on them by state.<sup>12</sup> Fenella Cannell argues against seeing popular genealogical

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- 8 For the Scottish case see: Paul Basu, *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Diaspora*, London 2007; for the Irish case see: Catherine Nash, *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, & the Politics of Belonging (Irish Studies)*, Syracuse, NY 2008; for the German case see: Tebbe, *From Memory to Research*.
- 9 Alex Haley, *Roots*, Doubleday 1976; Nash, *Of Irish Descent*, 8.
- 10 Basu, *Highland Homecomings*; Catherine Nash, *Genetic Kinship*, in: *Cultural Studies* 18/1 (2004), 1–33, DOI: 10.1080/0950238042000181593; Tebbe, *From Memory to Research*; Timothy/Guelke (eds.), *Geography and Genealogy*; Eviatar Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*, Oxford 2012. – Although I have not met anyone who took a DNA test, in the neighbouring Republic of Bashkortostan, inhabited by a Turkic-speaking ethnic group, DNA tests have recently gained prominence among amateur genealogists: Yusopov Yuldash, *Bashkirskie Uchenye Prodvigaut Ideii Genogeografii [Bashkir Scientists Promote the Ideas of Geno-Geography]*, in: *Elektrogazeta.Rf*, 18 March 2015, section Nauka, <http://www.i-gazeta.com/news/nauka102/33006.html> (4 March 2020). Television shows such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*, in both its British and American formats, further fuel the genealogy fires. Versions of this show were sold to various European countries, where it is successfully circulating. In Russia too, at least two TV shows that explore genealogical relatedness are in circulation. One such show, reminiscent of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, features Russian celebrities setting off on journeys to explore their family history. The show makes use of historians and local genealogists while advertising software programs and websites to enable a broader audience to conduct their own private genealogical investigations.
- 11 Basu, *Highland Homecomings*; Fenella Cannell, *English Ancestors: The Moral Possibilities of Popular Genealogy*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17/3 (2011), 462–480, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01702.x; Janet Carsten, *Introduction: Ghosts of Memory*, in: Ead. (ed.), *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, Malden, MA/Oxford 2007, 1–35; Jeanette Edwards, *A Feel for Genealogy: “Family Treeing” in the North of England*, in: *Ethnos* 83/4 (2018), 724–743, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2017.1322115; Rebecca Empson, *Enlivened Memories: Recalling Absence and Loss in Mongolia*, in: Carsten (ed.), *Ghosts of Memory*, 58–82; Caroline Legrand, *Routes to the Roots: Toward an Anthropology of Genealogical Practices*, in: Diana Marre/Laura Briggs (eds.), *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children*, New York 2009, 244–255; Nash, *Of Irish Descent*; Martine Segalen/Claude Michalet, *L’amour de la généalogie*, in: Martine Segalen (ed.), *Jeux de familles*, Paris 1991, 193–208; Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies)*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1997; Elena Zdravomyslova/Olga Tkach, *Genealogicheskii Poisk v Sovremennoi Rossii: Reabilitatsiia “istorii” Cherez Semeinuiu “Pamat” [Genealogical Search in Contemporary Russia: The Rehabilitation of “History” via Familial “Memory”]*, in: *Ab Imperio* 2004/3, 383–407, DOI: 10.1353/imp.2004.0168; Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives*.
- 12 Segalen/Michalet, *L’amour de la généalogie*; Haley, *Roots*. In the late twentieth century, the practice of popular genealogy was also instrumental in highlighting the social histories of discrimination and addressing “the neglect of those ‘hidden from history’”. Perhaps the most well-known of such projects of cultural recovery is Alex Haley’s bestselling account of his journey to his ancestral home in West Africa, *Roots*. Haley’s book was an attempt to reconstruct a family history of an African-American who was denied a past by mainstream American culture, both through slavery and through the politics of the melting pot. Through a form of genealogical research, *Roots* brought a broad recognition to slavery as an important part of US history and challenged the mainstream ideology of assimilation. Its renown appears responsible for the rising interest in genealogy in the US.

pursuit as a psychological compensatory practice of individuals. In her ethnographic account of amateur genealogists from East Anglia as well as her analysis of the British TV show *Who Do You Think You Are?* she argues that, “genealogy is a process by which the dead are brought back to some form of social life, the life of kinship, through the work and the journeys (both literal and emotional) which their living descendants undertake on their behalf”.<sup>13</sup> In her account, genealogy is fundamentally about care for the dead, which can also bring about new relations with the living. Amateur genealogy, therefore, is a moral and cultural space that points to religious dimensions of genealogical research, in which the living English create a shared social life by reviving their dead ancestors. Jeanette Edwards, also conducting her research in England, argues for genealogy as a practice of belonging to specific *places* and people, both dead and alive, in which family trees function as a display of the credentials of belonging to community, people, and things.<sup>14</sup>

In post-Soviet culture, genealogy as a form of care and belonging should be understood against the backdrop of the disappearance of the traditional Soviet system of meanings and the state’s obfuscation of the past. The specific nature of the Soviet past has necessarily shaped the practice of genealogical research. Thus, the turbulent years and aftermath of Stalin’s terror, collectivization campaigns, and World War Two play a prominent role in genealogists’ stories and their attempts to make sense of their lives. Reappearing in many stories, these “temporal landmarks”,<sup>15</sup> familiar to all and punctuated by political violence and/or clashes with political power often serve as points of departure from which to begin the process of rearranging personal and familial narratives.

I began conducting my ethnographic research in 2009, and although I have since moved on to explore other social issues, I have kept in touch with the core of my interlocutors and continued following their activities both on- and off-line. As Jeanette Edwards notes, family genealogical research as a practice of belonging and care is characterized by a “processual and never-finished nature”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the majority of the genealogy club members I followed are engaged in a long-term search for their family histories. Uncovering new information about one’s ancestors generates new leads. These are then used for the continuous construction and reconstruction of the genealogical grid. New details and discovered documents shape new interpretive strategies for making sense of the past. I observed club members striving to create elaborate genealogies dating back much further than the twentieth century. Some even unearthed documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when, with the wave of the incursion of the Russian empire into the Eastern lands, their ancestors – peasant serfs – were forced to move to brand-new company-towns in the Urals and Siberia.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Cannell, *English Ancestors*, 469.

14 Edwards, *A Feel for Genealogy*.

15 Scholars of memory refer to historical events that are instantly familiar and intelligible to others as “temporal marks”. Kevin Birth, *The Immanent Past: Culture and Psyche at the Juncture of Memory and History*, in: *Ethos* 34/2 (2006), 169–191, DOI: 10.1525/eth.2006.34.2.169; Jennifer Cole, *Malagasy and Western Conceptions of Memory: Implications for Postcolonial Politics and the Study of Memory*, in: *Ethos* 34/2 (2006), 211–243, DOI: 10.1525/eth.2006.34.2.211; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. by Lewis A. Coser, Chicago 1992.

16 Edwards, *A Feel for Genealogy*, 729.

17 Although beyond the purview of this article, several club members, and Mila was among them, managed to convert their personal experiences of reconstructing family trees into a successful source of income. They offered paid services to people interested in discovering their roots. Not a cheap service, it attracted quite a few members of the emerging middle class in post-Soviet Russia.

Yet, most of the stories that I heard in the genealogy club's meetings roughly corresponded to the four generations of families that lived through the tumultuous history of twentieth-century Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This situates club members within a relatively modest timeline and affects how they shape their historical narratives. Despite the modest and relatively shallow timeline of the genealogical grids, the significance attributed to specific socio-political events in the family narratives provides the described social ties and the historical narrative with considerable depth. Sergeui Oushakine writes about the recent vogue of museums and exhibitions dedicated to Soviet lifestyle and to the material culture of the Soviet past as actualizing the connections between different generations. The material qualities of things help visualize and articulate the social ties between people, ideas, and objects across time and generations.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, visualizing and contextualizing state violence using the genealogical map, structures the narratives about specific historical events, connects different generations, and brings the experience of history closer to the narrator.

This article builds upon and adds an important dimension to the scholarship that conceives of amateur genealogy as an important modern social practice of care and belonging.<sup>19</sup> Although scholars studying popular genealogical activities perceive political developments as fuelling family trajectories, in the scholars' accounts, by and large, political transformations remain in the background – a silent context against or despite which people are reconstructing their family histories.<sup>20</sup> My ethnographic examples challenge this assumption insofar as Russian genealogists place a special emphasis on the embeddedness of their familial trajectories in historically grounded political circumstances and turn the context of historical political violence into the central feature of their reconstructions and family narratives. By using their ancestors' interactions with political disruptions and violence as the point from which to begin rearranging their personal and familial histories, genealogists revive the historical context of their familial narratives. In other words, in their family narratives genealogists instantiate the past political violence and their ancestors' relations with the state and political regimes.

## Genealogy and the politics of commemoration in post-Soviet Russia

Natalia's familial narrative introduces us to the process of sketching, outlining, and articulating the entanglements between specific events of state violence and familial stories. I visited Natalia, an amateur genealogist in her late forties, in her home in one of the remote neighbourhoods in the city. Her two daughters were out and so the house was quiet, permitting an uninterrupted discussion. As we waited for the water in the kettle to boil, Natalia showed me her family tree, printed on a sheet of A3 paper. Going back and forth between the refrigerator

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18 Oushakine, *Second-Hand Nostalgia*.

19 Cannell, *English Ancestors*; Edwards, *A Feel for Genealogy*; Empson, *Enlivened Memories*; Nash, *Of Irish Descent*; Zdravomyslova/Tkach, *Genealogicheskii Poisk v Sovremennoi Rossii*.

20 See, for example, Carsten, *Introduction*; Empson, *Enlivened Memories*.



and a small dining table, preparing and serving snacks, she narrated the genealogical chart that I was studying.

On Natalia's father's side, her great-grandfather, a wealthy peasant, was stripped of his farm in the early days of the collectivization campaign – he was *raskulachen* – and exiled to Siberia.<sup>21</sup> He died there, presumably poisoned. That was, at least, the rumour circulating across generations of family members, but it was not clear why and by whom. After he died, his wife, Natalia's great-grandmother, returned to Ukraine. This was just before World War Two broke out. The couple had three sons, one of whom died in 1942 in the line of duty. Another son, Natalia's grandfather, was also drafted and married an army nurse. He, too, was killed in the war, leaving his wife to raise their baby (Natalia's father). Much less is known about Natalia's mother's side, whose ancestors come from a Polish town that is now in Ukraine. Natalia's maternal grandmother escaped the Nazi occupation in Ukraine but could not escape the front lines entirely, remaining in the occupied Kursk region. From her mother, Natalia heard stories about grandmother Efrosinia hiding beneath horse carts during the attacks and scrounging for food in neighbouring villages. Natalia concluded: "This is my story – exile and death on one side and perpetual movement and hiding on the other. All these things are part of me." I asked Natalia what she meant by that. In response, she suggested a straight line between the traumatic experiences of her ancestors and her present concerns that were undoubtedly shaped by a very different social context: "I can see how all these things that my ancestors went through manifest themselves in me. My marriage fell apart, I don't have my own apartment and I move around all the time. I do what I do because of what happened to them."

Natalia's story demonstrates how for many amateur genealogists, family connections and their entanglements with political violence and specific historical events become a vector of self-knowledge and self-realization.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, these practices of self-knowledge also emerge as a means to organize one's relations with the Soviet past. Knowing oneself through the social practice of genealogy requires engaging with a difficult historical past and with conflicting interpretations of this past. To understand how amateur genealogists engage with the past and its interpretations, it is important to first consider the nature of post-Soviet commemorative politics and its effects on the social practice of genealogy.

The Soviet past has a palpable – if equivocal – presence in contemporary Russia, and the social practice of genealogy reveals certain aspects of post-Soviet memory politics.<sup>23</sup> Com-

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21 *Kulak* was the category of wealthy peasants who were stripped of their wealth and either deported or imprisoned during the collectivization campaign that began as early as 1928.

22 Leykin, Rodologia.

23 Post-Soviet Russia is of course not the only example of unresolved memory politics. Coming to terms with the past through judicial, institutional, and popular initiatives leading to heated public debates have been the defining feature of many European nation states. In fact, it would be hard to find a modern nation state with a completely agreed upon memory of the past. Campaigns for exhuming tens of thousands of civilians killed by the Francoist regime during the civil war in Spain are but one example of such popular initiatives and their effects on the memory of past violence. See: Francisco Ferrándiz, *Exhuming the Defeated: Civil War Mass Graves in 21st-Century Spain*, in: *American Ethnologist* 40/1 (2013), 38–54, DOI: 10.1111/amet.12004; Carlos Jerez-Farran/Samuel Amago (eds.), *Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain*, Notre Dame, IN 2010, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1677> (8 October 2020); Layla Renshaw, *Missing Bodies Near-at-Hand: The Dissonant Memory and Dormant Graves of the Spanish Civil War*, in: Mikkel Bille/Frida Hastrup/Tim Flohr Soerensen (eds.), *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, New York 2010, 45–61, DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4419-5529-6\_3.

memorating the Soviet past has been central to state campaigns for national unity, and the performative nature of the state commemoration of its Soviet past plays an important role in organizing the Soviet experience in the present and in maintaining national consensus.<sup>24</sup> Post-Soviet political leaders have attempted to revise historical accounts of the Soviet period, and this process is far from complete. Constructing national unity requires presenting a national history without internal contradictions, and therefore these official renderings of the Soviet past often strip the historical past of its specificities and contradictions.<sup>25</sup> For example, several years ago, the president ordered the government to complete a protracted project of compiling a comprehensive history textbook for high school students. The textbook, Putin said, “should not have internal contradictions and double meanings.”<sup>26</sup> Such a textbook is yet to materialize.

Seeking to create a unified national narrative of the Soviet past, the state uses legislation to marginalize, and even criminalize, certain historical narratives about political violence committed by and in the name of the Soviet state. A notable example is a law penalizing “false information about the actions of Russia and its allies during World War Two.”<sup>27</sup> This law is aimed at limiting the public’s freedom to criticize actions undertaken by the Red Army during World War Two.<sup>28</sup> The controversial nature of the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union has recently re-emerged as a political tool in Putin’s assertions about the role of the Soviet Union in World War Two.<sup>29</sup> Along with these legislative initiatives and political statements that clearly serve the current political interests of the state, public commemorations of Soviet atrocities have been represented as unpatriotic and threatening the national unity of the new post-Soviet state.<sup>30</sup> For that reason, organizations commemorating the victims of Soviet political violence have long been under attack in the campaign for national mobilization. *Memorial*, an interregional public organization that studies the history of political repression in the Soviet Union, was labelled a “foreign agent” by Russia’s Justice Ministry. This designation is designed to stigmatize alternative views of the state policies writ large.<sup>31</sup>

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- 24 Boele/Noordenbos/Robbe (eds.), *Post-Soviet Nostalgia*; Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History*, in: *Ab Imperio* 2013/1, 269–302; James C. Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin’s Russia*, Wilmington, DE 2020.
  - 25 Boele/Noordenbos/Robbe (eds.), *Post-Soviet Nostalgia*; Alexey Miller, *Russia: Power and History*, in: *Pro Et Contra*, 13/3–4 (2009), 6–23; Elena Trubina, *Past Wars in the Russian Blogosphere: On the Emergence of Cosmopolitan Memory*, in: *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, 2010/4, 63–85.
  - 26 Sofia Samokhina, *Istoriuu Delaiut v Tsentre i Na Mestakh*, in: *Kommersant*, 29 August 2013, 2; Pearce, *Use of History*, 91–120.
  - 27 Duma Passes Bill Criminalizing Rehabilitation of Nazism, *Russia Today*, 23 April 2014, <http://rt.com/politics/154332-russia-nazi-rehabilitation-ban/> (13 August 2014).
  - 28 Petr Kozlov, *Senatori Razrabotali Alternativnii Zakon o Natsizme*, *Izvestia*, 27 June 2013, <http://izvestia.ru/news/552658> (20 August 2014); Svetlana Subbotina, *Za Opravdanie Prestuplenii Natsizma Predlagaiut Szahat Na Piat Let*, *Izvestia*, 24 June 2013, <http://izvestia.ru/news/552465> (20 August 2014).
  - 29 Andrew Roth, *Molotov-Ribbentrop: Why Is Moscow Trying to Justify Nazi Pact?*, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2019, *World News*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/23/moscow-campaign-to-justify-molotov-ribbentrop-pact-sparks-outcry> (9 February 2020).
  - 30 Tanya Lokshina, *Russia’s Growing Intolerance for Dissent*, *Human Rights Watch*, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/ru/news/2016/04/29/289351> (9 February 2020).
  - 31 *Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups*, *Human Rights Watch*, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle> (9 February 2020). *Memorial* has been liquidated in 2022 for alleged



Despite the state's unceasing attempts to monopolize and mould a unified historic narrative, the residue of the Soviet past continues to infiltrate the post-Soviet present through non-state channels and more intimate evocations of past violence. While *Memorial's* activity might be curtailed by the recent legislation, in the regions with high concentrations of Gulag prisoners, there are various non-state and informal initiatives to commemorate the victims of Stalin's terror. Thus, one finds monuments funded and raised by village residents that commemorate the victims of Stalin's repressive policies in several Siberian regions. Constructed through the collective efforts of local residents, some of these monuments are now maintained by local administrations.<sup>32</sup> Situated in the far corners of the country, they materialize the history of political violence and its effects on the different generations of local residents.<sup>33</sup>

It is this article's assertion that in Russia popular genealogy clubs provide a further institutional framework for these alternative evocations of the past. Since I first began my study, interest in genealogy has surged in Russia. A professional historian lamented that the state archive in the city is flooded with amateur genealogists, while she has a hard time securing space for her own research: "Genealogists are there, waiting to get in, like at 7:30 in the morning. If I don't come early enough, I might not find a place [...]" The head of the state archive in the city, concerned with the mistreatment of archival documents by the genealogists, echoed my friend's complaint. In the city where I conducted my research, there are now at least three different amateur genealogy clubs with approximately 600 active members. The numbers are only growing and younger generations of genealogists, who have had no personal experiences of living in the Soviet Union, having been born and raised after its fall, join the clubs in a quest for connectivity with people and places they have never encountered. Among other activities, these clubs host or visit other genealogy clubs in smaller towns in the region and host regional and national conferences dedicated to genealogical practices. In 2018, a coalition of genealogy clubs, city museums, a major information agency, ITAR-TASS, and a regional non-governmental foundation called "The 21st century's Family" won a hefty presidential grant for a project devoted to the popularization of the study of genealogy among the youth

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violations of the "Foreign Agent" Law: RFE/RL's Russian Service, Russia's Top Court Upholds Decision To Shut Down Memorial Rights Group, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 28 February 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31157842.html> (9 May 2022).

- 32 In the Siberian region of Altai: Pamiatnik Zhertvam Politicheskikh Repressii ("Kamen Skorbi") v s. Srostki [The Monument for the Victims of Political Repressions ("The Mourning Stone") in the Village of Srostki], Virtual'nyii Muzei Gulaga, <http://www.gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=267207242&language=1> (8 March 2020); Zakhoronenie rasstrel'iannykh v sele Bol'sheromanovka [The burial in the village of Bolsheromanovka], Nekropol' terrora i Gulaga, 2014, <https://mapofmemory.org/22-17> (8 March 2020); in the Siberian region of Kuzbass: Andrey Novashov, "Ne oshibki, a planomernoe unichtozhenie sobstvennogo naroda". V kuzbasskom sele sobiraiut dengi na memorial zhertvam GULAGA ["Not a mistake but a deliberate annihilation of one's nation". A Kuzbass village collecting funds to raise a monument commemorating the victims of GULAG], Sibir. Realii, 2019, <https://www.sibreal.org/a/30227238.html> (8 March 2020); in the Leningrad region: Tatiana Voltskaya, Ot Nuiry do Nuirinberga [From Nuira to Nuremberg], Novayagazeta.ru, 10 October 2016, section Society, p. Leningrad region, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/10/10/70126-ot-nyury-do-nyurnberga> (8 March 2020); in the Samara region: Anna Skorodumova, Gid: pamiatnik zhertvam stalinskogo terrora [Guide: monuments for the victims of Stalin's terror and repressive policies], Bolshaia Derevnia, 2015, <https://bigvill.ru/city/4101-gid-pamyatniki-zhertvam-stalinskogo-terrora-i-repressij/> (8 March 2020).
- 33 The Russian blogosphere is another space where new forms of memory and commemoration are exercised. See, for example, Trubina, Past Wars in the Russian Blogosphere.

and their parents. Called “My Family History”, this project is devoted to teaching middle and high school students how to conduct genealogical research.

In the context of the conflicting interpretations of the Soviet past the popularity of genealogy is better understood through what scholars who study the contested evocations of the past call “genealogical imagination”.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, modern scientific practices and European cultural metaphors are shaped by genealogical imagination.<sup>35</sup> In this cultural scheme, people are imagined both as connected to others and having distinct and autonomous identities.<sup>36</sup> Genealogical imagination offers us the position of an author who narrates his or her own experience in relation to others who are situated at varied distances from the author. Thus, through genealogical imagination, the story of a personal experience receives spatial and temporal dimensions and provides people with knowledge that both confirms their singular identity and situates them in a larger network of affiliations and kinship. When positioned on the genealogical grid, links between different dots that constitute relationships and distances between them become imbued with social and cultural meanings. These characteristics of the genealogical imagination ultimately influence both how we shape our narratives of self and our historical narratives.

The genealogical imagination, necessarily moulded by specific historical, social, and political processes, has played a profound role in post-socialist politics. In post-socialist and post-Soviet countries, socially disorienting experiences following the fall of the Berlin Wall made situating oneself on a genealogical chart an important part of both personal and collective self-understanding. In people’s efforts to reorder their worlds of meaning in the wake of drastic social changes, post-socialist politics have adopted genealogical idioms.<sup>37</sup> They played an important role in reconfiguring national imaginaries, as political actors in post-socialist countries have mobilized genealogy as a symbolic device to rewrite history and revise the pre-communist and communist historical periods.<sup>38</sup> Citizens too harnessed genealogy as a symbolic and political device. Thus, Liviu Chelcea writes about citizens in post-Communist Romania who, seeking housing restitution and retribution from the former communist state, used genealogical maps in order to make networks of kinship legible and bureaucratically verifiable to the state.<sup>39</sup> In short, with the disappearance of classificatory models, once provided by the communist state, reconstructing family stories becomes a means for making sense

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34 Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination*; Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1992; Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives*.

35 When Darwin was writing about different degrees of affinity between species, he built his theory on the widespread social ideas of his time concerning relatedness and genealogy. In twentieth-century Western culture, however, biological relatedness was conceived of as prior to social relations. In other words, social ideas about human relations were borrowed by biologists to describe nature, and, in the twentieth century, social sciences borrowed ideas from biology to make sense of human affairs. See: Strathern, *After Nature*, 17.

36 Strathern, *After Nature*; Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise*, New York/London 2005; Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives*.

37 Irina Razumova, *Rodoslovie: Semeinie Istorii Rossii*, in: Serguei Alex. Oushakine (ed.), *Semeinye Uzi: Modeli Dlia Sboriki*, 2 vols., Moscow 2004, vol. 1, 90–113; Verdery, *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*; Zdravomyslova/Tkach, *Genealogicheskii Poisk v Sovremennoi Rossii*.

38 Verdery, *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*.

39 Liviu Chelcea, *Kinship of Paper: Genealogical Charts as Bureaucratic Documents*, in: *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 39/2 (2016), 294–311, DOI: 10.1111/plar.12195.

of ruptures in social and political processes.<sup>40</sup> For amateur genealogists, delineating their belonging to ancestors grant them new identities, something that is necessary for making sense of the historical transformations in the country.<sup>41</sup>

## Genealogy and the toxicity of the past

Yet, as Russian genealogists would testify, the process of mapping out one's relations to ancestors and their political regimes is laden with toxic potential. Not unlike the fictive universe of Angela Abar in *Watchmen*, memories of and about one's family members can always potentially endanger the loved ones. The threat of toxic memories is evident in elaborate stories that my interlocutors shared with me about trying to extract information about past events from living relatives. Their accounts of collecting family stories brimmed with silences and selective recollections of the past. "Since I was a young boy, I have been interested in my family history, but my parents did not like to talk about their family roots", said a 67-year-old journalist who is at the forefront of efforts to engage middle and high school students in the genealogy enterprise:

"I asked my father but he was mostly silent about the past. [...] Later, during perestroika, I learned that my father spent ten years in prison because his father was designated a kulak and that many other family members disappeared somewhere in Kolyma [a major destination for the Gulag labour camps]."<sup>42</sup>

In the Soviet Union, Russian genealogists are quick to point out, genealogy was far from a popular hobby. While certain genealogical pursuits were welcomed and even encouraged, such as the constructed accounts of the so-called dynasties of proletarians, the pursuit of one's roots was frowned upon and considered dangerous.<sup>43</sup> At different periods of Soviet history, exposing one's origins might have had serious personal consequences. Stories about concealing information, or, conversely, courageously preserving documents or photographs

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40 Razumova, Rodoslovie: Semeinie Istorii Rossii; Irina Savkina, Rod/Dom: Semeinie Khroniki Ludmili Ulitskoi i Vasilii Aksenova, in: Oushakine (ed.), Semeinye Uzi, vol. 1, 156–182.

41 Zdravomy Slova/Tkach, Genealogicheskii Poisk v Sovremennoi Rossii.

42 Istoriia Moei Semii – Istoriia Rossii [My Family History – the History of Russia], TASS, 2018, [https://tass.ru/press/7289?fbclid=IwAR1gmF5BVjhMzG8On\\_vbfp\\_Dfi2tPXCp1EH70XZdm3LYWK42M55zRELoSZc](https://tass.ru/press/7289?fbclid=IwAR1gmF5BVjhMzG8On_vbfp_Dfi2tPXCp1EH70XZdm3LYWK42M55zRELoSZc) (1 March 2020).

43 Mikhail Elkin, Genealogiia Na Sluzhbe Obshestvu [Genealogy as a Service to Society], in: Materialy Pervoi Uralskoi Rodovedcheskoi Konferentsii (presented at the Pervaiia Uralskaiia rodovedcheskaiia nauchno-prakticheskaiia konferentsiia, Yekaterinburg, Russia, 2003), 25–29. The fact that genealogy as a hobby was not popular in the Soviet Union does not mean, however, that people in the Soviet Union were not preoccupied with their origins and with reconstructing their origins. However, the goal of the Soviet reconstruction of one's origins was to demonstrate the autobiographer's symbolic proximity to the communist symbolic genealogical grid (Marx begot Lenin, and so on). Verdery, *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*. Katerina Clark writes that as far as kinship metaphors in Soviet literature and political discourse go, during the Great Terror, these metaphors changed from horizontal, that is with an emphasis on siblings, to vertical, that is with a hierarchy of fathers (political leaders) and sons: Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Bloomington, IN 2000, 53.

that could pose a threat to one's freedom, were ubiquitous in the club meetings. Nadia, a 54-year-old enthusiastic club member from a small town, told me:

"I recently learned that my grandmother kept her father's photograph. [In the picture] he looks a lot like the Czar, and he wears an imperial army uniform. I didn't think about it [before], but I now understand how dangerous it was for my grandmother to keep that photo. It could've cost her and her family members freedom."

This reluctance to divulge information continues into the present period, as I heard many stories from amateur genealogists of their failed attempts to extract information from older relatives. One interlocutor re-enacted her dialogue with her paternal grandfather, whom she had begun to ask about his past. It went like this: "My father told me: 'Go talk to your grandpa. He remembers everything.' So, I went to see him. I said to him: 'So, tell me about your life.' He started yelling at me: 'What for? You don't need to know! Don't try to outsmart me!'" Eventually, she managed to reconstruct the fragments of his life story, which included deportations, incarceration in the Gulag, and experiences during World War Two. Each question was met by an outburst, and sometimes profanity. She was seriously concerned about causing him emotional pain but did not want to stop asking because as she said: "my curiosity overwhelmed me". When I asked her what she thought about this enduring reluctance to divulge personal information, she replied, "Sometimes people just don't want to know. Maybe they are afraid to discover a painful truth? What if their relatives were not Stalin's victims but rather were serving in his death squads? It is hard to confront these things."

Remembering the past and vocalizing it might be toxic. Authorities too often justify newly legislated restrictions to access Soviet state and party archives with similar concerns about the toxic potential of what they might reveal. In 2014, an inter-agency committee on state secrets extended until 2044 the classified designation for most documents pertaining to the Soviet security services in the years 1917–1991. When petitioned, the committee refused to declassify the archives.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, contradictory laws allow state archives to limit access to declassified documents of the victims of political repressions.<sup>45</sup> This considerably constrains ordinary individuals' and scholars' ability to research family histories from that period.

After having been petitioned by many social groups, Putin, during a recent meeting with the human rights committee, addressed the issue of access to archival documents. While agreeing with his opponents that the procedures should be liberalized, he expressed concern over unlimited access to archival documents about political repressions:

"It should be done very carefully because there are great risks in unlimited access to archives. We know how NKVD worked, and relatives won't always be pleased discovering things about their ancestors. There might be compromising information there. We should be very careful."

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44 Komissiiia Po Gostaiine Otkazalas Rassekrechivat Arkhiv NKVD [The Inter-Agency Committee Refused to Declassify the NKVD Archive], RBC, 19 January 2016, section Politika, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreeneews/569ea0d29a7947753125703> (10 February 2020).

45 Natalia Chernova, Kirpichi istorii [History's Building Blocks], Novayagazeta.ru, 13 March 2019, section Obshchestvo [Society], <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/03/13/79848-kirpichi-istorii> (10 February 2020).

Putin framed the circumscribed access to archives as an effort to protect citizens' wellbeing. Putin explained his concern: "It is impossible to determine whether a person behaved decently or was pressured to do what he did. This is why we need to be careful about this information. Otherwise, it can stigmatize people, with stigma transferring from generation to generation."<sup>46</sup>

The perceived toxicity of remembering the past has been spreading to other spheres of social life. The project aimed at generating interest in genealogical research among middle and high school students, and initiated by a group of devoted genealogists at the club where I conducted my research, has recently fallen into disfavour at the regional Ministry of Culture. In explanation of its position, the Ministry has cited the "destructive influence of the programme on young minds" and its view that "the programme propagates the idea of the state having negative effects on family and kinship".<sup>47</sup> In both cases, what transpires is that the past embodies so much toxicity that the state should take all possible precautions to safeguard its citizens from its poisonous influence. In this discourse, more knowledge about the past does not necessarily mean resolving it. To the contrary, more knowledge about it might be harmful to Russian citizens and their emotional wellbeing.

In my ethnographic explorations of Russian popular genealogy, the notion of toxicity becomes especially evident when a single-family tree is found to include both the perpetrators and the victims of Stalin's repressive policies. "On my mother's side I come from a family of NKVD officers, and from my father's side they were all Orthodox priests. Can you imagine what an explosive thing my genealogical map is? That is what prompted me to do genealogy in the first place", one of the club members told me. Victims and perpetrators as branches of the same family tree is a particularly popular trope in amateur genealogy, and it is almost always presented as the bedrock of one's psychological and emotional afflictions. The fact that perpetrators often became victims of terror over the course of time complicates the already intricate family narratives.

The violence inflicted by the Soviet state, while some members of a family execute the violence and others are its victims, not only influences practices of self-knowledge but also living relations among kin. "My grandmother was an NKVD officer", Olga told me.

"She remained a faithful Stalinist until her death. Her sister married someone who became a victim of the terror and returned from the Gulag only in 1953, after spending 15 years in the camps. My great aunt remained faithful to her husband and supported him throughout all those years. Somehow, my grandmother and her sister tried to keep in touch, despite the fact that every family gathering would end in a conflagration. I remember as a child going with my grandmother to visit my great aunt and her husband and they would inevitably start arguing and we would leave right away."

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46 Dostup k arkhivam po repressirovannym nado uprostit, schitaet Putin [Access to archives of the victims of political repressions should be simplified, Putin said], RIA Novosti, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191210/1562222385.html> (10 February 2020).

47 V Ekaterinburge priznali destruktivnym proekt "MIR – moiia istoriia roda" ["MIR – my family history" is considered destructive in Yekaterinburg], IA Krasnaia Vesna, 2020, <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/aebd5806> (22 March 2020).

In amateur genealogy, the quest for connectivity with the dead and with the living, when situated alongside the history of state violence, always has the potential to reveal disturbing details. “I was researching my family history”, Andrey, one of the youngest members of the club told me.

“I knew that my great-grandmother was Pavlik Morosov’s classmate.<sup>48</sup> Pavlik Morosov was a Soviet hero, fighting against *kulaks*. Regardless of ideology, I just felt sort of closer to real historical events when I learned about this connection, but then I discovered that some of my ancestors were *kulaks*. They were deported and suffered greatly. So, he was basically fighting against my family. I needed time to make sense of this information. I still do.”

Elena stated:

“I discovered that one of my relatives was a high-ranking NKVD officer in the Gulag prison. We knew almost nothing about him, and his wife took his story to the grave with her. I started unearthing my family history and found him. We share the same last name and now my son wants to change it because he says that it belongs to a murderer.”

Another club member, Nadia, told me in an interview:

“I come from a family of Gulag political prisoners and peasants deported during the collectivization campaign. My husband comes from a family of NKVD officers. When I started learning about it, I was concerned. Are we compatible? What kinds of trauma would our children inherit from us?”

If situating one’s familial story on a genealogical grid exposes the injurious impact of the history on personal narratives, then what makes this form of recollection soothing, as Mila explained to me in the beginning of the article? Nadia’s framing of the problem in psychological terms – “what kind of trauma would our children inherit from us?” – gives us a clue. Family narratives might bear destructive qualities and they need to be tamed. Informed by the rising therapeutic culture, despite their potential toxicity, these family narratives are perceived by many genealogists as conduits for self-knowledge and personal growth.

## Genealogy’s therapeutic effects

Imbued with the therapeutic logic, genealogy offers its followers an instrument for making sense of the individual present. Alina, a hip young woman, told me:

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48 An important Soviet political myth tells the story of a boy, Pavlik Morosov, who during the collectivization campaign denounced his own father, thus putting loyalty to the state above his loyalty to family. It is assumed that Morosov was murdered by angry relatives, thus earning for himself a place of high honour in Soviet political mythology. Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*, London 2007.



“Listen, my income is just fine – but I can never save money. I spend a lot on my children, on my family, but I can never save money. Nothing is left for myself. Especially for myself. I used to say about myself that ‘*den’gi zhgut ruki*’ [‘money burns a hole in my pocket’]. Then I started working on my family tree and what did I discover? My great-grandmother was *raskulachena*, stripped of everything, and after she managed to build a new house in exile, she was almost burned alive in it. My whole history in just one proverb.”

This a-ha moment about the links between Alina’s present problems (saving money and caring for herself) and her family history has a distinct therapeutic effect: it helps her to interpret her difficulties in the present as (over)determined by the lived experiences of her ancestors.<sup>49</sup> Commenting on his insights from working on his family tree, another club member told me: “In all of my job interviews, I always felt like I am being interrogated [by the security forces]. Then I discovered that I am a descendent of *kulaks* and Gulag prisoners. It all made sense to me.”

When I visited Elena, a thirty-something mother of two young girls, she spoke of her siblings and their complicated relations. Elena has one older and one younger sibling, who are effectively estranged from one another. Elena’s mother, many years after her husband (Elena’s father) died, re-married and moved out of their apartment, which at that time she shared with her youngest son, Peter. An arrangement was made that Peter would live in the apartment with his wife, while Elena and her older brother would be compensated for their share of the residence. This generated strife between the siblings, as the older brother, Pavel, thought that somehow the other siblings might be better compensated. The conflict weighed heavily on Elena, and as a genealogist she found an answer to Pavel’s “irrational” reaction in her family tree, in the generation that suffered through the collectivization and lost all its property during the campaign. Thus, genealogy, informed by the therapeutic discourse, turned the tension between an objectified ideal of the peaceful relationships between siblings and their here-and-now conflicts into a psychological problem that could be resolved through techniques of self-discovery and self-realization.<sup>50</sup>

More than simply narratives of self-discovery, these reconstructions of familial and political histories, imbued with therapeutic meanings, serve as a social commentary on the post-Soviet contemporary reality. In these reconstructions, family and political systems are often presented as two contradictory forces. A cultural trope with particular traction involves the newly established Soviet state as infringing on familial arrangements and relations between kin. Political violence inflicted on people and changes in social arrangements forever altered the behavioural patterns of Soviet citizens. In this psychological model, while the Soviet state is no more, the patterns constituted and solidified over several generations of Soviet families under the auspices of the state remain. To change these behavioural modes, one must first discover their origins and then modify them to fit a radically different social and cultural context.

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49 Leykin, *Rodologia*.

50 Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*, London/New York 2004; Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2008.

One of the club members, Larisa, tried to explain the model to me:

“With all the repressive policies, collectivization and then the war, many men were killed or died. Women were forced to take traditionally male roles. Reality changed but behavioural patterns remained. Today, many women can’t accept help but they also can’t say ‘no’ when asked to help others. They continue to sacrifice themselves even when it’s not necessary.”

“What about men?” I asked. She had a ready answer for that, too:

“On a genetic level, men whose ancestors in the twentieth century experienced something [political violence] believe that being a man is dangerous because the state might kill you. So, they spend their lives on the couch drinking. Women, on the other hand, don’t trust men because they unconsciously believe that something very bad might happen to them.”

I lamented the grim nature of this presentation. “It is grim”, Larisa replied. “We live in a peaceful time but our behaviours and the way we react to reality are determined by past events and by how our forebears dealt with them. Without understanding this, we cannot change ourselves.”

In these popular psychological models, the Soviet state is often identified as breaking the biological and spiritual norms of families and thus participating in the traumatic experiences that people endured during the Soviet period. However, instead of presenting their families as having been shattered by the state, people often relate tales of resilience: “My great-grandparents were stripped of their property and deported to Siberia with no money and ten small children, but they managed to rebuild their home and raise all of their children. I want to use this power of spirit in my life.”

On International Woman’s Day in 2015, I attended a club meeting on the topic of “Women in My Family”. Seated around a large table in a library, we sipped tea, munched biscuits, and swapped stories about our female family members. Nina, a particular devotee of the therapeutic powers of genealogy, would from time to time reflect on our stories, connecting them to what she knew was going on in our lives:

“Look how powerful these women were. One of your grandmothers was deported, another one saved five of her children during the war, all the while feeding soldiers. She managed to raise her children on her own. This power is in your family history. This power of kin [*sila roda*] can give you energy to go on. Make it your life force.”

Put differently, through the unlikely alliance of two cultural logics – the genealogical and the therapeutic – family histories become a sort of genealogical capital that people use to orient their actions in the present and to assuage the Soviet memory. Although purely symbolic as in this case, it does not come in the form of material wealth (for example inheritance or restitution),<sup>51</sup> this genealogical capital is used as a psychological tool and as a resource for the

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51 Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives*, 24.

reconceptualization of the past that people seek to understand and act upon. The redeeming quality of genealogy is that the toxic effects of historical cataclysms of the twentieth century are seen not as hindering but rather as propelling this understanding.

## Conclusion

Genealogy as a social practice is fundamentally about one's relations to others – both the living and the dead. It is based on knowledge constituted through research (genealogical investigations) and through the acquired experience of kinship (explorations of one's relations with others). In Russia and elsewhere, it is a quest for connectivity. Yet the direction of this connectivity and the symbolic placement of the self and its others on the genealogical grid are shaped by specific social, cultural, and political contexts. In the post-Soviet Russian case, positioning oneself and one's familiar history in relation to state power becomes an important feature of post-Soviet genealogy. The genealogical pursuit that I observed in Russia is built around attempts to revive the historical context of political violence and its entanglement with familial narratives. Of course, this involves the imaginative work of reconstructing fragmentary stories and memories, as well as affording certain social ties particular attention while downplaying others. In this process, dominant interpretations of history gain new meanings and familial narratives achieve temporal and spatial depth.

The article has shown that in the process of practicing amateur genealogy, the meanings and effects of the Soviet past on existing intergenerational ties and on the future generations of Russian citizens are renegotiated and rearticulated. Post-Soviet amateur genealogy both shapes and is shaped by post-Soviet commemorative politics. It uses genealogical idioms to revise and renegotiate the Soviet past. The genealogical imagination does not only facilitate the revisiting of historical narratives but also supports the crafting of these histories, installing them with lived experiences of real families. Amateur genealogy offers a frame of recollection, which permits reflection upon contradictory historical narratives about the Soviet past circulating in contemporary Russia.

Although laden with potential toxicity, the practices of amateur genealogy are transformed into a psychological tool that serves to temporally and spatially situate the sense of self on the genealogical grid. The therapeutic discourse that informs the practices of amateur genealogy in post-Soviet Russia transforms genealogy into a psychological device for appeasing the frantic memory of the Soviet past. Positioning oneself on the historically grounded genealogical grid, surrounded by a web of kin, ensures both a distinctive path for development and self-growth and a sense of inclusion in a larger historical community. It is by virtue of its transformative potential that genealogy has become a balm for the post-Soviet memory.