

Fighting the Online War: Online Russian Nationalists and the Discourse of Stalingrad in the Early 2010s

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Abstract

Memory of the Battle of Stalingrad, a pivotal moment in Second World War, is a cornerstone of Vladimir Putin's nationalist mythology. This study examines how participants of the "In the Whirlwind of Time" forum, a Russian-language online community whose usage peaked in the early 2010s, perpetuated and reinterpreted this war myth through science fiction and alternate history narratives at a grassroots level by co-writing literary texts. "Myth" is defined here as a symbolic narrative that shapes collective memory and identity, through science fiction and alternate history narratives. Writers, driven by nationalist and pro-Soviet sentiments, were informed by Soviet-era literary traditions and modern sociopolitical concerns. Engaging in a collaborative process of memory-making, they merged historical fiction with futuristic elements such as time travel to craft stories where the annihilation and resurrection encoded in the Stalingrad myth solve present-day moral and political crises. By conducting a Critical Discourse Analysis of forum postings and demonstrating how the resultant discourses are present in three key works, the article outlines the norms of the forum's discourse community to show how these narratives foster a mythic understanding of Stalingrad, transforming it into a timeless and universal battle against purported Western immorality. These stories not only glorify the Soviet past but also serve as ideological tools that both reflect and anticipate Russian state propaganda of the 2020s, suggesting the participatory nature of national identity shaping through mythmaking—and the crucial role that war played in grassroots nationalist narratives in the 2010s.

Keywords

Russia, nationalism, literature, myth, war, Second World War

Introduction

By the early 2020s, some 2,000 pulp fiction works about so-called *popadantsy*¹ — fictional heroes who travel through time to battle Russia's

¹ Borenstein calls these protagonists "time crashers," although I prefer *popadantsy*, from the verb *popadat'*, "to fall" (2024).

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enemies at key moments in the nation's history, usually saving the day and the nation by their actions — had been published in Russia (Viazovskii 2023). Of these, at least a thousand have centred on World War II, which has been at the heart of the Putin regime's increasingly nationalist and militarized memory agenda since the early 2010s (Galina 2021). This phenomenal growth in quantity has been accompanied by a burst of popularity since Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, when works from the *popadantsy* genre broke out of their small, masculine, and online readership and appeared on the shelves of physical bookstores in Moscow and across Russia. The Battle of Stalingrad was a 1942-3 battle during World War II that saw almost two million people die before a Soviet counter-attack. The unexpected victory that followed, and the march to Berlin, seem to occupy an outsized position in the *popadantsy* genre. By 2014, almost three dozen works had appeared centering on the battle as a crucial turning point in the nation's history. Many more mentioned it incidentally (Garner 2018). Scores more have since appeared as self-published works or released by major Moscow-based publishers. At the heart of the *popadantsy* genre is World War II, and at the heart of World War II lies the memory of Stalingrad. Nonetheless, the production of *popadantsy* works remains a relatively understudied phenomenon in scholarship.

One example of the Stalingrad *popadantsy* novel was Oleg Tarugin and Aleksei Ivakin's 2013 novel *The Shtrafbat's Constellation: From Stalingrad to Alpha Centauri*. The protagonist, Krupennikov, is an officer in a World War II penal battalion (*shtrafbat*) who falls through time and finds himself fighting space lizards in a future iteration of the Battle of Stalingrad set in space.² Krupennikov, who narrates the book, survives a bloody and ultra-violent battle for the fate of the world. He then addresses the reader: "I started the war at Stalingrad. I believe that neither I nor the others will ever forget those hellish days. It was there, in the smoldering ruins of that city, that we learned what real war meant." The authors here raise a number of questions about the relationship of past, present, and future and the role that Stalingrad has to play in that temporal nexus. Why should the experience of (re-)fighting a "hellish" battle that took place 70 years before this fantastical *popadantsy* novel was written have taught Krupennikov the meaning of "real war"? Why should Stalingrad take center stage in this work? Who is the "we" to which Krupennikov refers to in his comment (and, further, who is the reader to which these comments are addressed)? By exploring discourses of Stalingrad as they moved between this text, two further Stalingrad *popadantsy* texts, and an

2 As with most *popadantsy* works, the plot is flimsy, and the mechanics of the time-bending plot devices are glossed over in favour of action (Borenstein 2024).

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online forum frequented by the authors and their intended readers, I attempt to cast light on the ways in which memory was constructed in the Russia of the early 2010s within what Alexander Etkind terms “deterritorialized” spaces of memory (2013) — and the implications this might have for the Russian state’s militarizing activities today.

In the Whirlwind of Time: A Community and its Texts

The *In the Whirlwind of Time* (*V vikhre vremeni*, VVV) forum was a freely accessible Russian-language online community whose activity peaked in 2013. Activity centred on the discussion and production of alt-history and fantasy novels. Novice and experienced community authors alike posted drafts of pages or chapters and received public feedback, turning to other forum users for help on every subject. Community members co-authored works, suggested stylistic and narrative amendments, and discussed politics — an integral part of the *popadantsy* phenomenon — alongside literary work. VVV became a production line for pulp fiction works spanning the gamut from medieval fantasy to science fiction — but especially *popadantsy* works. These novels were chiefly produced for self-publication and self-distribution among a small circle of community members. Indeed, the forum had in 2013 just 2,000 registered users, with 400–500 visiting every day. Nonetheless, the forum was so successful that it ran a series released by the major Moscow publishing house Eksmo. The most prolific author-community members published dozens of books with large Moscow-based publishers (see “Bibliografiia uchastnikov foruma [List of internet forums]”).

Four of the more successful VVV authors were Oleg Tarugin, Aleksei Ivakin, Aleksandr Kontorovich, and Vladislav Koniushevskii, each of whom were last-generation Soviets in their 40s and 50s in the early 2010s. Each penned work that included descriptions of Stalingrad at their narrative centre: Tarugin and Ivakin’s aforementioned *Stalingrad to Alpha Centauri* (2013), Kontorovich’s *Black Infantry: Shtrafnik from the Future* (2010), and Koniushevskii’s *The Attempted Return* (2008), all of which, eventually published by physical publishers, provides an example of how the *popadantsy* genre began to reach a wider audience in the early 2010s.

Tarugin and Ivakin’s work sees “Stalingrad” refought in the future, where a *shtrafbat* from the past — the “best soldiers in history,” as the authors describe them — win an improbable victory against a band of lizards controlled by a barbaric American enemy that seeks to control human overpopulation through mass destruction and experiment on humans at a concentration camp-like extraterrestrial base. The Soviet soldiers of the past are thus able to “save” humanity. Kontorovich’s protagonist, Kotov, is a 21st century soldier

who has served in both Afghanistan and Abkhazia. Falling through time to the past, he relives the chaotic 1942 retreat from Kharkiv to Stalingrad, where he is killed in the act of “saving” Russia. Although he miraculously has now awoken in the present, he has been able, through sacrifice, to save Russia in the 1940s past, in Afghanistan, and again in the 21st century.

In Koniusheskii’s work *Lisov*, another modern-day military specialist relives the entirety of World War II. Thanks to his knowledge of the future, a discussion with Stalin, and his “invention” of post-war technology in the war, he is able to *avoid* Stalingrad’s occurrence. As a result, the Germans lose the War, and the USSR remains a dominant world power in the 21st century: there is no turbulent 1990s, and Western dominance never happens. The rewritten future ends in an epilogue set near an untouched Stalingrad, now at the center of a still-extant USSR.

In the published versions, the authors’ acknowledgements highlight the works’ connections to VVV. Tarugin and Ivakin thank another user, “MilesV,” for writing “individual episodes” of the work, and name a further five VVV members, as well as “all of its regular users” for help with writing the book. Kontorovich notes that his work was written for a “small circle of familiar faces,” while Koniusheskii, too, expresses thanks for the community’s help with completion of his work. The forum, therefore, provided important aspects of co-authorship and a readymade audience of readers for the works. These works, despite eventually being released in small print runs (fewer than 2,000 copies) by physical publishers, were written within and for the VVV community.

The Stalingrad Myth: Annihilation and Resurrection

Each of these authors incorporates into their text a narrative of the Battle of Stalingrad that I have described elsewhere as a (post-)Soviet resurrection myth (Garner 2018, Garner 2022). The battle was portrayed in Soviet culture, from the earliest weeks of the conflict, as a “great turning point” (*velikii perelom*) during which the fate of the war, the nation, and humanity itself would be decided. Literature and propaganda transformed the costly military ordeal that saw a million Soviet citizens die — and Stalingrad itself all but destroyed — into a *necessary* sacrifice that gave birth to the future. This was usually encoded through what Northrop Frye would identify as “apocalyptic” turning points: darkness giving way to light, black to white, death to life, etc. Following Frye’s framework, I contend that such myths reinforce collective identity and moral values (Frye, see also Gunkel 2006). Myth is a symbolic narrative that shapes collective memory and identity, particularly through

perceived times of sociopolitical turbulence. Frye's myth indicates absolute "metaphorical identification" with the *apocalyptic* — the realization of the impossible, which here does not stand in for the end of or (in the case of sci fi) the absence of, linear time. Rather, in the words of Frank Kermode (1967), this provides a *kairotic* moment means for the individual to perpetually orient themselves to a meaningful point in time: the inevitable "new life" that follows Stalingrad. The Stalingrad myth, which embraced destruction as a necessary precursor to new life, was encoded in literature, film, and other cultural products throughout the Soviet period. Through a reified series of stock images, phrases, and characters, authors such as Konstantin Simonov, Ilya Ehrenburg, Viktor Nekrasov, and Vasily Grossman not only created but endlessly restated this myth, enabling its application as both a tool to "resurrect" both the Soviet state and individual subjectivity in the post-traumatic post-war years (Cotton 2024).

The myth interplays with the Russian embrace of what Gregory Carleton terms the "annihilation narrative" (2010), the inevitable and even positive outcome that is the hero-soldier's death in the Russian war story, in 2000s and 2010s cultural discourse. In both state-sponsored and grassroots pop culture, characters like those of the *shtrafbat* are subjected to gruesome deaths to serve as examples of desirable suffering. Reams of works produced in the first two decades of the Putin era revel in gritty violence as a means to prove their characters' heroism — and yet, when set within the framework of the Stalingrad myth, that heroic suffering acquires the force of heroic *creation* as a sacrifice must inevitably lead to new life.

As the Russian state has given its iteration of the Cult of the Greater War greater prominence in society, so it has too amplified rhetoric about annihilation and apocalypse (Engström 2014). Restated in familiar terms of destruction/resurrection, the Stalingrad myth has become an increasingly important part of Vladimir Putin's iteration of the Soviet-era cult of the so-called "Great Patriotic War." Invoking the myth of Stalingrad is a means to project a sense of futurity — a relationship to *kairos* — into the constant and deliberate entanglement of "chosen glory" and "chosen trauma" described by Allyson Edwards and Roberto Rabbia (2019). 2013 marked a turning point in the state's invocation of the Stalingrad myth both politically and culturally. In that year Fedor Bondarchuk's *Stalingrad* was released at the Russian box office to mark the 80th anniversary of the battle's end. The movie's mostly state-provided \$30m budget made it one of the nation's biggest ever productions. Despite mixed reviews, *Stalingrad* took in a record-breaking \$66m, making this the Russian Federation's most profitable opening weekend in history.

Since then, Stalingrad has taken an outsized role in state-sponsored war commemoration, with Vladimir Putin regularly visiting present-day Volgograd — the city was renamed in 1961 — to act as “worshipper” at its war memorials on the key holiday of Victory Day (Garner 2022, 2). More recently, state propaganda organs have referred to battles in Ukraine as being a “new Stalingrad” (Sokolov 2023), Dmitry Medvedev has hosted press conferences at the Stalingrad Museum Complex in today’s Volgograd, while Putin, speaking in 2023 in Volgograd, claimed that Stalingrad bore perpetual relevance to the present: “Again and again we are forced to repulse the aggression of the collective West” (Heintz 2023). Each of these invocations of Stalingrad implies another mythical, quasi-religious victory born not despite but because of the scale of sacrifice in the present. Putin and his proxies interweave contrasting narratives of positivity and negativity, heroism and nihilism, and life and death, projecting Stalingrad into and onto the state’s ongoing military and militarizing campaigns.

Nonetheless, the *VVV* authors I study in this paper, a decade or more ago, incorporated the Stalingrad myth, through their protagonists’ fight and (symbolic) death taking on a vast importance in “birthing” a better future for Russia, into their *popadantsy* works — apparently spontaneously, and before the state further elevated Stalingrad in the public-memory consciousness. Amidst an explosion of “deterritorialized” memory campaigns and projects in online spaces in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the *VVV* authors were preoccupied with what has now become a central tenet of the Putinist regime’s discourse. While *VVV* itself is all but defunct, by examining the processes that produced its literary output, I hope to shed light on how apparently disparate mnemonic collectives interacted with war memory in the early 2010s — and how this apparently anticipated the Putin regime’s memory policies, the explosion of Russian popular interest in revanchist nationalist narratives in the late 2010s, and the continuation of these themes today during Russia’s war against Ukraine.

By seeking to address this discussion through a study of discourse that illuminates the social relations within the *VVV* community, I found that a myth of Stalingrad, deliberately recycled from Soviet-era texts, functioned as a means for *VVV* forum members to site their social relations within an imagined cycle of destruction and reconstruction that rendered a purportedly threatening present less harmful. This suggests that in the early 2010s, users within online bubbles of memory were self-reinforcing the use of discourses around the memory of World War II independently of the state’s demands. This observation has implications for scholars seeking to understand the

mechanisms behind newer grassroots digital memory projects, which mirror the Russian state's move toward centering a more monolithic cult of war across its historical memory projects, especially in terms of framing its aggression against Ukraine.

Literature Review: Trauma, Memory, and Alt History

The politics of war memory in Putin's Russia, particularly regarding Second World War, has been a focal point for scholars examining the intersection of history, nationalism, and statecraft. Much scholarship (e.g., Wood 2011) explores how Vladimir Putin's state uses memory in a performative sense, leveraging grandiose public celebrations of Second World War — in particular, Victory Day and events around it — to valorize the regime itself and reiterate the notion of a “generational debt.” However, this article is situated within a critique of top-down models of historical memory production in Russia (e.g., Edele 2017). Much of this work builds on Nina Tumarkin's concept of the “Cult of the Great Patriotic War,” which legitimized the power of the USSR's incumbent rulers by lauding the sacrifices of the older generation and burdening younger generations with an unpayable moral “debt” (Tumarkin 1994). An array of similar work, especially since the early 2010s, has explored the grassroots enactment and embellishment of memory at the level of popular culture and discourse, and in particular in online settings.

Etkind and Blacker's work, written at the time that *VVV* was most active, described the Runet — the Russian-language parallel internet — as a place that offers “an alternative to state-sponsored historical narratives,” arguing that “deterritorialized” cultural memory, freed of physical constraints, moves “beyond static, physical spaces [to spread] across digital platforms and mass-reproduced texts” (Blacker and Etkind 2013). It is within this axis — the apparently fluid and bottom-up transference of memory between digital platform and mass text — that the *VVV* forum and its users' published works are situated, and where I conducted my explorations. This axis dovetails more broadly with a Russian and global virtual culture that has been fragmenting since 2013 with only greater speed. This has fragmented and reconstructed individual perceptions and stable anchors, erasing shared meaning while rapidly giving birth to new collective meanings within closed-off communities — “bubbles” — that self-create reality (Sawyer 2018; Bufacchi 2021; Gaist 2022; Amarasingam 2024).

Despite the fact that social media has become a key tool for the Russian state to (re)create war memories (Bernstein 2016; Makhortykh 2020) as it seeks models of a “usable past” to create consensus and stability in society (Pearce

2020), the role of bubbles of “true believers” —grassroots enthusiasts or fellow travellers in fora just like VVV— in Russian online memory creation remains relatively understudied.

Since 2013, the Russian state has co-opted various mnemonic groupings and campaigns into its official politics (Weiss-Wendt 2021). As a notable example, the grassroots Immortal Regiment campaign was co-opted by the regime and has since occurred online and in person. Although VVV was not picked out by the state for this sort of favor — it was presumably too niche — the process of myth (re)creation that I explore within the space is understudied.

Indeed, studies of Russian digital memory projects have tended to focus either on those run or co-opted by the state, or those that seek to challenge state narratives — or to approach the topic through the lens of the state’s online surveillance and control techniques (e.g., Etkind 2013, Porzgen 2021, Mälksoo 2015, McGlynn 2023, Kalinina & Menke 2016). This has led to an emphasis on studying online mnemonic communities as “popular attempt[s] to reclaim the memory of the Great Patriotic War” from the state (Kurilla 2024). Some notable exceptions have showed the role of myth and ideology in constructing the Soviet past in popular culture in recent years, especially online (Markhorthykh 2020, Noordenbos 2021), but there is still a relative paucity of understanding of how members of early online nationalist communities such as VVV entered into dialogue with each other, with wider historical discourse, and with myths such as that of Stalingrad.

Despite the importance of internet culture to the *popadantsy* genre, an equivalent lack of scholarship exists on the role of community and collective authorship within “deterritorialized” memory projects such as the VVV works under discussion here. The most notable studies of *popadantsy* works, such as Elliot Borenstein’s (2024), have explored in detail the relationships between their authors and protagonists, but have given less emphasis to the *process* of creation within a mnemonic community of authors and readers (Borenstein, in particular, explores the genre under the heading “World War Me,” emphasizing the egoistic nature of the works). Other scholars have seen these stories as examples of authorial desire, whether to turn “losers” into “epic heroes” who benefit from an “upward social mobility” their authors lack (Mahda 2019) or to return to a lost past (Scagliusi 2022, Privalov 2022). Pawlowska et al. (2019) argue that the genre’s focus on placing characters at the heart of great turning points in Russia’s history is evidence of the authors’ “*maniacal* desire to remake history.”

Nonetheless, scholars approaching the topics of World War II memory and *popadantsy* literature are almost universally united by their contention — one

that I argue is key to understanding the *VVV* work — that Russian nationalists in the 2000s and 2010s were immersed in what Serguei Oushakine (2009) terms the “patriotism of despair.” The post-Soviet era was seen as one where Russian society and the Russian state were beset by traumas and instabilities that led to a perceived loss of identity. By considering this social milieu, from which the texts emerged, I therefore not only cast light on how the *VVV* community functioned within processes of memory (re)production in an era when “deterritorialization” was becoming the norm, but add important context to existing author-focused studies of *popadantsy* work — therefore bringing closer these two strands of scholarship.

Method

I contend that the *VVV* forum functioned as an example of a self-created, semi-autonomous *discourse community* that shares common goals and its own specific terminology and methods of communication (Swales 1990). Such online communities enable the constant reshaping of and blurring of the lines between individual and collective memory (van Dijk 2007), which Etkind contends are vital to shaping “deterritorialized” memory. Since my interest is in the movement of ideas from communities to texts (and vice versa), I used a two-part mixed-methods approach. The first stage consisted of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of forum postings in which community members on *VVV* discussed work in progress. Having identified key discourses about the representation of Stalingrad, I then explored how those discourses manifested in Tarugin and Ivakin’s, Koniushevskii’s, and Kontorovich’s texts. These particular texts were selected because they were released by physical publishers, but also acknowledged aspects of co-authorship and the influence of the *VVV* forum, showing how discourses in the novels related to discourses identified in the first part of the research.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a means to uncover in text(s) hidden “social interactions” that provide “legitimation” for power (Van Dijk 1993). It treats language as “a form of social practice” in which textual production is intertwined with social and ideological structures (Fairclough 1995). Fairclough suggests that in this sense, discourse does not just reflect social conditions but actively shapes and is shaped by those structures — and in turn shapes “identities” and “ways of being” (1995). Van Dijk (1993) suggests that a benefit of CDA is developing an understanding of the relationship between text and context (the “mentally represented structure of those properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or comprehension of discourse,” as Schiffrin et al. put it [2008]). While the three novels are the

primary “text” and the VVV forum the primary “context,” this relationship is also inverted as users interact with, discuss, and recycle each other’s works, forming a relatively self-contained (or “deterritorialized”) site of textual (re) creation. Exploring the historical nature and evolution of discourses as they are (re)created within and across textual sites by users of the VVV forum and in novels permits a thorough examination of the interlinked nature of discourse, memory, and community — and thus a means of ascertaining how and why discourses around Stalingrad came to play a role there, and how they are refracted in published works. This approach is not novel for historians (see Reisigl 2017) or for the study of mnemonic communities in Russia (for similar examples, see Kalinina & Menke 2016; Edwards 2021).

I inductively coded discussions of forum users’ works in progress and newly published works from (approximately 800 posts) January 1, 2012, to December 31, 2013, when the forum was at its most active. Theoretically, inductive coding provided the best means to explore the community in the data analysis stage as a maximally “deterritorialized” community that may have deviated from the reproduction of expected discourses. I made note of recurring codes that could form discourses about authorship, about war in general, and in particular about Stalingrad. Grouping the themes, I established the prevalence of discourses from within these codes, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method.

Although many different discourses repeatedly cropped up on the forum, I elected to focus on just the two most prominent ones (described below) when reading three novels in the second part of this small-scale study. The discourse analysis ensured that the subsequent analysis of three key literary texts was informed by the VVV community members’ discussions. This method of analyzing literary texts treated the three novels not as isolated tools for creating and perpetuating memory, but as sites for the (re)production of discourses that formed memory.³ I thus explored purely those manifestations of the discourses at hand within the text, exploring how they intersected with the construction of the Stalingrad myth outlined above within the space of the texts.

Overall, this approach was designed to highlight the interplay between localized discourse, literature, and historical consciousness in one single-case study. While it does not seek to shed light on every such community — or even on all or most *popadantsy* works or authors — the role of “narrowcasting” has only become more prominent in the years since VVV was at its most

3 Here I follow Jan and Aleida Assmann’s understanding of historical memory (A. Assmann 2011; J. Assmann 2011).

active. Almost any audience can be found online for a product or interest, no matter how niche (see Khlevnyuk 2019). Thus, discerning the process of memory perpetuation and creation within a single group, and then using it to form a model for that group's self-perpetuated production of memory, is the major contribution of this paper.⁴

Discussion: Truth, the West, and Living to Die

The CDA showed that VVV operated according to a web of written and unwritten expectations. Community expectations were policed not by moderators but by users, who littered discussions with insults about perceived transgressions: a work was “shit” or the writer was a “f*g” when it veered from a Russian nationalist, pro-Soviet viewpoint. This confrontational behavior—not unusual in isolated online communities (Amarasingam 2023)—did not inhibit collective activity. Indeed, the production of collaborative work was extremely popular on the forum. For example, “Fedor Vikhrev,” a pseudonym for a group of users who co-author works, published ten works with sci-fi and alternate-history themes. When writing these works collaboratively, a handful of users would contribute the majority of material, while others chipped in with support or criticism according to community norms. Koniushevskii's, Tarugin and Ivakin's, and Kontorovich's works emerged from this same process.

The Battle of Stalingrad was at the heart of discussions on the forum, reflecting broader societal interest in the battle as a significant moment in Russia's history. It was mentioned 175 times, more frequently than any other Second World War battle (Kursk was the second most mentioned, at 93 instances, followed by Sevastopol, at 67). Stalingrad was at the center of multiple published books—including the three I explore below—and other fragments of text uploaded by users for discussion. Two discourses emerged as essential to discussions of authoring Stalingrad: *truthfulness* and *anti-Americanism*.

The most prominent discourse on the forum, which cropped up in almost every discussion of work in progress, related to the community's standards of *truthfulness*. Questions around objectivity, truthfulness, and accuracy occurred in the overwhelming majority of discussions about Stalingrad works in progress. However, the prevailing viewpoint among community

⁴ Single-case studies are occasionally met with skepticism due to concerns about limited scope and methodological rigor, which can affect the generalizability of results (Yin 1994). Despite these concerns, such designs are still widely used in descriptive and exploratory research, as they provide detailed insights into specific cases without making comparisons to other groups or contexts. This method provides a useful means of understanding unique social contexts (Dixon and Bouma 1978).

members was that Soviet fiction was “true” — this word or its synonyms was used in almost every discussion among group members — regardless of its historical veracity. Users would evaluate a text’s similarity to the most heavily published Soviet-era Stalingrad authors’ works, in particular those of Viktor Nekrasov, Konstantin Simonov, and Vasily Grossman (who were mentioned between 10 and 15 times each). For example, one user, while commenting on a forum newcomer’s work, declared that Soviet writer of Stalingrad novels Konstantin Simonov “knew how to do it better.” Using phrases, plot devices, and images from those authors’ most famous works was considered evidence of “truthfulness,” implying an interest in the past akin to Frye’s construction of mythic narrative or Kermode’s concept of *kairos* as a constant point of reference.

For forum users, a literary corpus passed down from a Soviet era seen as the progenitor of the Stalingrad myth — from the “fathers’ generation” that dominates Nina Tumarkin’s concept of the Cult of the Great Patriotic War — thus created expectations for the limits of Stalingrad’s portrayal in the works at hand.⁵ As some online mnemonic collectives engaged in debates about the historical reality of the war and the Stalinist past, and as some scholars suggested that the country might engage in a broader process of de-Stalinization as a result, VVV users — despite the potentially limitless possibilities of the *popadantsy* and sci-fi genres and their “deterritorialized” space—turned to a reified corpus of Soviet-era texts to determine the narrative characteristics of Stalingrad, and dressed down their peers for disagreeing about the nature of this “truth.” Nonetheless, and perhaps oddly, members of the group never explicitly discussed Stalingrad — the “greatest battle in history” and a “great turning point” (*velikii perelom*) — as the bringer of a “new day.” Users remained mired in the idea that the present — as the below discourse suggests — was a period of inescapable social and personal traumas. The Stalingrad myth was seen as an important aspect to include in novels produced by VVV members, yet their discourse of “truthful” Stalingrad highlighted *annihilation* rather than *resurrection*.

The second most prominent discourse on the forum discussions was that of *anti-Americanism* (used interchangeably with anti-fascism and anti-Europeanism). According to forum rules, members could be banned for “fomenting ethnic and religious hatred,” yet this did not appear to extend to Americans, who

5 A flexible standard of truth is itself an inheritance from the Soviet era: as early as 1972, the author Mikhail Alekseev explained that the “truth” of his work was in its resemblance to *possible* stories, not what actually happened (100). Another kind of generational shame was linked even earlier to the aesthetic battle between “Western” abstract art and conservative trends in the early 60s. Generational and social groups had an important role to play in the process of myth creation, which was not just a government-led initiative (Johnson 18).

were regularly and openly abused on the forum. Derogatory insults thrown at Americans included the terms “f*gs” and “Nazis” (the parallels with contemporary Russian state rhetoric on Ukraine and its Western allies as “Nazis” and “fascists” need no elaboration). One partially-finished manuscript included sci-fi materials that refigured Stalingrad as a contest against America and was met with plentiful praise: “Excellent”; “fuck those yanks [*amerikosy*].” Americans were perceived to have replaced fascists as Russia’s enemies par excellence in the present, threatening to attack or destroy Russia through wars in Kosovo and Iraq (the latter of which was mentioned five times in discussions about Stalingrad works on the forum). Although precise demographic data was impossible to find, forum members consistently professed nationalist and patriotic beliefs, which aligned with the ethnonationalist Russian views of politics and society that throughout the 2010s singled out the West and America as the greatest cultural and geopolitical threat to Russia (Kalsto 2016). Many forum users claimed to be military veterans of Russia’s conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and — less in evidence — Georgia. The forum’s members, therefore, emphasized a concoction of masculine, militaristic and ethnocentric identities that reflected an increasingly mainstream politics after the 2012 presidential election (Kalsto 2016, Sharafutdinova 2014). Here, then, anti-Americanism was a means of responding to a perceived attack from outside — and the perceived potential of a cultural annihilation to echo the “annihilation” the USSR underwent at Stalingrad.

If a demand for *truthfulness* in writing was woven throughout members’ posts, then the *purpose* of writing the “truth” was to counter deleterious Western influence. To combine the qualities of truthfulness and anti-Westernism was to produce a “truthful” Stalingrad text that allowed users to combat perceived emasculated qualities associated chiefly with Western homosexuality (indeed, “f*ggot” was one of the most common insults in comment threads).⁶

Since the three novels analyzed in the next part of this article were warmly welcomed by, produced in collaboration with, and explicitly addressed to forum users, we should expect to see that they (1) attempt to reproduce the Stalingrad myth as it was created in Soviet-era texts, with less interest in sharing a set series of literary facets relating to the *popadantsy* or alt-history genres; and (2) that defeating American or Western forces would be a vital part of a story of Stalingrad as annihilation — one that, perhaps, did not explicitly foreground an ensuing national resurrection.

6 Note that in 2013, the Russian state and regional governments were beginning a public campaign to outlaw “homosexual propaganda” that purportedly threatened to destroy “Russianness” (Healey 2017).

Discourses of Truthfulness and Anti-Americanism in Three VVV Novels

The discourses around truthfulness and anti-hegemony found through the CDA are in evidence throughout the works by Tarugin and Ivakin, Kontorovich, and Koniusheskii. Several facets characterized the novels' representation of these discourses: explicit and implicit recycling of key events, characters, and other literary features of the Soviet-era authors most praised on the forum, with Americans and Europeans replacing Nazis as the chief villains; references to Soviet culture as a lens for understanding reality more broadly; use of stock phrases from Soviet-era propaganda about World War II; and use of the annihilation and resurrection motifs familiar from the Stalingrad myth. Here, the authors — thanks to their emulation of Soviet-era Stalingrad plots, combined with the history-changing characteristics of the *popadantsy* genre — addressed the resurrection more explicitly than the discussions on the VVV forum itself.

The authors make Stalingrad “truthful” for their readers by alluding explicitly and implicitly to the Stalingrad works of authors Vasily Grossman, Konstantin Simonov, and Viktor Nekrasov. By doing so, they incorporate the VVV community's discourse around truthfulness into their work. Canonical features of the battle incorporated into the text include references to encirclement and isolated soldiers; Stalingrad's oil silos; the River Volga; the workers' village; the Stalingrad Tractor Factory; the *Detskii khorovod* fountain in the city centre; and — in modulated form — to towns such as Kotel'nikovo (which appears as “Kotel'nicheskii” in *From Stalingrad to the Stars*). Key dates, such as August 23rd (the bombing of Stalingrad that began the battle), and November 19th (the date of the ultimately victorious counter-attack), are mentioned explicitly. Key textual markers, such as the phrase “The town was burning, the asphalt was burning, the concrete was burning, the glass was burning” (Ch.1, Tarugin and Ivakin), are drawn directly from an image of a burning Stalingrad that first appeared in Vasily Grossman's wartime notebook from the battle (Grossman 1942) and subsequently reappeared in Soviet and post-Soviet depictions (e.g., see Simonov 1942, Simonov 1944, Bondarchuk 2013).

Kontorovich's Stalingrad sequence closely resembles Nekrasov's novella *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (*V okopakh Stalingrada*, 1946)⁷ in both emplotment and imagery. As in Nekrasov's work, the sequence is set within the first fortnight of the battle at the end of August 1942 as the protagonist first retreats, finding himself overnighting in an “old barn,” then fights to take a key strategic hill. In the earlier work this was the Mamaev Kurgan, and in the 21st century

7 A favourite work for VVV users, Nekrasov's novella is unmistakably alluded to in Fedor Vikhrev's work *V okopakh vremeni* [*In the Trenches of Time*].

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work it is an unnamed but apparently similar location. The hill in Nekrasov's version is a place where "you can see the whole of Stalingrad like the back of your hand" (Nekrasov 1946); in Kontorovich's, it is a place from where "the Germans could see... our whole line of defence, all the way back and across, as far as the eye can see." Both protagonists spend days in dugouts described in near-identical terms (for instance, the image of "crumbling plaster" is repeated across both works).

The protagonists are then charged with seizing a German bunker. Nekrasov's character, absent clear commands, gets lost in a confusing and dizzying battle, where the enemy appears only in the form of shadowy figures, and stumbles his way to victory. Kontorovich's *popadanets* has no such problems. Planning his attack, he turns a map "here and there, every which way," instantly producing a clear plan: "You'll need to be there 10 to 15 minutes. The other company will attack from the front and draw fire on itself. Then you'll attack." He throws himself and his troops into a successful battle where Germans are easily dispatched: "The German fell against the wall and a bloody stain spread across the wall. The second one has his back to me. Running away? Well, well... My bullet pushed him forward, and he slammed hard into the door, sliding down to the floor. Done." The work's reiteration of Stalingrad is filled with modern violence and dispenses with the weaknesses of Nekrasov's literary forebear to make the 21st century hero a superman, but it remains aligned with the Soviet-era literary canon — and thus answers VVVusers' calls to make depictions of the battle, even within the fantasy of alt-history, "truthful."

Tarugin and Ivakin, meanwhile, recreate (amongst other examples) a scene that occurred in both Konstantin Simonov's novel *Days and Nights* (1943) and Vasily Grossman's *Stalingrad/For a Just Cause* (1956). In those works, the protagonists — named Saburov and Krymov, respectively — look to the stars as they are about to enter the heaviest period of fighting at Stalingrad. For each of those characters, the topography of battle in the present blurs with the vast sky: for Saburov, "the wall's contours blurred with the sky so it seemed that newly painted houses were rising out of the ruins"; for Krymov, an "immense sky, bright and weightless, dusted with stars" becomes inseparable from the River Volga, gunfire, and other aspects of battle. In *From Stalingrad to the Stars*, the protagonist Krupennikov encounters an almost identical scene as he is about to enter a decisive battle: "The sky around suddenly lit up with a myriad of shining stars. The stars — dazzling, radiant, sometimes hurting the eyes — were everywhere. Above and below, to the right and to the left, people seemed to be floating in a deafening, overwhelming void of immense scale." However, Krupennikov takes to the stars and saves the universe, eclipsing

— like Kontorovich’s protagonist — the physical limitations of his forebear. The writers’ work exists in dialogue with this Soviet-era fiction, but rewrites it with the limitlessly mythical possibilities of sci-fi, where the apocalyptic (or *kairotic*) moment is always accessible and where all action is rendered heroic and meaningful: Stalingrad, invoked in the 21st century, seems to promise VVV readers not just an end to Oushakine’s “despair” but a future victory of the greatest magnitude.

The three works are replete with references to Soviet culture of war that buttress the more obvious allusions to canonical Stalingrad works. Phrases drawn from wartime propaganda include Koniushevskii’s description of Stalin as the “best friend of the Soviet people”; Tarugin and Ivakin’s references to the soldiers’ battles as “a just cause”; and the description of a character’s death using the phrase “he died the death of a hero” (*geroem pogib*). The assertion of the *shtrafbat* soldiers’ right to “atone for one’s guilt with blood” — a phrase also used by Kontorovich — accompanies adjectives typically used in all three novels and in the past, including in Stalingrad works, to describe masculine Soviet heroes: “steadfast” (*stoikii*); “brave” (*khrabryi*); “courageous” (*muzhestvennyi*); and *zheleznyi* (“iron”) (Clark 1981, Garner 2018).

Meanwhile, Soviet-era films, books, and poems are referenced constantly and explicitly. Koniushevskii’s protagonist compares other soldiers to the “main character from *The White Sun of the Desert*,” the popular Soviet film, and no fewer than six times comments that the action is happening “as if in an old film” (a comparison also used by Kontorovich). Consequently, the hero is able to recognize that “this park led to Stalingrad” and thus emerge victorious in a key fight: these references are not mere nostalgic padding, but suggest that knowledge of Soviet-era war culture enables the “average height, average build” everyman hero to become a better soldier.

Krupennikov’s knowledge of Soviet culture, however, gives him a special insight into “real” heroism. He disapproves of his commissar’s discovery of Western rock music in the future, but praises Aleksandr Tvardovskii’s popular wartime poem “Vasilii Terkin,” offering a quotation from the poem — “No, guys, I’m not proud; I’ll agree to a medal!” — to educate his comrade in the future. He then refers to Chapaev, the Soviet-era byword for military heroism, to rally his troops: “We’ll go into the attack just like in *Chapaev*!” Vasilii Terkin and Chapaev serve as templates for appropriate wartime behavior, even in an unfamiliar future.

The protagonists of these works thus demonstrate fluency in a historical “truth” that makes them stronger, more moral beings. The specific selection of the *wartime* past — as embedded in cultural memory — as referent sites

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their actions in perpetual relation to an implied “apocalyptic” moment. Cultural memory has helped the author(s) (and, thanks to their emergence from the VVV discourse community, the other forum users) to “build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develop... an identity” for themselves (J. Assmann 2011). Here, Krupennikov’s work serves as the ur-example of a developed “identity”: a fully-fledged manifestation of the VVV community’s expectations of historical “truthfulness” and those expectations’ relationship with the apocalyptic moment embodied in the Stalingrad text.

Any reader familiar with the works of Vasily Grossman, Konstantin Simonov, Viktor Nekrasov, and other Soviet-era works about both Stalingrad and World War II would be instantly at ease in this familiar textual world. By unironically incorporating Soviet clichés into their texts, the VVV authors express a dual sense of belonging: to the Soviet cultural past and to the forum community. However, the inclusion of such references does not just reiterate the past, as when it comes to the annihilation/resurrection pendant, each of the authors under analysis *exaggerates* the Stalingrad of the past in the novels of the present.

Images of Stalingrad itself as the apex of destruction are at the heart of each novel. Aping phrases associated with the battle from its earliest literary representations in 1942 — when early Stalingrad writers suggested that crossing into the city was akin to dying and being resurrected (e.g. Simonov 1942) — each work compares battle to a fiery underworld. Kontorovich describes Stalingrad as an “impenetrable [*kromeshnyi*] hell” (Ch. 37); Tarugin and Ivakin describe their future Stalingrad as “a real hell” and “a personal hell”; and Koniushvskii’s protagonist crosses into a “firestorm” as he enters battle. Stalingrad thus becomes a byword for destructive sacrifice and suffering; indeed, Ivakin and Tarugin compare the “smoking ruins” of a colony in the future to the Dresden that “the officers already knew all too well by 1945,” and to Stalingrad itself. By invoking these canonical images of Stalingrad, the writers signal that theirs are to be “truthful” narratives of total annihilation for their 21st-century readers.

When Germans are replaced by Americans in the text, the limitless flexibility of reality in the sci-fi genre allows the nature of this annihilation to take on an even more hyperbolic scale. “The Manhattan Project is child’s play compared to this,” explains Kontorovich’s protagonist, as he uncovers an American plot designed to force Soviet defeat at Stalingrad. Koniushvskii’s German enemies — portrayed as monstrous soldiers who “philosophically” debate ways to kill “*untermenschen*” and relish “seizing... and publicly executing” Soviet civilians — are made yet more villainous by

their comparison to today's enemy: a captured German "deserves what he gets" as he "behaved like the Americans in [one character's] time"; "yanks" (the derogatory *amerikosy*) are "scoundrels [*mudaki*]" and a "despicable people" whose behavior in the 21st century is like that of the Nazis. This theme is most pronounced in Tarugin and Ivakin's novel, where thanks to "traitors" like Khrushchev and Gorbachev who "betrayed" Russia, America has won the Cold War and is capable of repeating and eclipsing the crimes of the Third Reich. Their "Western European rationalism" leads them to experiment on humans: "How are these modern scientists different from the bloody vivisectionists of the Third Reich?" (Ch. 3), asks one time-traveling soldier. Their victims, including two *shtrafbat* soldiers, are transformed into "pieces of bloody meat"; they are annihilated.

The textual world of the novels reflects that of the forum, using the most popular discourses present on the forum to paint the "real" Stalingrad as a battle against America that demands the sacrifice of Russians and their morality. The novels thus suggest that Stalingrad is not just an object of nostalgic desire, a moment to which the authors implicitly hope to return and to replay, but an event that, in its mythical form, has significance for the present and the future. By traveling in time, the protagonists of each work resolve the moral crises of the post-Soviet era. Ivakin and Tarugin's battalion are able to tell their descendants that the West "shit all over our [Soviet] Union." Coming face-to-face with the younger generations, they are able to interrogate, scold and educate: Krupennikov asks, "Why were you and I, Il'chenko and Zaits, sent to our deaths? [...] For what? For these lazy, self-satisfied descendants, who don't even remember the Great War?" The world of the future is one in which Western sexual promiscuity and drug-taking shocks the moral Soviets — especially Krupennikov, whose vision of correct soldierly behaviour is so thoroughly informed by canonical Soviet culture. Likewise, Koniusheskii's hero, Lisov, is delighted to return to Stalin-era morality and thus counter the traumatic chaos of the 21st century present.

In order to emphasize the possibility of redemptive suffering, the heroes of the works are each subject to a form of literal or symbolic annihilation and find themselves reiterating the Stalingrad's coda to annihilation — the story of the "new day." Kontorovich's Kotov/Leonov (the former his 21st-century name, the latter the wartime character he "occupies"), desperate to defend his position in Stalingrad, calls fire onto himself: "I thrust my hand out of the embrasure and fired a flare of the correct colour." He is killed by the ensuing barrage, which we learn about from his superior's report of his heroism: "I report that on the 29 August 1942... at 14:45 a signal rocket from the

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bunker indicated ‘Calling fire onto my position!’ and a concentrated artillery-mortar barrage was directed at the bunker.” Instantly, therefore, Kotov is written into a purportedly Soviet-era text as “Leonov.” Waking up in the present after his wartime death, the protagonist has attained the status of the wartime heroes of old — and thus seems capable of defeating the enemy of the present (indeed, it is no coincidence that *kot* means cat, while “Leonov” alludes to a powerful lion). This symbolic resurrection suggests that he will return to the “battles” of the present, imbued with a new heroism born of his self-elected death at Stalingrad; “Leonov,” meanwhile, will exist in the present as a model of heroic sacrifice to be summoned in further invocations of the Stalingrad myth.

Koniushevskii’s treatment of the annihilation/resurrection counterpoint is perhaps the most curious. Thanks to the actions of the protagonist, Lisov, the Battle of Stalingrad never actually happens — and, consequently, the USSR remains a dominant world power into the 21st century, counterbalancing American hegemony.

Without the destruction of Stalingrad, the myth of Stalingrad seems impossible. Nonetheless, the work is also canonical in two ways. Firstly, the *absence* of fighting Stalingrad is a prelude to the hero’s recounting to his colleagues — and to Stalin — a tale of the battle that draws on Soviet-era depictions: “They fought for every house, but the Germans, despite the strength of their assault, could not take them... those who fought these battles and survived feared nothing!” Thanks to its textual presence as a myth to be invoked, the battle still serves as a transformative moment for the ordinary soldiers who become heroes.

Secondly, the battle is replayed in fact through the hero’s *personal* sacrifice. Koniushevskii’s character is willing to embrace death as he takes on an entire German army single-handed, “knowing there could be no reinforcements.” Only by risking this death does he discover that he — as if in a video game — has miraculous powers of what Koniushevskii terms “regeneration”: “I wouldn’t have believed that this man was on my table just the day before yesterday! But what an astonishing speed of regeneration!” exclaims a surgeon. Lisov is thus repeatedly destroyed and reborn in the book. An absolute death would for Lisov be a release from his historical and moral obligation to play out sacrifice and thus save — resurrect — a possible future for Russia. Lisov therefore negates Tumarkin’s generational debt by single-handedly re-experiencing pattern of the myth: “Stalingrad” is fought; Stalingrad is not.

For each of the protagonists, re-experiencing a transposed but canonical form of Stalingrad that results in their personal annihilation opens up the

possibility of a personal healing of sorts. The loss of self, the dissolution into a past made up of war memories defined by materials from within the VVV forum, is accompanied by the lifting of what Tarugin and Ivakin call a “burden”: “A stone has been lifted from my heart,” explains Krupennikov as he ruminates on his inability to return to his own timeline. Framed within the myth of Stalingrad, the discourses of truthfulness and opposition to American hegemony allow users of VVV to create textual worlds in which the memory of Stalingrad is replayed in exaggerated form, and in which ordinary protagonists re-experience the *kairotic* turn — the “apocalyptic moment” — of the battle. They save the nation, save children, and save the future. Where time travel permits the VVV authors’ heroes to seamlessly span universal space and time and to eclipse the “real” Stalingrad with vastly more potent forms of annihilation and resurrection, death is, in Tarugin and Ivakin’s words “emptiness. It’s when there is nothing” (“Interliudiia”). Time travel is a method to negate one’s own death and the consequences of the USSR’s symbolic “death” — the troubles of the 1990s, the “forgetting” of Stalingrad, and the generational debt established by the death of millions of Soviet soldiers in the Second World War.

Conclusion: Writing as Fighting

These *popadantsy* works rely on the texts of the past, but they are not merely nostalgic recreations of the past, as some scholars of the genre have suggested. As a result of their invocation of the Stalingrad myth, the novels render any trauma, suffering, and sacrifice meaningful — reinforcing collective meaning for the “small circle of familiar faces” that made up the mnemonic community on VVV. The three works at hand did not prove universally popular when released publicly. Online reviewers of the Eksmo edition of Koniushkevskii’s *The Attempted Return*, for example, criticized the work as “plagiarized” and “unoriginal” thanks to its resemblance to other *popadantsy* works (litmir.net).⁸ Nonetheless, each work also received praise from VVV users, who lauded, for example, Kontorovich’s portrayal of “morality and ethics.” For members of this community, the *process* of communally reconstructing and consuming a form of truthfulness based in the constant reiteration of discourses sourced from the Soviet cultural past was more important than originality: Krupennikov’s lesson of “real war” learned at Stalingrad was not based in historical reality, but in the act of invoking a canonical version of the battle.

⁸ Nonetheless, responses overall were positive. The book’s overall rating as of fall 2024 stands at 4.7/5.

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I have argued that this process responded to the experience of what Oushakine terms a period of “despair” around the post-Soviet perceived loss of identity, stemming from purported attacks from the West and, especially, from America. Nationalist-patriots like those on the forum wove together discourses of truthfulness and anti-Americanism within the Stalingrad myth’s framework to generate meaning in the present. As one VVV user commented, “Our grandfathers’ sacrifices at Stalingrad guide our actions today.” Those “actions” were not just limited to *fighting* Stalingrad — as the Putin regime’s discourse supposes is happening today in some battles in Ukraine — but extend to engaging in the *process* of its metaphorical (re)creation. Stalingrad, as both the ur-apocalyptic moment of World War II and the subject of a canonical myth long established in Russian culture, served as the ideal target for the process of meaningful recreation.

Writing and reading Stalingrad, therefore, provided the key to reaching for the “apocalyptic” moment of myth: it enabled VVV users, no matter their actual literary abilities, to orient themselves toward what they perceived as the most apocalyptic moment in their history and thus assert repudiate perceived chaos in the present. A crisis of national and individual identity — of history and of memory — could be overcome by penning new iterations of the Stalingrad myth for, and with, other community members. My arguments cast light on how grassroots groups like VVV interact with memory in “deterritorialized” spaces; their interactions do not inevitably lead to more complex or developed war memories, or to ones that substantially diverge from state-approved iterations of memory.

I contend that this small community was an early part of a broader process in Russia, by which “deep-seated habits of memory” and “shared practices of remembrance” have led to an embrace of the terror, violence, and failings of the high Stalinist era (Haskins 2024). Indeed, each of the works at hand adds lashings of violence, chauvinism, and misogyny to the Stalingrad myth. Nonetheless, this study has indicated that, even in the groundlessness of “deterritorialized” internet culture, memory practices do not lead to endless fragmentation or individuation. Rather, meaning can be (re)generated quickly around existing myths perpetuated within a given community. By starting from a CDA approach, I have revealed the hidden processes of myth generation between and within two spaces — the forum and the literary work — where individuals collectively affirmed the importance and validity of efforts to respond to a crisis of meaning in the present. As a result, within this space, a fragile ontological stability could be asserted, which is an aspect of mythmaking present in other areas of Russian memory culture (Noordenbos 2021).

Today, understanding the processes of memory and myth creation, and their relationship with the politics of the present, is more vital than ever. In an apparently endlessly fragmenting internet culture, some scholars highlight the role of user-generated content in shaping memory politics around war (Karpova 2019, McGlynn 2023, Garner 2023, Gaufman 2023). As I have shown, users can work collectively and apparently at the grassroots level to use a body of pre-existing work to establish and reinforce the (re)production of a definite series of discourses. Group bonding online, then, is potentially just as important as the state's history projects in driving the perpetuation of these mnemonic cultures. Against the broader background of the Russian state's turn toward a postmodern politics and propaganda that saw memory and myth creation become increasingly fluid through the use of online spaces (Pomerantsev 2019), VVV members' collaboration in what they saw as a spontaneous series of discursive norm-making behaviours — choices made without the state's express involvement — resulted in the creation of cultural products that perpetuated and furthered the state's foremost myth of war.

Future work, as Russia continues to wage war in Ukraine, cheered on by groups of patriotic enthusiasts on newer networks such as Telegram, should delve further into these “deterritorialized” communities. These works could consider whether these communities' memory cultures are produced in dialogue with the state — or, as in the case of VVV, in dialogue with pre-existing repositories of cultural memory.

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