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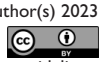

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Beyond denial: Justifications of mass violence as an agenda for memory studies

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 challenges memory studies to analyze transmissions of discourses which justify mass violence and challenge the focus on denial. On the one hand, the Russian regime's claim to undertake "denazification" and prevent a "genocide" expounds the seminal role of cultural memory in politics. The weaponization of history, international law, and religion is widely accepted in Russian society and by global populisms. On the other hand, the invasion came as a surprise even to many experts because in politics, media, and research, justifications of mass violence are often dismissed as pretexts distracting from facts. Yet, the dismissal entails a major lacuna: we know too little about how justifications travel through societies and have a long-term impact. The article proposes that while *acts* of mass violence alter political and socio-economic realities, *justifications* of mass violence establish the linguistic and heuristic parameter for their subsequent juridical, moral, and scholarly evaluation. Normalizations of justifications contribute to perpetuating societal fault lines and set the frame for further conflict. The memory studies focus on transgenerational transmissions of psycho-social sequalae of violence laid the groundwork for understanding *longue durée* transmissions. However, memory studies have focused on denial as a key psychological and political driving force of transmissions, while, for instance, Russian and Serbian memory cultures are shaped by both denial and outright affirmations—not-even-denial—of past mass violence as model for present politics. Memory studies provide the appropriate conceptual space as a framework for addressing implicit normalizations and explicit affirmations of justifications of mass violence.

Keywords

denial, genocide, justification, mass violence

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Introduction

This article proposes the inquiry into *longue durée* transmission of discourses that justify mass violence should be an agenda for the field of memory studies. The agenda builds on the current memory studies focus on global, transnational (Sierp, 2021: 9), and transgenerational aftermaths of violence. Yet, the 2022 invasion Russian of Ukraine, with its glaring instrumentalization of the cultural memory of the Shoah and World War II, propels memory studies into a new moment as it challenges the focus on denial as the driving force of destructive memory policies and practices. While denial is undoubtedly an important dynamic, the field of memory studies is challenged to analyze how it relates to the explicit approval and implicit normalization of justifications that render past mass violence a model for present politics. Such discourses of approval and justification have become pervasive particularly in societies under authoritarian rule and in extreme populisms around the globe.

This article outlines a multidisciplinary theoretical framework for analyzing how justifications of mass violence are transmitted between conflicts. Furthermore, it proposes such analysis as a promising direction for future memory studies. It does so on the basis of four key hypotheses: that justifications for mass violence appeal to different audience groups; that sanctions and actors criticizing acts of mass violence often unwittingly adopt justifications; that the authority of cultural and/or religious canons is invoked to appeal to societal common sense, thereby normalizing mass violence; and that justifications invoking history re-interpret the past to act, for instance, as utopian models for present agendas or as revenge narratives. The article is not based on a single case study but references different conflicts to point out current research lacunas in the understanding of these four dimensions of justifications and their transmission. These lacunas cannot be closed by one case study alone because understanding *longue durée* transmissions requires analyses of different conflicts and their particular historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. We believe that the multidisciplinary field of memory studies is best equipped to understand justifications of mass violence and the processes of their transmission as this requires scrutiny of material facts, speech acts, and underlying psycho-social dynamics. These are studied in a broad range of disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, including history, sociology, political sciences, psychology, and literary criticism.

Justification is an umbrella term subsuming divergent speech acts which have in common that they seek to make mass violence appear "just." They include moral vindications, juridical legitimizations, political propaganda, praises of superiority, populist incitements, conspiracy myths, military orders, downplaying, and screen memory narratives. These speech acts follow different rhetorical strategies—such as "justificationalism," that is, outright assertions of rightfulness (Ihrig, 2016: 6), neutralization (Anderson, 2017), denial (Schmidt, 2017), or rationalization (Mohamed, 2015)—but they all serve one aim: making perpetration seem right; deplorable but unavoidable. Morally and legally unacceptable as justifications of mass violence are, brushing them aside as empty pretexts undermines understanding the social function of justificatory discourses. This point has recently been made in relation to "justifications of war," which often form the backdrop of mass violence: they "are more than 'cheap talk' without normative meaning. Even propaganda refers to an audience which constitutes itself around certain normative expectations" (Brock and Simon, 2021: 523). The justifications given by the Russian regime for invading Ukraine in 2022 address the normative expectation of being on the morally right side, which is informed by the cultural memory of victory in World War II. It is well known that the cultural memory of conflicts is prone to be instrumentalized for current political agendas (Stone, 2010), notably "to construct national or ethnic identities" (Gerlach, 2010: 258). Nevertheless, justifications of mass violence that repeatedly draw on cultural memory have played a seminal role in the 2022 Russian invasion

of Ukraine. They present a challenge to research, politics, and publics as they operate by both denial and outright approval of perpetrating violence.

Memory studies are well-equipped to take on the challenge of understanding the aims and impact of this violent language. The field has developed the methods and concepts to analyze how the cultural memory of mass violence has repeatedly been instrumentalized for problematic agendas, notably through strategies and policies of repression in denial. As Berger and Olick (2020; cf. Olick, 2007: 176–192) have recently shown, the formation of cultural memory must, therefore, itself be historicized. The current outright approval of mass violence is an incentive to widen the scope of memory studies beyond their critical examination of denial, which has been the mainstay of our current understanding about how psycho-social sequelae of perpetration inform future conflict. Justifications of mass violence have certainly not escaped research in the past. However, the present moment requires a more refined approach.

The article proceeds in four steps: it will outline, first, the historical moment that prompts the agenda we propose; second, how justifications have been explored so far and which questions remain pressing; third, recent methodological innovations that can address this lacuna, and finally, the insights this agenda promises to yield.

A new historical moment and the return of history

Mass violence is by scope, intensity, and complexity the most extreme form of conflict. It is occurring on an alarming scale in the twenty-first century in, for instance, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, and is likely to surge because of conflicts induced by the climate crisis in the future (Akçam et al., 2021). Perpetrated by groups of people in and outside war, mass violence comprises killings and other forms of violence that aim at exterminating large groups of civilians. It includes expulsion, enforced hunger, forced labor, collective rape, and strategic bombing (Gerlach, 2010: 1). The impact of mass violence is grave: during the twentieth century, between 60 and 150 million civilians died in mass killings alone, while approximately 34 million combatants died in international and civil wars during the same period (Valentino, 2004: 1). But how is it possible that large groups of people commit mass violence against civilians time and again, when such acts seem impossible to justify?

Since the Holocaust, a vast array of social sciences and humanities research, including memory studies, has explored political, economic, and psycho-social dynamics that foster mass violence as well as strategies for prevention and sanctioning, including memorialization. However, the seminal role that justifications of mass violence, given by regimes, play in eliciting societal support still appears to be underestimated in the wider societal and academic perception. This, at least, is what the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine suggests. As justifications for the invasion, the Russian regime has claimed to "denazify" Ukraine (Putin, 2022a), to prevent a "genocide" of Russians in Ukraine (Putin, 2022b), and to be in a "metaphysical" war with the West (Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow, 2022a, 2022b). Already before the invasion, Vladimir Putin (2021) referenced the medieval Kievan Rus' to justify Russia's claim to dominion over Ukraine. On the one hand, the uncanny "return of history" (Welsh, 2016) in these references is unsurprising from a memory studies perspective; after all, the weaponization of history, international law (notably the term *genocide*), and religion, that is widely adopted by anti-democratic populisms around the world, both rests upon and expounds the importance of cultural memory in politics. On the other hand, the invasion still came as a surprise even to many experts because in politics, media, and research, justifications of mass violence are often dismissed as pretexts distracting from facts.

This dismissal is understandable, given that mass violence cannot be morally or legally just, yet it entails a major knowledge gap: we know too little about how justifications travel through

societies to elicit support for the perpetration of mass violence and what their long-term impact is. Both aspects are prominent in the justifications presented by the Russian regime in 2022. Their rationale is both to legitimize the present violence and to set the memorial record straight. In an 8 April 2022 interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Sergey Karaganov—political scientist, head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, and prime author of the claim that Russians abroad were in danger of being annihilated, the so-called Karaganov doctrine—linked Russia's war against Ukraine to Russia's humiliation after the fall of the Soviet Union, calling the post-Communist world order "a Versailles system number 2" (Karaganov and Fubini, 2022: π11). This is to say that as a victor of the Great Patriotic War against National Socialist Germany, Russia deserves a role as leader in the present world order. Karaganov's argument harps on the historiographical hypothesis that the humiliation of Germany after World War I in the Treaty of Versailles spurred National Socialism and World War II. The Russian regime thus evokes contrasting dimensions of the cultural memory of World War II, casting current Russia in the role of both humiliated Germany and its Soviet adversary. The incoherence of the justifications of the war against Ukraine has puzzled audiences, notably in the West. It is often brushed aside by considering these justifications as empty pretexts distracting from manifest material and/or geostrategic agendas. While such agendas often underly mass violence, they cannot explain what motivates large parts of a population to participate in, abet, or tolerate atrocities. And broad societal support is necessary, given that mass violence perpetration is "a far-reaching social project" that "requires ideological justification" to encompass diverse actors and motives (Üngör and Anderson, 2020: 8–11). This is the societal role of the divergent justifications given by the Russian regime to invade Ukraine in 2022.

The field of memory studies is well-equipped to highlight the seminal role justifications play and bring them to a better understanding in the wider academic and societal discourse. This is especially true for a challenging element of recent justifications brought forward by the Russian regime: the outright approval—not-even-denial—of perpetration. The oftentimes "shockingly explicit" (Noordenbos, 2022: 1299) statements of violent intent that operate beyond denial and other forms of "non-memory" (Sendyka, 2022) pose one of the crucial "challenges for memory studies" (Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022) that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine entails.

During the last decades, memory studies have focused on denial as a key psychological and political driving force of the long-term, transgenerational impact of trauma and perpetration. "Denial continues to perpetuate the justifications of past violence and thus the harm to victims" (Payne, 2020: 132) since it leaves them unaddressed. For "[i]f a community has to recognize that its members, instead of being heroes, have been perpetrators who violated the premises of their own identity," it can cope with this dissonance "only by a collective schizophrenia, by denial, by decoupling or withdrawal" (Giesen, 2004: 114). Denial entails impunity, a generalized "numbing towards violence" (Schwab, 2020: 226), and has the potential to feed into "(cycles of) revenge" (Üngör, 2012: 78) as it shapes discursive rules about what can and cannot be said, which are transmitted to descendants (Eaglestone, 2017: 9–27). Denial often clears the way for recalling a more "useable past" (Adler and Weiss-Wendt, 2021: 1) as, for instance, in the case of "the undoing of the past" in post-1945 Western Germany that "de-realized" the Nazi era and replaced it by the narrative of heroic reconstruction and the identification with the United States (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975: 28). Similarly, the current use of the Russian cultural memory of World War II to justify the war against Ukraine relies on "the repressed memory of repression" (Adler and Weiss-Wendt, 2021: 4) in Stalinism, which would contradict the narrative of past greatness. Therefore, denial is a starting point for understanding even speech acts that do not negate but affirm mass violence and seek to justify it.

However, despite this substantial explanatory potency, denial does not allow us to address two important dimensions of the transmission of justifications of mass violence. First, denial appears

to present a harsh contrast to current memory cultures in, for instance, Russia and Serbia (Adler, 2012), that are decisively shaped by *both* denial *and* outright affirmations—a not-even-denial—of past mass violence as model for present politics. Given its fundamental importance, the concept of denial must remain meaningful and should, therefore, not be extended to include explicit affirmations of perpetration. Second, the concept of denial does not fully explain many implicit normalizations of justifications of mass violence that can be found even in critical approaches. Reproducing justifications is not confined to perpetrating parties because they often become widely accepted. A prominent example of such a problematic transmission of justificatory terminology is the concept of "ethnic cleansing" (*etničko čišćenje*), used to describe and justify mass violence during the 1990s Bosnian War, which circulates globally as a supposed mere descriptor but normalizes the highly problematic idea of ethnic purity (Petrović, 2019a, 2019b).

The field of memory studies is well-prepared to develop a framework for addressing implicit normalizations and explicit affirmations of justifications because both contribute to the persistence of mass violence. Analyzing this impact requires understanding the long-term persistence of justifications and their transmissions in societies. To align this proposed inquiry with previous research in the social sciences and humanities, we hypothesize that *acts* of mass violence alter the political, geo-strategic, and socioeconomic realities inhabited by surviving victims, perpetrators, accomplices, and descendants while *justifications* of mass violence establish the linguistic and heuristic parameter for their subsequent juridical, moral, and scholarly evaluation. Justifications of mass violence, therefore, contribute to perpetuating societal fault lines and set the frame for further conflict. In other words, justifications of mass violence are transmitted from one conflict to another not only by way of intentional adoption, but also due to the implicit normalization of distinctions and ideas such as, for instance, the purity implied in "ethnic cleansing." Understanding these intersecting processes is an agenda for a whole interdisciplinary field because it requires scrutiny of many cases from different historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts to establish the alleys of transmissions.

The research question: transmissions of justifications

Justifications of mass violence have, so far, been studied primarily from a legal perspective which distinguishes between justifications arguing that acts are not wrong, and excuses contesting accountability (Hankel, 2008: 209). Memory studies must take account of legal approaches in analyzing justifications of mass violence because legal perspectives dominate the academic as well as political understanding of mass violence—with good reason: perpetrators ought to be held accountable for exerting violent acts and even for inciting violence in speech acts (Wilson, 2017). Societies increasingly seek to come to terms with violent pasts and possibilities of reparation by way of memory laws (Barkan and Lang, 2022). Moreover, justifications of mass violence are often proffered after the fact in court. In a criminological approach, Anderson (2018: 173) lists key rhetorical strategies of justifications: those that aim at a "reversal of morality," "appeal to higher authority, denial of the victim," and "denial of humanity." Excuses that aim at the "reduction of moral cost" involve denial of responsibility, injury, or autonomy, and make claim to normality, inevitability, relative acceptability, or inner opposition. Legal responses to mass violence are indispensable because impunity corrodes states and leads societies into anomie. However, their prominence in research is problematic (Petrović, 2022) because "the logic of criminal law attributes mass violence to a small number of individuals. Structural conditions and organizational contexts are underappreciated" (Savelsberg, 2015: 267). The law's methodological individualism is often adopted in the interdisciplinary field of perpetrator studies. This is problematic from the perspective of memory studies because isolating justifications from the broader societal discourse

overlooks three aspects that are irrelevant in the law, but seminal to cultural memory. Addressing these aspects harbors a set of challenges that make studying the transmission of justificatory discourses an agenda for the field of memory studies, rather than a task for an individual researcher or one case study paper.

First, perpetrators speak to a heterogeneous audience that comprises diverse actors who are driven by divergent motives. Therefore, they often present varying justifications rather than one definitive account (Anderson, 2020). Justifications easily appear incoherent, as in the case of those brought forward by Russian state officials and the Russian Orthodox Church in 2022. Different terms and narratives appeal to different audiences, that is, to diverse domestic actors, so as to elicit support for, tolerance of, or at least indifference to the exerted violence. Therefore, the Russian Orthodox Church—an institution thoroughly irreconcilable with the Soviet master narrative that still dominates the Russian memory of World War II—plays a coequal role in justifying the war. Other justificatory narratives, such as Putin's claim to prevent a genocide of Russians, appeal to the international community with the aim to threaten countries and regions into approval, or at least abstention. The seemingly "contingent mix of ideological and pragmatic motives" (Üngör, 2021: 69) testifies to the audience-tuning of justifications of mass violence. Taking the address of a heterogeneous audience into account adds complexity to the analysis of justifications which have, so far, been heuristically divided into two basic legal categories: "post facto rationalizations" and "pre-perpetration authorization" (Üngör, 2021: 58).

Categorizing justifications according to a broader set of recurrent rhetorical strategies can help to analyze and compare justifications. This, however, has to move beyond the legal sphere so as to widen the outlook from justifications given after the fact (in court) toward scrutinizing justifications offered before and during the fact (for instance, in propaganda). Thus, Etkind (2013: 117) proposes "four genocidal tropes" used by the Russian regime since 2022 to justify mass violence in Ukraine: presenting the captured land as empty, describing the violence as response to a threat, distorting memory of the pre-history of the conflict, and "stretching the perceived difference" between populations and states toward full irreconcilability. Testing these tropes against a wider corpus of justifications is a task for future research, which also has to consider what makes them intellectually, morally, and emotionally appealing to different audience groups. Inquiring into this appeal leads to a second dimension unaccounted for in legal approaches to justifications.

A second point is that perpetrators are themselves recipients of societal discourse. The fact that, in the period from 1914 to 1950, "justifications for genocide are remarkably similar in different national and cultural contexts" (Üngör, 2021: 74) suggests that perpetrators listen to the justifications of other perpetrators. This pertains not only to contemporaneous acts of mass violence, but even more so to previous events as "collective memory is essential for mobilizing perpetrators" (Stone, 2010: 111). Karaganov's above-cited justification of the 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine not only refers to the Russian cultural memory of World War II and the end of the Soviet Union, but also the international historiography of World War I. In a key strategy of audience-tuning, justifications often invoke the authority of cultural canons to appeal to a society's common sense so as to normalize mass violence. This entails the spatial dissemination and temporal transmission of justifications for mass violence between conflicts that are usually regarded as separate. A case in point is "the demonstrable influence of the US Plain Wars and Native policies upon Hitler and the core Nazi leadership" in their war of annihilation in Europe's East (Jones, 2021: 52). Accounting for the spatial dissemination and temporal transmission of justifications of mass violence substantially widens the scope of discourses that need to be scrutinized. Such discourses may exhibit no criminal intent, but can be relevant due to their reception history and representational logic. One such example is the romanticizing portrayal of North American colonization in literature and popular culture, which provided a model for the Nazis (Jones, 2021: 52). As McGlothlin

(2021: 8–31) has recently shown, the intersection of juridical discourses with quite different genres must be considered even when studying the accounts of individual Shoah perpetrators. Such accounts are shaped by an exchange of narrative patterns between the genres of juridical investigation, detective story, and religious confession, all of which aspire to presenting a sense of closure, and with it relief, for the reader. As in this example, memory studies can demonstrate the ways in which transmissions of justifications require the analysis of both the formal and the referential dimension of discourses.

What adds to the complexity of analyzing transmissions of justifications for mass violence between conflicts is that "memories travel around our global cultural landscape" (Sanyal, 2015: 7) and not solely in modern media. Justificatory references to the Bible and its ancient Near Eastern as well as Roman contexts established *longue durée* links between conflicts and regions long before the modern era (Van Ruiten and Van Bekkum, 2020). And references to religion in justifications of mass violence are no matter of the past; the so-called Islamic State (IS) has justified its mass violence as revenge for medieval Christian crusades against Islamic rule (IS, 2014). While seemingly connecting to a deep history, this historical reference is, in fact, quite modern.

> *It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the terms harb al-salib (the war of the cross) and al-salibiyyun (crusaders) entered the Arabic lexicon and, even then, only through an appropriation of European terms [. . .] in response to an [. . .] expansionist Europe who now threatened the sovereignty [. . .] of the Ottoman empire. (*Awan, 2020)

References to religious texts and practices in justifications of mass violence invoke the authority of higher power and ancient wisdom. They are attractive points of reference for later justifications—and can pose a moral challenge to research—because while physical violence is regulated in any given society (Thiersch et al., 1994: 4), often with an ingroup/outgroup-distinction, mass violence has not always been viewed as transgression. Assyrian (Fuchs, 2011) and Roman (Baker, 2021) siege warfare, when met with resistance, regularly employed mass violence, especially against women and children (Markl, 2018b). In several ancient cultures, deeds of extreme violence were displayed in the media of imperial propaganda (e.g. see Zimmermann, 2009). Evaluating the pervasive justificatory references to cultural canons and deep history requires expertise that goes beyond that of any individual researcher, in order to account for the ways that justifications of mass violence travel between periods, discourses, and genres. In the modern world, law, politics, and popular media are interlinked, while the relation between politics and religion is disputed. In past epochs, religion, politics, and the law were closely related while the modern distinction between (factual) historiography, (fictional) literature, and religious texts (as referring to the transcendental) is inappropriate for many historical sources. Tracing transmissions of justifications between conflicts requires wide cultural, linguistic, historical, and methodological expertise to untangle the historicization and pragmatics of cultural memory references in justifications for mass violence—such as the IS adoption of the crusades and Putin's claim to the Kievan Rus', that is, the projection of identificatory narratives into the past, which must not be mistaken for historical accuracy, and the communicative purpose of the projection in the present (Markl, 2018a).

A third point that remains unaddressed in a primarily legal approach is that justifications of mass violence still circulate even after individual culprits have been brought to justice. "Nationalist discourses, myths and rumors" have proven to be "conducive to violence" (Leader Maynard, 2015: 71), and these forms of "violent language" (Baele, 2019: 706) are unlikely to vanish even after juridical intervention—not despite, but largely because of the dynamics of denial. Persistent justificatory discourses can be expected to contribute to the retrospective interpretation and memorialization of acts of mass violence when collectives construct a meaning from the perspective of

perpetrators, accomplices, and descendants—be it in explicit approval or implicit normalization. Welzer et al. (2002: 161; our translation) have outlined one such instance of the "transmission of topoi and patterns of interpretation" as "self-evident certainties": for the German public, Holocaust memory often features a strict distinction between Germans and Jews, and thus perpetuates the Nazi claim "that 'Jews' and 'Germans' represent two profoundly different groups of people, which can be interpreted as a posthumous victory of the National Socialist persecution and extermination policy."

The lasting impact of justifications calls for a more complex approach to agency that transcends the legal paradigm (Wüstenberg, 2020). The analysis of the societal circulation of justificatory discourses before, during, and after the fact is complex and broad in scope. Furthermore, and adding further ambivalence to the field of analysis, is the fact that the very areas of societal communication that spread justifications of mass violence are also those most capable of inspiring critique and resistance, namely, historiography, literature, public memory, popular media, and religion. It takes a whole field to scrutinize this scope, and the field of memory studies is particularly apt for this task since its focus on denial has rendered it well-versed in addressing ambivalences.

A further profound challenge is presented by terminology. The inquiry into the genres and dynamics that transmit justificatory discourses must include a critical reflection of research terminology as it may unwittingly contribute to implicit normalization. A far-reaching example of a problematic transmission of justificatory discourse concerns the term *genocide*—a seminal element of the Russian regime's justifications of the war against Ukraine—owing to its ethnopolitical implication. Genocide was defined by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly as crime "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group" (UN, 1948, Art. 2). In its etymology and definition, the concept of genocide perpetuates the question of whether a victimized group is a *gens*. Ethnicity is construed as an ontological status rather than as the result of identificatory discourses which are often at the core of disputes that incite mass violence. The concept of genocide has, therefore, been criticized as resulting in an "ethnization of history" (Gerlach, 2010: 255). It tends to cast victims as "representatives of a (perpetrator-defined) group" (Stone, 2010: 113) rather than as individuals of possibly quite different self-conceptions. It thus adopts, rather than analyses, heuristics legitimizing perpetration. Challenging the concept of genocide, Moses (2021) concludes,

> When politics is imagined in sectarian terms, as ethnic struggle, we are inhabiting the mental world of genocide rather than thinking beyond it. Another problem of genocide, then, is its participation in the discursive construction of identity-based violence against civilians. (p. 12)

The adoption of the ethnopolitical logic of perpetration in the concept of genocide cannot appropriately be described as denial. It, rather, illustrates the problem of the mimetic participation of criticism in what it is criticizing (Prade-Weiss et al., 2023). Adopting a descriptive concept, such as mass violence, "systematic murder of noncombatants" (Valentino, 2004: 10), or "one-sided violence" (Eck and Hultman, 2007), in lieu of *genocide* is one necessary step in inquiring into the linguistic dynamics by which the meaning of these acts is constructed, negotiated, and transmitted to different contexts. Yet, taking on a different terminology alone is insufficient for "thinking beyond" the heuristic and linguistic frame established by justifications of acts of mass violence because it does not contribute to understanding the dynamics of their implicit normalization. To the extent that concepts are "discursive construction[s]" (Moses, 2021: 12), any attempt to think "beyond" one of them must face the difficult structure of discourses, that is, of the not necessarily coherent systems of terminologies, narratives, and heuristics that serve to construct something as meaningful and, thereby, generate power. "Where there is power," Foucault (1978)

writes, "there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (p. 95). That the legislation prohibiting genocide incorporates the ethnopolitical logic of the crime it sanctions is a striking case in point. It is a consequence of the political dispute over *one* issue in which all parties share. Analyzing these complexities in memory studies calls for acknowledging the issue that the participatory logic of discursive constructions does not allow researchers to adopt a complacent position that claims to be untouched by the involvements of which others are accused. The participatory logic of discourses does, however, allow for a genealogical critique, that is to say for an approach to justifications of mass violence interested in understanding how their arguments "came to be *acceptable as* legitimate" to some audiences (Knittel, 2019: 178). This is the interest of studying justifications of mass violence in transmission.

The theoretical frame: conceptual foundations and innovations

A combination of concepts of memory studies and conceptual innovations in the social sciences and humanities at large allows to approach transmissions of justificatory discourses despite the outlined challenges. They pertain to the role of ideology, the assessment of complicity, and understanding the transgenerational transmission of the psycho-social aftermaths of violence.

Inquiring into justifications of mass violence inevitably leads to the difficult question of the role of ideology, which has been discussed as either over- or underrated (McDoom, 2021: 20–22). Critics have argued that the tendency "to overemphasize the role of narrow political ideology" has led to a misleading distinction between "'ideological genocides'" such as the Shoah and "supposedly utilitarian genocides," ignoring practical and ideological factors, respectively (Bloxham and Moses, 2010: 4). Recent re-conceptualizations of ideology move beyond the binarity of "ideological and pragmatic" (Üngör, 2021: 69), thus also doing away with the issue that the internalization of ideologies is notoriously difficult to prove. Leader Maynard (2022) suggests that "deep convictions are not necessary" (p. 109) for ideological language to induce effects. "Ideologies are crucial" as they shape how violence "is perceived and understood in times of crisis" by providing "justificatory narratives" (p. 63). Importantly, "such narratives are not merely by-products or rationalizations of other 'deeper' motives or causes" (pp. 63–64) but provide an infrastructure for diverse actors to collaborate and are thus key to inciting mass violence. "Justifications of the violence capitalize on arguments, norms, and institutions that are familiar" (p. 101), such as security, which makes it possible for them to become widely accepted norms. This political science approach to ideology as infrastructure in the causation of mass violence can also be adopted in memory studies because it does not isolate ideology as a hard-wired set of outlandish beliefs from the surrounding societal discourses. This makes it possible to address implicit normalizations and explicit affirmations of justifications of mass violence after the fact.

Widening the outlook onto justifications of mass violence from individual perpetrator speech in a juridical setting to its explicit and implicit transmission in societal discourse unavoidably touches upon the issue of complicity—both in acts of mass violence and in commemoration. As a legal term, complicity describes the way a crime is committed, namely by aiding or abetting wrongdoing. Complicity poses a challenge to the law as it undermines the principles of individual accountability and autonomous action. Dependent on the actions of a principal wrongdoer, the accomplice is still autonomous insofar as aiding or tolerating wrongdoing makes a difference (Dupuy, 2016: vii). Accountability is based on individual intentionality, which creates difficulties in current corporate and international law since corporate and state complicity with human rights infringement often evades sanctioning as corporations and states are not understood to have intentions. This, paradoxically, renders them actors without intent (Dupuy, 2016: viii). Complicity marks the limits

of legal discourse by pointing beyond the law's methodological individualism to fundamental structures of social relationality (Prade-Weiss, 2022: 4–5).

The complications complicity presents in legal discourse are what render the concept productive in memory studies approaches to problematic participation in both acts of mass violence and the transmission of its justification. Rothberg (2019), however, points out the moralizing overtones in the concept of complicity and thus proposes to replace it by that of "implication" to evade the temptation of a stance of "narcissism [. . .] that keeps the privileged subject at the center of analysis" (p. 19). Yet, even this temptation marks what is at stake in complicity: how to evaluate individual participation in communal structures and relational dynamics. Language, the principal medium of human interaction, is a good model for understanding them, because individually responsibly speakers still cannot but make use of pre-established, conventionalized semantic, phonetic, and syntactical structures. It can be worthwhile to retain the concept of complicity as a marker for complexity and enmeshment that evades straightforward legal culpability. Mihai (2022) points out that "selective political remembering" (p. 9), that is, pinning guilt to a few demonized perpetrators, and glorifying a set of resistance heroes, is detrimental to societies. With such mnemonic individualism, "the 'nation' or the 'people'" are collectively "absolved of historical responsibility," and "the community's hermeneutical space" remains numbed toward injustices, which entails "reproducing the very widespread practices and relationships of exclusion—economic, political, cultural—that led to violence in the first place" (Mihai 2022: 23). In Romania, for instance, widespread participation in the Ceausescu regime has been "sidelined" (Mihai 2022: 137) as public memory demonized a few individual perpetrators and declared the population a victim of Communism as "an occupational regime" (p. 139). An absolving selective memory that perpetuates patterns of violence is crucial also to the Russian "repressed memory of repression" (Adler and Weiss-Wendt, 2021: 4) in Stalinism, which permeates the Russian regime's justifications for the war against Ukraine. To counter such transmissions, Mihai (2022: 9) proposes that social practices of "mnemonic care" need to account for the diversity and ambivalence of motives for people to participate in, and participate in justifying, mass violence.

The focus on transgenerational transmissions of trauma (Aarons and Berger, 2017; Danieli, 1998; Salberg, 2017) and psycho-social aftermaths of perpetration that shapes recent memory studies has laid the groundwork for understanding *longue durée* transmissions of justifications. Of key importance is the link of individual pathologies to the family setting as a "remembering context" (Coates, 2012: 123) and to communal socio-political practices of commemoration. In this view, denial plays a critical role since the repression and denial of perpetration and complicity become manifest in "gaps in or deformations of language: incoherences, discontinuities, disruptions, and the disintegration of meaning or grammar or semantic and rhetorical coherence" (Schwab, 2010). This makes the point that what shapes subsequent evaluations of mass violence and transmits justificatory heuristics are omissions in discourse as much as explicit terms and narratives. Disorganizations of language play a crucial part particularly in family settings because this is where speech and forms of interpersonal engagement (Salberg, 2017) are usually acquired, and where individual experience of members of older generations is negotiated in the terms and conventions of collective memory to form a sense of self and personal identity. Therefore, the transgenerational effects of denial can result in a public/private "cycle of violence" (Benjamin and Fourie, 2020; Berckmoes, 2022). One dynamic that links denial to the implicit normalization and explicit affirmation of discourses justifying mass violence is a split between public and private that exceeds their functional differentiation even to the point of contradiction. Educative and media efforts in Germany have not only produced knowledge about the Nazi past in third-generation descendants, but also engendered the need to distance family narratives from that historiography, with the effect that "empty talk" about a collective guilt co-exists in parallel with a "cumulative heroization" of

individual ancestors (Welzer et al., 2001: 64–159; our translation). Such tensions between public memory culture and family narratives become particularly challenging in the "generation of postmemory," when the representation of acts of mass violence is "no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems" (Hirsch, 2008: 110).

Key to understanding the implicit normalization and explicit affirmations of justifications of mass violence is recent criticism of the understanding of transgenerational transmissions of trauma and perpetration. Transgenerational transmission is commonly understood as anachronistically importing psycho-social aftermaths of past violence into a present that is profoundly different from that past because terror regimes have ended. Yet, political and socioeconomical realities often remain unchanged even after the demise of terror regimes, as Gobodo-Madikizela (2021) points out with reference to post-apartheid South Africa. She is critical of the imagery of the undead that dominates discourses on transgenerational transmissions, notably in the terms "haunting legacies" (Schwab, 2010), "crypt," and "phantom" (Abraham and Torok, 1994). Gobodo-Madikizela (2021) objects that "in South Africa at least, we are dealing with continuities of the past rather than its return" (p. 23). Rather than being dead, the traumatic past often continues to inform the present of commemoration (Fox, 2022). Especially from a non-western point of view, understanding the transgenerational transmission of psycho-social sequelae of mass violence is necessary because the violence inducing them is not strictly past but continues to inform private and state practices and discourses of violence.

Three intersecting concepts of memory studies provide the methodological groundwork for comprehending such continuities. First, "implicit collective memory" (Erll, 2022), that is, assumptions that underly a collective's cultural memory, but which are rarely reflected upon and which are often implicit in their forms and media, such as narrative patterns. Implicit cultural memory allows us to address the issue of implicit normalization of justifications of mass violence. It also enables us to address appeals to common sense that weaponize familiar memorial forms. One example of this is Putin's use of "the narrative template of Russian victimhood" (Wertsch in Erll, 2022: 6), a narrative pattern that pre-dates the cold war. Second and third, the concepts of "remediation" and "premediation" enable the telescoping of justifications to trace transmissions of discourse. "Remediation" captures the fact that key events are "represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media." This repeated representation results in "premediation," such that "media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for new experience and its representation" (Erll, 2009: 111). What structures the commemoration of past events and informs the understanding of subsequent events is "a canon of existent medial constructions," notably "the narratives, images and myths circulating in a memory culture" (Erll, 2009: 111). Their sources may originate in "remote cultural spheres" (Erll, 2009: 111), such as the Bible and texts of classical antiquity, which have been remediated over centuries in diverse contexts and have thus provided schemata for the interpretation of much later events. This prompts one of the three structural insights the proposed agenda promises to yield for the field, which will be pointed out in a last step: transmissions undermine the heuristic temporal distinction between before and after.

Insights to be gained

The proposed agenda for analyzing the transmissions of terms, narratives, and heuristics that seek to justify mass violence promises to yield three insights relevant to the field of memory studies. They all hinge on the unique contribution of memory studies to understanding justifications of mass violence: widening the focus from individual perpetrator speech in a juridical setting to the circulation of societal discourses in heterogeneous genres.

The first potential insight pertains to temporality. Juridical discourses as well as historiographical and literary narratives operate based on an implicit timeline of before, during, and after the fact. This heuristic temporality is as fundamental to evaluating actor intent, which constitutes legal culpability, as to structuring the presentation of historical causality and responsibility. However, transmissions of justifications of acts of mass violence undermine this temporality. On the one hand, justifications set the frame for the subsequent evaluation of mass violence and perpetuate societal fault lines into the *future*, thus linking past and future conflict. A striking case in point is Klemperer's (2013: 1) analysis of National Socialist idiom which points out a terminological continuity of notions of "cleansing" in concepts such as "denazificaion." On the other hand, justifications of mass violence often refer to authoritative texts and to cultural trauma, and thus retrospectively shape a continuous *pre-history* of conflicts to legitimize violence. Thus, Putin refers to the medieval Kievan Rus' to justify Russian dominion over Ukraine. This suggests that justificatory discourses about present acts of mass violence are nodal points of the re-negotiation of deep history. Owing to reinterpretations, the Russian Orthodox Church—historically one of the first targets of Stalinist mass violence (Etkind, 2013: 5)—presently participates in the Russian regime's narrative of lost Soviet glory. This strain of inquiry builds on criticism of linear temporality in which the distinct dimensions of past, present, and future function as a "given" in the field of history (Bevernage and Lorenz, 2013: 10). From a cultural memory angle, Assmann (2020: 9–10) proposes "the notion of a *cultural time regime*" instead, which understands the ordering of time as a "product of culture." Literary texts are not bound to linear temporality and are thus vital for achieving a wider societal understanding of the delayed temporality of trauma (Madigan, 2020: 46). By citing popular assumptions, myths, and expectations, they offer crucial insights into the complex temporality of justifications of mass violence as well as the psychological dynamics at play in the wake of mass violence.

The second point pertains to intent. Individual intent is constitutive of legal culpability and fundamental to construct causation in historiography. Yet, recent legal and social science research into peoples' complicity with atrocities challenges the juridical principles of individual accountability and autonomous action, and political philosophy has questioned the role of actor intent in historiography after World War II (Arendt, 1958: 181–188). While it remains vitally important to hold responsible actors accountable for incitement (Wilson, 2017), implicit normalizations of justifications of mass violence in particular often happen without criminal intent, and they prepare the ground for explicit affirmations. To understand societal circulations and *longue durée* transmissions of justifications for mass violence, memory studies can push our understanding beyond the legal approach of primarily proving intent toward studying effects. Conceptualizing language and the cultural canon as fundamental media of social relationality allows us to combine, rather than juxtapose, individual responsibility and pre-formed structures.

The third point pertains to the ambivalent role of critics and scholars in the transmission of justifications of mass violence, who, even while offering critical analyses, may be contributing to the perpetuation of justifications for mass violence. This issue is manifest on the lexical level with the ethnopolitical implications of the legal concept of *genocide*. It is also identifiable in lacunas in historiographical vocabulary, such as the absence of the terms *genocide* and *massacre* from Brunner et al. (1997 [1972]) dictionary *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Moses, 2021: 31). The complication of the transmission of justifications of mass violence even in criticism arises, not least, from the structural problem of repetition by representation. Documentary and fictional genres that seek to portray mass violence and/or raise awareness of the suffering of victims cannot but reproduce the terms, narratives, and heuristics given to justify the crime, and thus run the risk of replicating the perpetrators' stance and discourse. This is a vital point because mimetic participation is as much a complication of analyzing mass violence as a key structure in committing it: justifications of mass violence often present utopian pasts modeled on reinterpretations of cultural memory for present

agendas. They invite populations to participate in mass violence in order to share in the return of a glorious past. Participation in the renewal of past glory is one of the key promises of the Russian regime in its justifications for the war against Ukraine.

Approaching these structural challenges is indispensable for a better understanding of the long-term impact of justifications and the recurrence of mass violence. Both are urgent in the current historical moment. The threat of impending mass violence in the wake of the climate crisis, if left unaddressed, is likely to lead to a "global polycrisis" of "self-reinforcing feedbacks among global systems" of societies in conflict over natural resources and a declining global environment (Homer-Dixon et al., 2022). This threat is recognized by scholars and politicians. The UN Security Council, however, has failed to adopt a resolution integrating climate-related security risks into conflict-prevention strategies (UN, 2021). This political deadlock makes all the more urgent the need for other arenas of societal discourse to address how past mass violence is evoked to justify a violent future. The field of memory studies provides the conceptual means and the heuristic space to develop this understanding.

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Author biographies

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