Politics of memory

Course instructor: Alina Thiemann, PhD
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Semester: Spring 2025
Time: Thursday, from 6pm to 8pm, via Zoom (Zoom link will be provided by instructor)

Course description

This course will introduce students to the interdisciplinary field of memory studies. We will study how societies remember, represent, and interpret their history, focusing on how political elites and various interest groups try to influence the way collective memory is formed and transmitted. With the help of theoretical readings drawn from sociology, anthropology, history, political science, and communication studies, we will discuss how contentious historical events such as the Second World War, Cold War and communism are remembered and represented in public discourses. At the end of this course students should be able to understand main concepts in memory studies and to critically observe how collective memory is shaped by media, political and historical discourses.

Learning outcomes

Students will acquire a good overview and understanding of theories and main concepts in memory studies, while building their skills in critically assessing academic literature. Students will also improve their capacity to analyze information from different sources and their ability to write essays, including referencing and bibliography.

Class schedule and bibliography

Session 1: Course overview. Intro to memory studies
Recommended reading:
Olick, J. K. (2008). "Collective memory": A memoir and prospect. *Memory Studies*, *1* (1), pp. 23–29.

Session 2: What is collective memory?
Mandatory reading:
Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Ch. 1 3, pp. 37-53.

Recommended reading:
Zelizer, B. (1995). Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication.* 12 (2), 214-239.

Session 3: Memory vs. History
Mandatory reading:
Wertsch, J. V. (2002). *Voices of Collective Remembering.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 30 – 66.

Recommended reading:
Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, *26*, 7–24.

Session 4: National days
Mandatory reading:
Geisler, M.E. (2009). The Calendar Conundrum: National Days as Unstable Signifiers. In D. McCrone and G. McPherson (eds). *National Days.* Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Recommended reading:
Simon, V.C. (2008). Nations on Screen: Live Broadcasting of Bastille Day and Reunification Day. *European Review of History.* 15 (6). 615-628.

Session 5: Commemorating wars
Mandatory reading:
Jay Winter (2017) Commemorating catastrophe: 100 years on. *War & Society*, 36:4, 239-255.

Recommended reading:
Seaton, P. (2016). Japanese war memories and commemoration after the Great East Japan Earthquake. In A. L. Tota and T. Hagen (Eds.). *Routledge international handbook of memory studies.* London; New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 345 – 356.

Session 6: The Holocaust
Mandatory reading:
Zelizer, B. (1998). *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 171-201.

Recommended reading:
Gibson, P**.** and S. Jones (2012). Remediation and remembrance: "Dancing Auschwitz" collective memory and new media. *ESSACHESS. Journal for Communication Studies*, 5 (2), 107-131

Session 7: The Cold War
Mandatory reading:
Saunders, A. (2009) Remembering Cold War Division: Wall Remnants and Border Monuments in Berlin, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17 (1), 9-19

Recommended reading:
Bach, J. (2016). The Berlin Wall after the Berlin Wall: Site into sight. *Memory Studies*, *9* (1), pp. 48–62

Session 8: Remembering communism
Mandatory reading:
Jones, S. (2011). Staging battlefields: Media, authenticity and politics in the Museum of Communism (Prague), The House of Terror (Budapest) and Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen (Berlin). *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 4 (1), 97-111

Recommended reading:
Bernhard, M. and J. Kubik (2014). The Politics and Culture of Memory Regimes: A Comparative Analysis. In M. Bernhard and J. Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years After Communism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Session 9: A European memory?

Mandatory reading:

Spohn, W. (2005). National identities and collective memory in an enlarged Europe. In K. Eder and W. Spohn (Eds.), Collective memory and European identity. The effects of integration and enlargement. Aldershot: Ashgate. pp. 1-16

Recommended reading:

Thiemann, A. (2012). European conscience and totalitarianism: Contested memory in the European Union. *Romanian Journal of Journalism and Communication*, 3-4. 59-71.

All class materials are available on Campus Numérique. The sessions will be held on Zoom (the link will be communicated by the instructor before the first session of the class).

Assignments and grading

Class participation (10% of the final grade)

For each session, students are expected to come prepared to discuss the assigned readings and participate in class discussions.

Weekly reading questions (20% of the final grade)

Starting with session 2, students are required to submit one question related to the mandatory text assigned each session. The question needs to be sent to the instructor by email before the session and no later than Thursday at noon. Questions are required from session 2 through session 8. No questions are required for the last session.

Class individual and group presentations (30% of the final grade)

On the one hand, students are required to bring a photograph that they consider relevant for the topic and the text(s) assigned for a session and to be prepared to share it in the class and briefly discuss their choice (individual assignment counting for 15% of the final grade).

On the other hand, students are required to make a group presentation in which to discuss one recommended reading (group assignment counting for 15% of the final grade).

Written assignment (40% of the final grade)

Students are required to write an analytic essay of about 2,500 words (footnotes and bibliography not included in the word count) based on a political discourse of their choice in which they discuss how the past is presented and used to shape the present and the future, while engaging with academic literature (including texts discussed in the class and at least one additional scholarly work). The choice of the political to be discussed needs to be communicated to the instructor latest by session 7.

The essay is due one week after the class concludes.