

## ВСЕОБЩАЯ ИСТОРИЯ. СПЕЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ ДИСЦИПЛИНЫ

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### Online Commemoration of the Vietnam War in U.S. Memory Politics (1997–2017)

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## GENERAL HISTORY. SPECIAL HISTORICAL DISCIPLINES

Научная статья

### Онлайн-коммеморация Вьетнамской войны в американской политике памяти (1997–2017 гг.)

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**Abstract.** The article examines the evolution of memory politics in the United States from 1997 to 2017 in the context of digitalization, using specific examples of online commemoration of the Vietnam War. In analyzing key projects (Virtual Wall, Interactive Timeline of the Vietnam War, Wall of Faces, Wall that Heals, etc.), the following characteristics of digital memorialization were identified: democratization through crowdsourcing; therapeutic function; hybridity of online and offline spaces. The authors pay special attention to the specifics of American approaches, where civic initiatives often play a significant role, and an emphasis on healing national trauma becomes the dominant narrative. Despite the new opportunities for widespread participation inherent in technology, digital commemoration also reproduces the previous key contradictions of working with a "difficult past". In practice, participatory approaches often lead to the depoliticization of history, reducing public discussion to an aggregation of personal tragedies. The therapeutic focus on national "healing" often fails to address issues of historical responsibility. Thus, digital platforms

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена исследованию эволюции политики памяти в США в 1997–2017 гг. в условиях цифровизации на конкретных примерах онлайн-коммеморации Вьетнамской войны. При анализе ключевых проектов («Виртуальная стена», «Интерактивная временная шкала Вьетнамской войны», «Стена лиц», «Стена, которая лечит» и др.) выявлены такие характеристики цифровой мемориализации: демократизация через вовлечение (краудсорсинг); терапевтическая функция; гибридность онлайн-офлайн пространств. Особое внимание авторы уделяют специфике американских подходов, где важную роль нередко играют гражданские инициативы, а акцент на исцелении национальной травмы становится доминирующим нарративом. Несмотря на заложенные в технологиях новые возможности для широкого участия, цифровая коммеморация воспроизводит и прежние ключевые противоречия работы с «трудным прошлым». Партисипаторность на практике нередко ведет к деполитизации истории, сводя публичную дискуссию к агрегации личных трагедий.

positioned as neutral spaces for memory in the United States have effectively become tools for the formation of a new, technologically mediated consensus that bypasses the most difficult aspects of the "difficult past"..

**Keywords:** memory politics, monumental politics, digitalization, interpretations of history, United States, Vietnam War

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### Introduction. Theoretical Aspects of Digital Memory Politics

The sphere of collective memory, long shaped by official narratives, memorial practices and traditional media, is undergoing a fundamental transformation under the influence of digital technologies. The processes of commemoration are increasingly moving into the online space, where they are taking on new forms, dynamics and an audience. This shift creates an "arena of memory", characterized by interactivity and constant competition of interpretations. In this context, the memory of the Vietnam War that has become one of the most traumatic and controversial elements of American historical consciousness, is a relevant interdisciplinary research object. The memory of the war is a "difficult past", and its offline commemoration has long been balanced between official silence, narrative of "national trauma" and critical rethinking. In the digital age the commemoration of the Vietnam War is entering a new digital phase.

The relevance of this topic is related to the need to study not only the impact of digital technologies on memory politics, but also the processes of memorialization of the Vietnam War that developed in various periods of American history. As previously noted in another article, this topic includes, in particular, such important subjects as the spread of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in American society, the official reaction of government authorities in the United States, the "monumental politics" during the Cold War, the actions of veterans' organizations in defense of their rights, etc. [1].

This article aims to analyze the phenomenon of online commemoration of the Vietnam War as one of the key factors influencing the modern US memory politics regarding the Vietnamese events. By the memory politics we mean the conscious efforts of state institutions, civil society and individual groups to construct, legitimize and promote certain versions of the historical past in order to achieve relevant socio-political goals [2, p. 141]. Online commemoration is a set of practices ranging from virtual

Терапевтический фокус на национальном «исцелении» зачастую не включает вопросы исторической ответственности. Таким образом, цифровые платформы, позиционируемые как нейтральные площадки для памяти, фактически становились в США инструментами формирования нового, технологически опосредованного консенсуса, который обходит стороной наиболее сложные аспекты «трудного прошлого».

**Ключевые слова:** политика памяти, монументальная политика, цифровизация, интерпретации истории, США, Вьетнамская война

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memorials and digital archives to discussions on social networks and algorithmically generated content.

Theoretical aspects and correlation of concepts such as memory politics, symbolic politics and monumental politics, as well as methodological approaches to the study of this issue are considered in the works of such domestic and foreign researchers as A. Assman, M. Lipman, O.Yu. Malinova, A.I. Miller, J.E. Johnson, Chr. Capozzola, T. Clack, K. Mitchell, I. Moor, M. Halbwachs, M. Edelman and others [3–12]. There has been quite significant progress in this area of research in recent decades, although some aspects (including those related to online commemoration of "difficult" historical themes and events) clearly need further development.

Some memory studies also focus on the topic of digitalization of monumental and memory politics. An example is the work of such researchers as J. Garde-Hansen, A. Hoskins, D. Uzzell, D.A. Buteyko, V.E. Dergacheva, L.B. Zubanova and others [13–18]. The authors consider this process as a factor significantly influencing the very structure of cultural memory and the political struggle for the past.

Analyzing the transformation of memory politics in the digital age requires a thorough analysis of various digital sources that not only record, but also actively form new memorial practices. In the context of the online commemoration of the Vietnam War in the United States, such sources are complex digital objects that go beyond simple electronic copies of archival documents. Interactive online memorials and educational platforms such as "The Virtual Wall" [19], "The Vietnam War: an Interactive Timeline" [20], "The Wall of Faces" [21], "The Wall That Heals" [22] and others are becoming key to our research. The chronological framework of this study is determined by the time of creation of the digital objects in question. However, it should be borne in mind that these platforms function as "living", constantly updated archives, where the official historical narrative collides and intertwines with the personal memories of thousands of users.

In the digital dimension of memory politics, we often observe a transition from a monological model, where memory was constructed "from top to bottom" through official monuments and narratives, to a dialogical and network model. In this context, the following can be identified as key characteristics of the digital memory politics:

1. Democratization and participation: an opportunity for ordinary citizens to participate directly in the creation of memory content.

2. Global accessibility: breaking down geographical and state boundaries of access to commemorative resources.

3. Multimedia and interactivity: using texts, photos, videos, audio and interactive tools to create an immersive experience.

4. Personalization of memory: the focus shifts from collective abstract symbols to individual stories and personal losses.

#### **"The Virtual Wall": from a Monument to a "Living" Archive**

The Vietnam War as a complex and traumatic event in American history is a representative example for analyzing new approaches to online commemoration. Along with offline memorials and monuments, online memorials are also being created in the United States. A striking example was the online memorial "The Virtual Wall of the Vietnam War" [19], launched in 1997.

This project is the digital reincarnation of the Washington Vietnam Veterans Memorial, but its functionality and meanings are much broader. If the granite wall is a concise symbol of grief, then "The Virtual Wall" is a detailed "living" archive. "The Virtual Wall" has a separate memorial page dedicated to each fallen American soldier. Each page is a personal monument containing photos of the American soldiers, brief memories, photos of chevrons, awards, military units, etc. The key principle here is crowdsourcing of memory. The Virtual Wall's database is updated by relatives or friends of the deceased, turning the memorial into an ever-growing resource. The website also contains a list of people awarded various military honors for their service during the Vietnam War. This memorial project enables users to establish thousands of contacts between relatives and comrades of the victims, performing not only a memorial, but also an important socio-therapeutic function, restoring ties severed by the war [19].

At the present stage, the practice of online commemoration is applied not only in the USA. Thus, considering examples of similar "living" archives in other countries, it is worth mentioning the Russian "Memory Gallery" [23], which is one of the main interactive components of the memorial project "Memory Road" [24]. This is a large-scale project of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces of Russia. On its official website, any user can view the "Memory Gallery", find a card of his

relative (participant of the Great Patriotic War) and attach to it photographs, front-line letters, documents, the history of the military path, etc. The site already contains a huge number of photos and documents uploaded by users [23]. The gallery is only part of a complex technological memorial project that performs three main tasks: preservation (archive), involvement (crowdsourcing) and visualization (gallery) of the memory of each participant of the Great Patriotic War. It serves as a bridge between state archives, personal family memory and modern multimedia technologies.

#### **The Evolution of Digital Commemoration: a Variety of Formats**

The success of "The Virtual Wall" proved the viability and relevance of the online format. New digital memorials began to appear in memory of Vietnam War veterans, each offering a unique approach to commemoration.

In 2009, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund [25] launched "The Wall of Faces" project. As part of this project, a page on the foundation's website is dedicated to each veteran whose name is inscribed in a memorial in Washington, DC. In an effort to preserve the legacy of those who died in Vietnam in a visual format, the foundation strives to find a photo for each of the more than 58,000 names. "The Wall of Faces" allows family and friends to share memories, post photos and communicate with each other. "The Wall of Faces" is part of a hybrid memorial space, as it does not exist separately, but is directly linked to the database of names on the physical Wall. On the memorial's website each name has a link to the corresponding photo page (if found). Thus, the project blurs the boundary between offline and online space [21].

On the one hand, this project performs a deep therapeutic function, on the other hand its visual strategy may inadvertently contribute to a simplified reading of the history, where individual grief overshadows critical reflection. Thus, the project is not just an archive of photographs, but an active tool for forming the collective memory of the Vietnam War, which combines the inclusivity of individual memory and the power of a visual narrative, that requires thoughtful analysis.

In 1996, the same memorial foundation launched a program called "The Wall That Heals." The foundation created a replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed to travel across the country. The traveling exhibit provided an opportunity for thousands of veterans who were unable to face the painful memories at the Memorial, to find the strength and courage to do so in their own communities, thus beginning the healing process. In addition to the replica of the Wall, the traveling exhibition "The Wall That Heals" includes a trailer that transforms into a mobile educational center. The trailer features a timeline of the "War and the Wall," providing

additional information about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The trailer's exhibits provide visitors with insights into the legacy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the collection of items left at the Wall in Washington, D.C. [22].

"The Wall of Faces" and "The Wall That Heals" projects are closely interconnected and are key components of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund's unified memorial strategy. While "The Wall of Faces" focuses on personalization (giving names to faces), "The Wall That Heals" aims to democratize access (bringing memory closer to people). Together, they work to fully "engage" the audience, with one project operating in the digital realm and the other in the physical realm with a digital overlay.

#### **Interactive Timeline of the Vietnam War as a Multimedia Immersive Experience**

The Interactive Timeline of the Vietnam War is a large-scale educational project launched in 2017 to accompany the Ken Burns and Lynn Novick documentary series "The Vietnam War" [26]. This is not just a chronological list of dates, but an immersive multimedia experience designed to delve deeply into the history of the conflict.

The timeline is an example of a multi-layered chronology, covering the period from 1858 (the beginning of French colonial rule) up to the events of 1975 and their aftermath. This framing presents the war not as an isolated event, but as a complex historical process with deep roots and long-term consequences [20].

The interactive timeline demonstrates a multi-faceted approach to the commemoration of the events of the war, consistently presenting three different points of view on key events: the "View from the North" (DRV), the "View from the South" (Republic of Vietnam) and the "American View" (USA), which includes the positions of the US administrations, American soldiers and anti-war activists. This approach avoids one-sidedness and shows the war as a tragedy for all parties involved. Each point on the timeline is accompanied by rich multimedia content: video clips from the film; archival photographs and newsreels; audio recordings of speeches by presidents, negotiations, memoirs of veterans, protest songs; official documents; personal testimonies of more than 80 American and Vietnamese participants in the events [20].

The Interactive timeline is not just an addition to the film, but an independent resource of digital public history. It demonstrates how careful work with a variety of sources (from archival documents to oral testimony) and the principle of multiple perspectives can create a complex commemorative space for self-study of one of the most controversial conflicts in modern American history. This project demonstrates how digital technologies can serve not to simplify, but to deepen understanding

of the past. The project shows how academic knowledge can be transformed into an accessible, but not simplified digital format for a wide audience.

#### **Conclusion**

The digital environment is radically transforming memory politics, creating a new, dynamic, and competitive "memory arena". The example of online commemoration of the Vietnam War in the United States clearly demonstrates the key vectors of this transformation: democratization and participation (crowdsourcing of memory), personalization (shifting the focus to individual stories), hybridity (erasing the boundaries between the physical and digital, the archival and emotional) and immersion (creating a multifaceted experience through multimedia).

Thus, the online commemoration of the Vietnam War demonstrates a fundamental shift in memory politics. Digital memorials do not compete with offline monuments, but rather form a unified hybrid landscape of memory with them. They address the fundamental challenge of commemorating a traumatic past: overcoming the anonymity of victims and creating a "memory community" based on personal engagement. Digital memory politics are becoming more inclusive, emotional and personalized, making memory not a static legacy, but a living, ongoing dialogue between the past and the present.

The projects discussed in the article illustrate how the digital environment allows not only to preserve memory, but also to create new rituals and forms of collective experience. The online commemoration of the Vietnam War is a representative digital model of American memory politics. It transforms the passive viewer into an active participant, and memory from a set of frozen symbols into a living, evolving dialogue, which is the quintessence of an approach that reflects the specific nature of American historical and social experience.

However, the digital commemoration of the Vietnam War in the United States is an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, it opens up space for previously unimaginable forms of participation, therapy and visualization. On the other hand, it serves as a tool for soft memory management, where technology, design, and algorithms subtly guide collective trauma experiences towards a depoliticized and personalized national mourning, while obscuring questions of historical responsibility. The future of digital memory politics depends on an awareness of these risks and a deliberate effort to create platforms that are not only inclusive in form, but also self-critical in their historical content.

It is also worth noting that civil society plays a key role in the offline and online commemoration of the Vietnam War in the United States. Instead of being a passive con-

sumer, civil society acts as an active producer of digital memory. Civil initiatives, veterans' associations and their families often serve as the driving force behind crowd-sourcing projects, infusing them with personal content and advocating for alternative forms of remembrance.

The future of digital memory politics depends in large part on the ability of civil society actors to use its interactive potential to articulate more complex and critical versions of the past that challenge both official oblivion and comfortable consensus.

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