

Oral history and historical memory in the digital age: gender perspective

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Abstract - Based on the memories of the Great Patriotic War's contemporaries an article shows the possibilities of using the oral history method to discover new data on the largest historical event of the 20th century. It describes digital technologies of recording, processing, saving the received data, such as respondent stories recorded on digital media, transcribed and digitized texts of memories. Attention is paid to the gender aspects of the analysis of received materials, which allows us to state the essential gender characteristics of military interviews. The method of historical interview helps to shed light on the specifics of war's gender aspects, to find out assessments of certain events and phenomena related to the history of relations between women and men in wartime and to establish little-known facts. New data are introduced into scientific circulation, which allows restoring various aspects of attitudes, opinions, and assessments regarding the phenomenon of women's participation in a war, expanding the social, psychological and historical characteristics of such a social phenomenon as the Great Patriotic War, approaching its objective and multidimensional understanding. The results of the study confirm the expediency of this method to preserve the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War.

Keywords— *oral history, the Great Patriotic War, historical memory, gender perspective, digital technologies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The interconnection of oral history and historical memory is often in the centre of researchers' attention, which is due to possibilities that were discovered by the appearance of oral history as a scientific direction, and not only as a research method. For historical researchers, the value of oral history as a historical source has been obvious for a long time. Today, oral history has firmly occupied its place as an academic discipline studied in institutions, as

evidenced by its teaching and publication of textbooks, which describe in detail the methodology and methods of this modern historical science area [see for example Shcheglova, Fedorov, Kustyshev [1; 2; 3]. Consideration of oral history as a research method establishes a close connection between historical and sociological research, in the centre of which is historical memory. Sociologists are attracted to historical memory as "an expression of the process of organizing, preserving and reproducing the experience of people, country, state for its possible use in the people activities or for returning its influence on the public consciousness sphere" [4]. Historians point out the distinctive attribute of an oral historical source: the individuality and subjectivity of information reflecting the life experience of a particular person as a participant or eyewitness to historical phenomena and processes, his personal evaluations and perceptions [1, p. 38]. The question arises inevitably of the relationship between the social/collective and individual recording of historical events in memory, as well as their transmission. Which story is trustworthy? The one that the direct event participant told, having missed these events through himself, and then, remembering, talking about them, or the one written in textbooks, fixed in holidays, in commemorative practices? In our opinion the answer is obvious: the first one complements the second one, making it more capacious and objective. About this interconnection and the inclusion of one memory individual (autobiographical/internal/personal in Halbwichs; personal in L.P. Repina) in the other - external/social/historical, M. Halbwichs wrote that autobiographical memory uses historical memory, "because the history of our life is part of general history", while "the second, naturally, is wider than the first." [6] L.P. Repina underlines: "Even individual memories are a mix of personal and social. Memory itself is subjective, but at the

same time it is structured by language, education, collectively shared ideas and experiences, which makes individual memory also social. Memories are also social in that they relate to social relationships and situations experienced by an individual with other people. These memories, which include both personal identity and the fabric of the society, are essentially a means of reproducing social ties" [7, p.431-432]. The subjective nature of memory is also noted by A. Assmann: "Personal and collective memories are realized by a certain subject, enhancing his self-consciousness" [8].

Speaking about the methodological significance of oral history for the social sciences and humanities, the researchers note that it provides information almost not recorded by official documents and serving as a source for a number of sciences, noting that oral history sources as an established research direction - oral history - is still at the development stage [9, p. 4-5].

Also, important fact is researchers, working with the data obtained by the oral history method, pay attention to the gender attributes of oral history, talking about how information is exchanged during an interview, which events men and women pay attention to, in particular, that "oral history and its gender aspect leave aside the statistics requirements and the mass character principle" [10, p.90]

The digital technologies' development and the possible applications' expansion in the social and human sciences is an important aspect of using the oral history method for not only recording data, but also processing, storing, creating a common source base of studied period, the ability to work with this database for researchers located in different countries [see other: 11, 12].

Studying the link between historical memory and oral history, we decided to test the following hypothesis: how much individual memoirs of contemporaries about a particular event - the Great Patriotic War, obtained by interviews show the connection of personal and historical memory, whether war memories have gender differences, how men and women remember the same events.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS (MODEL)

In our study, we used the model of the historical interview developed by P. V. Fedorov [2]. We share the author's opinion of this model that "a historical interview is aimed to extract oral memories from the people's memory. Stored in the memory of people and orally transmitted information is fundamentally different from the information that is usually fixed in written text." We interviewed 76 informants, the Great Patriotic War events contemporaries, at the age of 75 to 94 years old living in Volgograd and Volgograd Oblast, Stavropol Krai, Arkhangelsk Oblast, on Sakhalin and other regions of Russia in 2019. The questionnaire was asked to recall the war's beginning, life during the hostilities (during the Battle of Stalingrad), the role of women in the war (at the front line), etc.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In introducing the study results, I would like to note the fact that older people have become our interviewees, so it often happened that they gave answers to questions that we

had not yet asked, and there was no need to ask a question. Therefore, we found ourselves in the situation described by R. Grelel in his work on the interpretation of the oral history interviews [13, p. 304].

The data we obtained as a result of interviewing the Great Patriotic War's contemporaries can be divided into several parts, these are interviews taken from war veterans, that is, direct participants in hostilities (7 people), then rear workers (6 people), and the large group of war children (63 people).

Our interlocutors were both urban residents and rural residents. This fact was reflected in the difference in the memories of the war's beginning among the respondents. For example, a resident of Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) recalls on June 22, 1941: "We heard about the war's beginning from black loudspeakers, such plates hung in houses. Probably, you know already. So, they declared war" (female, 88 years old). "We heard about it (the war) from the first days, because on the first day on the radio, then there were such big mouthpieces on the streets, they announced the Great Patriotic War's beginning" (female, 87 years old). And here a female resident of Krasnoarmeysky district of Volgograd said: "As the war began, so we learned. As they began to bomb us, so we learned. Before that, we heard that war was, but everything still was good, and we baked (bread) still, but how they started bombing, how they bombed around, how people ran around!" (female, 83 years).

A female resident of the Stavropol krai tells about the same event: "I learned in 1941 because my father was taken away, from the first days of the War. I don't remember that. I know that the Germans attacked our country. Well, 3 years old. What did I understand there? Nothing ...". To the clarifying question about the radio, she said: "Radio was only conducted when all the collective farms were united. We had 6 collective farms united in the one in the 1950s" (female, 81 years). A resident of Krasnoslobodsk recalls: "They announced on the radio, in my opinion, so ... We were the boys, I don't remember. Of course, either by radio or by phone. From the district ... In the district we had a military enlistment office, and we lived in the farms over the Don" (male, 91 years old). "Well, the war began <...> we felt that the war was going on a stream of refugees, in 1941, they passed from the west through farms, I do not know where they were going, - to relatives or anywhere else, the refugees went with their families until the last (days before the occupation)" (male, 84 years old, Pronin farm).

In this example, we see such attribute that, as a rule, our memory does not "highlight" when it comes to how the USSR people learned about the war beginning. It is different details of memories of the war's beginning of different ages people who lived in one case in a large city - Stalingrad, in the second in a Stalingrad suburb, and in the third in Stavropol Territory village or on a farm, namely, they learned about the war beginning, on the radio, but only where it was, or on refugees flowing through the settlements.

As the practice of history interview conducting shows, this procedure is very ambiguous and difficult in terms of emotion, since, by giving consent to the interview, its participants - elderly people, answer questions in very

different ways: someone with pain and feelings, which a story about the past stirred up, someone, especially veterans who often meet with schoolchildren, give general and “sample” answers to questions, someone hears bad and answers is not exactly the question asked, and someone with a grudge about their situation (loneliness, a small pension, the indifferent attitude of others, except for May 9). Much depends on the person, the features of his memory, as well as on the residence place of war contemporary, on his education level and activity type, on his marital status.

The memories of wartime children are jarring in their emotionality when they answer the question about “the smell that has remained since childhood. Does anyone association sit firmly in the head?” The interlocutor responds: “The smell of burnt meat. Therefore, I rarely fry meat, I do not like barbecue” and following answer the question: “Are there frozen pictures in your mind?”, we heard in response: “Yes. The first is a burning house, the second is a burning Volga” (female, 84 years old). Another the war contemporary remembers it so: “I especially remember the time when the Germans bombed such huge tankers, oil tanks, standing over the Volga. Oil flowed, floated on water and burned. The glow (was) from oil at night. We lived at a 20 km distance (from Stalingrad) and the light from the fire was visible. I remember also - I myself watched a large group of German planes flew through a flood plain (Volga-Akhtubinskaya). I heard an adult conversation: “They flew to bomb the Lenin railway station.” I saw how once a plane (German) was shot down from an anti-aircraft gun, it caught fire, and everyone watched a German pilot descending by parachute. Interesting that all the women grabbed who the pitchfork, who the hoe, who the shovel. They immediately caught the pilot, soldiers arrived and captured him” (male, 85 years old). These are memories of people trapped in Stalingrad during the Stalingrad Battle days. That is the interviewee woman living in the Bryansk region during the war said to the question “What do you remember about the war?”: “I remember about the war: in 1942 the Germans came to our village. Our village was among the forests, it is called the Bryansk forests, and during the wartime, the partisans made their base there, not far from our village. And for the fact that the partisans came to the village and the residents helped them with what they could, the Germans evacuated all the inhabitants. Some they shot. The Germans said that they were connected with the partisans and were shot for it, and all the other residents, including me, my mother and family, were loaded onto trucks, I can remember that it was called Studebaker, and taken to the station.” Vyshkov, “in order to send us all to Germany. But at that time my mom really believed in the God, prayed to Him and requested to Him for our family saving. My father was at the front, she had five children in her arms, and the smallest was a few months. And my mother prayed a lot and asked God to not allow us to be loaded into these wagons, which carry animals. And it happened that among those who guarded and loads us there was some very good mother’s friend, and he, in sympathy with us, managed to quickly take us away from this station, our whole family: mom and her children, and we were somewhere for several days; I remember that we hid in some apartments, and when this wave of departures to Germany (ended), the Germans took everyone they wanted to take, then we were taken to a nearby village.

And we lived there until 1945. And our village, where our house was and where we lived, was completely burned down, the Germans burned everything there, we had nowhere to go. And, only after my father returned, then we began to build a house, built it and I already remember: here, then the war ended, I remember that moment when my father came from the front. And some childhood memories of that time: I only remember that I always wanted to eat, that we were often hungry” (female, 80 years old). In this interview, we find a reference to religious faith, which, in the respondent opinion, helped her family to avoid sending to Germany.

Memories of the war of children survived this terrible event were the object of researchers’ group study who published a voluminous materials’ collection of in-depth interviews “Children and War: The Stalingrad battle and life in military Stalingrad in the memories of the city inhabitants” (Ryblova). Researchers note that historians who encounter oral stories about the war of people survived it in childhood note their little plot diversity, their closeness “on the family, neighbours, street”, rarely going beyond everyday life. The respondents themselves consider the researcher’s interest in this non-heroic page of their life with a certain degree of skepticism. Getting ready to a serious conversation about the war, which does not imply “some kind of sentiment” they often sincerely wonder why they are asked in such detail about the family, home, and friends [14, p. 28]. These are the aspects that we encountered. We can say that the interview materials taken by our team during the work on the study, to some extent, complement the materials presented in the mentioned collection.

The issue of women participation in the war is increasingly becoming the focus of the researcher’s attention [15, 16]. In our study, the gender aspect of the interviews is presented with questions about women, their work in the rear and at the front, for example: “Were there many women at the front? What they were doing?”; “How can you describe/characterize women’s work during the war years? What were the difficulties? Do you know about campaigns to help the front?”; “It’s customary to talk about female labour heroism, how would you describe/characterize it? What was it expressed in?”

For example, one of the war veterans, answering these questions, said the following: “Women were alone and worked [on the collective farm]” ... “I registered 30 women with military operations, one of our village women did such a catch, changed into German uniform, it turned out that many Germans were killed in this way, thanks to her we won There were almost no women with a rifle. She was with a machine gun” (male, 95 years old).

Another veteran says: “Women fought on a par with men. My brother ... worked as the head of the bath and laundry squad, washing and laundry. He had only women working. They washed and so on, they worked for the army, uniform and other laundry ... Bandages Yes. It’s scary” (male, 92 years).

“I studied in agricultural technology, in practice there were women mostly. How many grains did they shovel with a shovel? Now there is a technique, and then women [worked] shovel, they had families, they left their children, worked from morning to evening. I saw how in factories, in

the Chapaevsk city, I was just in wartime in this city, there made shells, cartridges, boxes for shells and cartridges. And the girls worked there, 13-14 years old, at the machine, even slept there” (male, 94 years).

At the same time, there are also such memories: “Well, at least there was not a single <woman> in our company, where they were: they could be nurses in the medical battalion, they could be radio operators at the regimental headquarters or telephonists, and there were no women in the ranks, so for all wartime, I have never encountered women. This is well shown by the Heavenly Slow Mover, there is a regiment of women flying in the An-2, well, they did a great job even better than any other huge planes” (male, 95 years old)

Memories of women rear workers of the same age as war veterans are somewhat different: “During the war, we were immediately identified for nursing courses. Two people from the military office trained us in military affairs. They took us to the field, they taught us to crawl. After that, we were assigned to practice in a military hospital. We came there and were immediately warned that contacts, relationships with men are prohibited. We were afraid to go there so that no one would grab us” (female, 92 years old).

“I worked on a collective farm, I also managed to plant my own garden. When to plant it? <...> At night - the moon (shines), as I remember now: the sky is light-bright and I came home from work, dug a garden with a shovel, it was difficult, not only me, but the whole farm worked like that, worked a lot, had a lot of work ”(female, 93 years).

“At first (the Battle of Stalingrad the beginning) I was just carrying soldiers on a boat. Sometimes I sail in a boat, and from above the Germans shoot from the plane. There is nothing to hide behind. And I put a cup on my head, and the bullets on it - boom-boom-boom, I heard. And then the wounded were taken to the hospital in Sarepta, and I bandaged them there. There was no medicine. We disinfected the wounds with cinchona. At first, I fainted: they were all covered in blood, who had no arms, who had no legs. It's horrible!” (female, 94 years)

Summing up some results, it should be noted that in speaking of the war, both veterans and home front workers emphasize the wartime difficulties, with different emotions, but at the same time paying attention to events significant to them. It is obvious that during the war women, for themselves and in the eyes of men, discovered new qualities and new forces in themselves that allowed them to overcome the “horror” and continue transporting the wounded, bandaging them, working at night, digging the garden under the moon, overcoming fear and hunger, although they were 15-17 years old at the war’s beginning. Our interlocutors, especially women, talk about Victory, remember this day, in fact with tears in their eyes because the war took their loved ones and relatives: “For me, I'm not happy in this holiday, I cry more over my daddy did not come home.”

IV. CONCLUSION

Our hypothesis about the connection of contemporaries` individual memories about a specific event - the Great Patriotic War, obtained by means of interviews, confirmed

the connection of personal and historical memory, and also confirmed the gender differences in the war memories, as men and women remember the same events.

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