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Rediscovering Identity: Autobiographical Memory and Media Discourses of Russian-Germans in Germany and Russia

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the processes of rediscovering identity in autobiographical memory and media discourses of Russian-Germans living in Germany and in Russia. According to R. Brubaker, the Russian-Germans are viewed as a transnational group with a specific “hybrid identity”, whose identification varies depending on the cultural project, which they are involved in. In Germany and Russia, the boundaries of this identification are the politics of memory of the host society and the dominant narratives regarding this group as repatriates (Germany) and as a diaspora with its own culture (Russia). Our analysis, which was based on the methodology of the critical discourse analysis by S. Jäger, revealed that such a dominant narrative in Germany is the “narrative of return”. In Russia, however, there are two discursive threads: the image of Russian-Germans as a repressed group and the narrative about the outstanding role of Russian-Germans in the history of Russia. The curves of autobiographical and family narratives of the three generations of Russian-Germans in Russia and Germany were analyzed and compared according to the biographical method of F. Schütze. People aged 30–50 were the most open to the influence of collective “standardized” narratives both in Germany and in Russia. Despite the fact of living in Russia, those respondents who were preparing to repatriate to Germany actively reproduced the “return narrative” and used international mnemonic frameworks to structure

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their autobiographical and family story. Our study showed that the influence of the discursive media environment on the autobiographical and family memory of Russian-Germans living in Germany and Russia depends on the respondent's individual life experience (the curve of their biography), age, and some peculiarities of their family history.

KEYWORDS

Russian-Germans, autobiographical memory, media discourse, critical discourse analysis, biographical method, return narrative, ethnic minority, hybrid identity

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Introduction

In the past decade, processes of ethnicization and construction of ethnic identity have attracted much scholarly attention. Among other ethnic groups, Russian-Germans represent a specific case of migration and cultural transfer. What makes their case particularly interesting, at the same time as difficult to study, is that they represent a kind of "double migrants". The ancestors of this group moved to Russia during the reign of Catherine II and, until the collapse of the USSR, they retained their cultural memory of resettlement and German culture. Then, they moved back to Germany in the 1980s and 1990s.

Since 1988, about 2.5 million migrants of German origin have moved to the Federal Republic of Germany from post-Soviet countries for permanent residence. In total, more than 4 million migrants from the former USSR live in Germany, which is about 4% of the country's population (Dietz, 2000; Laitin, 1998; Rock & Wolff, 2002). No less interesting is the fate of those Russian-Germans who remained in Russia and found themselves in a situation of rediscovering their ethnic identity in the 1990s, when an active revival of ethnic traditions and ethnic self-consciousness began (Mamattah, 2012; Mukhina, 2007; Münz & Ohliger, 2003). In modern studies, Russian-Germans are considered as a special transnational group whose identification varies depending on the project in which the participants are involved. The boundaries of such an identity are "fuzzy" and defined situationally. The priority here is not their ethnic roots as such but rather the networks of connections (Boyd, 1989; Brown, 2005; Kurilo, 2015; Sanders, 2016, Savoskul, 2006). This thesis, substantiated by V. D. Popkov (2016), is relevant both for the studies of Russian-Germans in Germany and for the studies of Russian-Germans in Russia. After the 1990s, there have been significant differences in the processes of ethnicization among Russian-Germans in these two countries, which determines the need for

a comparative analysis of these processes. This research gap has not been filled yet since the studies of Russian-Germans in Russia and Germany mostly focus either on the German (Brown, 2005; Kurilo, 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2011; Savoskul, 2006; Zeveleva, 2014a, 2019) or on the Russian (Mamattah, 2012; Mukhina, 2007; Vedernikova & Kravchenko, 2021) contexts.

This article aims at carrying out a comparative analysis of the narratives of Russian-Germans in Russia and Germany about rediscovering of their identity. These narratives encompass the autobiographical memory of the three generations of Russian-Germans and the media discourses of this ethnic group. The following three hypotheses are tested:

- The first hypothesis is that the narratives of the autobiographical memory of Russian-Germans are strongly influenced by this group's media discourses reflecting their cultural memory;
- the second hypothesis is that there are significant differences in the media discourses of Russian-Germans in Russia and Germany associated with the differences in the status of this ethnic group;
- the third hypothesis is that Russian-Germans in Germany and Russia use the media discourses differently to construct their autobiographical memory, with these differences largely depending on the age and personal migration experience.

Theoretical Framework

The starting point for our study is the constructivist idea of Rogers Brubaker (2004) about the need to separate ethnicity from the groups themselves, which was expressed in the concept of ethnicization. He associated this concept with a sense of joint belonging, which, like an event, happens or does not happen (Brubaker, 2004, pp. 22–23).

Viacheslav Popkov advanced Brubaker's ideas further and argued that combining with any cultural practices, ethnicity becomes part of the social reality of individuals, and is perceived as something natural, primordial, self-evident by them (Popkov, 2016, p. 121). For Russian-speaking groups, the defining characteristic is not ethnicity or citizenship but the Soviet cultural practices. Therefore, we are dealing with the transnational Russian-speaking space in modern Germany. The basic criterion that is applied to identify Russian-Germans as a separate ethnic group is, therefore, the Russian language (Popkov, 2016, p. 147). The next step is to describe the Russian-speaking residents of Germany as a peculiar transnational group, whose identification varies depending on the project in which the participants are involved. From Popkov's view, the boundaries of such an identity are "fuzzy" and are defined situationally. The priority here is not ethnic roots but the networks of connections (Boyd, 1989; Pattie, 1999; Popkov, 2016).

The above-described understanding of cultural boundaries clearly correlates with contemporary research on collective identity and social memory. For example, renowned sociologist of culture, Stuart Hall (1996), notes that the term "identity" can be understood as a "temporary attachment to the subjective positions that discursive practices construct for us" (p. 6). He also wrote:

I use “identity” to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate”, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken”. (Hall, 1996, pp. 5–6)

In our case, these are the discourses of the cultural memory of Russian-Germans.

The mobility of this “suture” of identity in the commemorative aspect was analyzed by Jeffrey Olick (2007), who proposed a relational approach to social memory. He proposes to consider collective memory as a certain combination of various social forms, spaces, and practices: from ordinary memories to general forms of maintaining a pattern. Memory is a social activity, a process, not a static object: “The analytical goal of research on collective memory should be to understand figurations of memory—developing relations between past and present—where images, contexts, traditions, and interests come together in fluid, though not necessarily harmonious, ways ...” (p. 91). We must understand, however, that the thesis about the constructability of cultural memory also has its limitations, since the construction of images of the past cannot but rely on elements of autobiographical and family narratives, which very often persist despite the influence of social discourses (Sietz, 2004). “The past, in some respects and under certain circumstances, stubbornly resists attempts to reshape it” (Schudson, 1989, p. 107). In our article, we will try to confirm this thesis by looking at the autobiographical narratives of the Russian-Germans, which, among other things, reflect the strategies these people use to adapt their cultural memory to the current reality of life in a specific country.

Autobiographical and family memory are two closely connected concepts, nevertheless, there are some important differences between them. V. V. Nurkova (2000) defines autobiographical memory as a subjective reflection of a segment of a person’s life path, which consists in fixing, preserving, interpreting, and updating autobiographically significant events and states that determine the self-identity of a person as a unique, self-identical psychological subject (p. 19). One of the significant cultural frameworks for constructing autobiographical memory is family memory, which, as A. Erll aptly puts it, “serve as a kind of switchboard between individual memory and larger frames of collective remembrance” (Erll, 2011, p. 315). C. Lenz and H. Welzer (2007) see the family as a relay between personal, autobiographical remembering on the one hand and public remembrance and official images of history on the other (p. 15). We believe that family memory is one of the environments where images and practices of historical culture are circulated. Historical culture, in its turn, is understood here as the social production of knowledge about the past and its manifestation in a community’s life.

The relational approach outlined above has already been applied in the study of Russian-Germans as communities of memory in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) by Olga Zeveleva (2014a, 2019). Based on the collected biographical interviews and analysis of the discourses of the cultural memory of Russian-Germans in the FRG, she showed that

the dominant discourse of the history of Russian-Germans is formed by the system of “filters” in the German host society, and these filters, in turn, were formed from the elements of individual histories. ... This understanding is reproduced as an averaged “collective history” of Russian-Germans in Germany. (Zeveleva, 2014a, p. 124, trans. by Andrei Linchenko & Bella Gartwig [A. L. & B. G.]

Comparing the official narratives shared by integration organizations and the German media, she was able to show the direct dependence of the autobiographical and family stories of Russian-Germans on these narratives:

In the case of repatriation, the host state plays a leading role even in the individual understanding of family history, as well as in the migrants’ understanding of their place in society through this history. This may lead to a collective sense of the history of the group as the history of victims. (Zeveleva, 2014a, p. 125, trans. by A. L. & B. G.)

In the case of Russian-Germans as repatriates to the FRG, it is not only the narrative of suffering throughout Soviet history that comes to the fore but also the narrative of return, which creates mythological grounds for perceiving the history of an ethnic group.

In our article, we would like to confirm these findings for the specific age group of respondents and to compare the role of the German and Russian contexts in the construction of autobiographical memory by the media discourses of Russian-Germans.

Sources and Methods

In the spring of 2018, we conducted 12 narrative interviews in Bochum, Dortmund, and Siegen, with the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Ruhr University in Bochum. Four interviews were conducted with people aged 20–30, five interviews with people aged 30–50, and three interviews with people aged 50–70. At the time of the interview, all the respondents were German citizens and had lived in Germany for at least three years. All of them were Russian-Germans. When forming our sample, we took into account the fact that Russian-speaking migrants could face different adaptation conditions in different cities. The federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia was chosen because there was a large number of Russian-speaking migrants in comparison with other lands (Ministerium für Arbeit, Integration und Soziales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2013; Worbs et al., 2013), which could contribute to the formation of a special transnational Russian-speaking space.

In the winter of 2022, we conducted 12 interviews in the cities that were previously part of the Volga German Republic (Saratov and Samara) and in Lipetsk. Four interviews were conducted with people aged 20–30, four interviews with people aged 30–50, and four more interviews with people aged 50–70.

The collected interviews revealed a number of similar tendencies in narrative descriptions. This article will provide quotes from the interview, reflecting the most typical and recurring opinions.

In our study, the methods of narrative psychology and biographical analysis described in the works of Fritz Schütze were used. This methodology is well known to researchers and has been repeatedly used to study the life histories of migrants (Treichel & Schwelling, 2006; Zeveleva, 2014a). Fritz Schütze (1984) proposes to consider a biographical story recorded in the course of a narrative interview as a conceptually unified one. The interviewer does not interrupt the narrator, allowing them to build the plot of the story in a free form. Only at the end of the interview, the narrators answer a series of clarifying questions, which in the language of the theory of Schütze is referred to as the phase of narrative questions (p. 80).

According to Schütze (1983), the history of life is a sequentially ordered layering of large and small sequentially ordered procedural structures (p. 284). With the change of dominant procedural structures over time, the corresponding general interpretation of the life history of the bearer of the biography also changes. The most important goal of Schütze's methodology is to correlate the informant's life history with their subjective interpretations. This is achieved through a comparison of such procedural structures as intentional processes (life goals of the biography bearer, actions taken by them in the process of overcoming difficult life situations), institutional patterns (prescribed rules of behavior on the part of the family, educational system, professional circle) and flow curves (general identity dynamics). In Schütze's analysis, flow curves can have both positive and negative meanings. Positive meaning signifies the curves that are ascending in progression, they open up new spatial opportunities for action and development of the narrator's personality as they become able to establish new social positions. Negative meaning, on the contrary, stands for the curves that are descending in progression, thus the narrator's space of opportunities for future action and development becomes limited by "layers" of previous biographical experience.

The direction of life curves can be determined not only by looking at the characteristics of the autobiography. As Olga Zeveleva (2014b) has shown, the discourses of the host society are an important source for migrants' meaning-making around their autobiographical and family memory. In her research, she relied on a wide range of sources: the newsletter *Volk auf dem Weg* [People on the Way], posters and texts of exhibitions dedicated to the history of Russian-Germans in Berlin, websites of integration houses in Berlin and Hamburg, and the official website of the Friedland border transit camps.

In this study, we have sought to evaluate her findings by applying the methodology of critical discourse analysis developed by Siegfried Jäger (2001) for the analysis of the media discourse of Russian-Germans in Germany and Russia. Jäger's approach focuses on the origin and transformation of valid knowledge and its function in the constitution of subjects and in the shaping of society (Jäger, 2001, p. 32). Jäger defines knowledge as "all kinds of contents which make up a consciousness and/or all kinds of meanings used by respective historical persons to interpret and shape the surrounding reality" (p. 33). In defining the discourse concept, Jäger follows Jürgen Link, who sees it as an institutionally consolidated concept of speech since it determines and consolidates action and thus already exercises power (Link, 1983, p. 60). Jäger's model is well-known and has already been repeatedly applied to the

analysis of printed publications. The research procedure includes the general review of the publication and the selection of specific fragments of discourse, the study of the context (visual elements, the structure of the presentation, the topics covered), description of rhetorical techniques (the form of argumentation, symbols, tropes), the isolation of the ideological component and the general intention of the text. The resulting in-depth analysis deals with the specific discourse fragments and the discourse strand. The “discourse strand” is an analytical construct that Jäger defines as the sum of text fragments (discourse fragments) on one topic (Jäger, 2001, p. 47).

To study the German context of the discourse of Russian-Germans, we turned to the *Volk auf dem Weg* newsletter for 2015–2021¹ and *Museum für russlanddeutsche Kulturgeschichte* [the Museum of Russian-German Cultural History] in Detmold². This way we were able to supplement Zeveleva’s findings. For the study of the narratives produced and reproduced by Russian-Germans living in Russia, we analyzed the materials of *RusDeutsch* portal³ and illustrated reference books dedicated to Russian-Germans (Cherkaz’ianova, 2016; Smirnova & Tishkov, 2021), the newspapers *Sibirische Zeitung plus* [Siberian Newspaper Plus]⁴, *Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung* [Moscow German Newspaper]⁵, and the electronic book of memory of Russian-Germans (Gedenkbuch, n.d.). The important source for us was the documentary *Russkie Nemtsy* [Russian-Germans] (2014) that was shown on TV channel *Kultura* [Culture] with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (Eisner, 2014). Our task was to analyze and compare the main discursive strands that can act as meaningful patterns for the autobiographical memory narratives of Russian-Germans in Russia and Germany.

The Repatriation Narrative in Media Discourse of Russian-Germans in Germany

The main milestones in the history of Russian-Germans, reflected in their family narratives and cultural memory, could be as follows: the resettlement to Russia in the 18th century, the establishment of the Volga German Autonomous Republic in 1924, the Stalinist repressions of the late 1930s and mass deportation to Kazakhstan in 1941, repatriation to Germany in the late 20th century (Mukhina, 2007; Smirnova & Tishkov, 2021).

As Zeveleva’s research showed, in all the interviews she collected in 2013–2014, the autobiographical dynamics unfolded within the framework of a specific family memory formula:

We were invited by Catherine II to the Volga region, where we lived and worked before the persecutions under Stalin. We were deported to Siberia and Central Asia, where our ancestors worked in the labor army. After the end of the war, we were discriminated against in the USSR. Then Helmut Kohl invited us to Germany, and we left because of the nationalist sentiments of the late 1980s and 1990s. (Zeveleva, 2014a, p. 118, trans. by A. L. & B. G.)

¹ <https://lmdr.de/vadw/>

² <https://www.russlanddeutsche.de/en/>

³ <https://rusdeutsch.ru/>

⁴ <https://bibliothek.rusdeutsch.ru/periodika/gazeti/6625>

⁵ <https://bibliothek.rusdeutsch.ru/periodika/gazeti/1058>

It is important to emphasize that the standardized narrative as a “narrative of return” (narrative of repatriation) was relevant for all the generations of repatriates with different levels of education, which leads Zeveleva to the conclusion about the “standardisation of stories as a way of explaining the link between personal storytelling and state discourses” (Zeveleva, 2019, pp. 640–642). In our study, we will try to confirm this idea and further elaborate on it.

We analyzed the issues of the *Volk auf dem Weg* newsletter for 2015–2020 as well as the main exhibition of the Museum of Russian-German Cultural History in Detmold, Germany. Since the discursive space of the newsletter and the museum is organized in accordance with multiple semantic strategies, we have selected the materials directly related to the representation of the history of Russian-Germans through the stories of individual families. The newsletter *Volk auf dem Weg* has a permanent section where narratives of the family memory of Russian-Germans are published. These include the stories about childhood memories shared by their parents and the stories dealing with the main stages of their lives.

The critical discourse analysis of family histories presented in the newsletter confirmed the conclusions of Olga Zeveleva about the presence of a standardized narrative (narrative of repatriation), which acts as a frame for family memory. As an example, let us look at the discursive strands identified in the narratives of the Häussler and Bender families.

The story about the Benders was published in four issues of the newsletter in 2015 (No. 6–10). Rudolf Bender told the story of his mother, Ida Bender, as well as her family history. The analysis of the context, rhetorical devices, styles of argumentation, and ideological components allowed us to identify several discursive strands in his narrative. The first and main discursive strand is presented as a narrative of the suffering of one family, through which one can see the fate of the entire people. The story emphasizes the uniqueness of the suffering of Russian-Germans, which is incomparable with anything else in the world history (Gossen-Giesbrecht, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). The second discursive strand of the story is presented as the story of Ida’s struggle for the rights of the Russian-Germans in the USSR and their rehabilitation. In this context, the image of the first Motherland arises, that is, the Republic of the Volga Germans, which the characters of the story seek to revive. The third discursive strand is the peculiar “fate” of Russian-Germans who return to Germany and find another Motherland. As a result, Ida Bender wrote a book about her family’s history, which can be seen as an act of completion of her family’s long and winding road.

The narrative of repatriation stands out in the autobiographical and family memory of Ida Häussler. The main discursive strand of her story was the resistance to Russification and the desire to preserve German culture through generations. The collective metaphor here is “life in a German cocoon” (Paulsen, 2020, p. 20, trans. by A. L. & B. G.). Her desire to write a family history as an autobiography is clearly visible in a number of sequences and can be seen as the second discursive strand. The third discursive strand is identified only after the interviewee was asked a series of questions about their family’s dreams of moving to Germany (*Der Traum von Deutschland*). And here the narrative comes closest to the typical German media narrative of repatriation

as Ida points out that from her early childhood, she heard her family members talking about returning to their historical homeland, Germany (Paulsen, 2020, p. 21).

We found a similar discursive strand in the expositions of the Museum of Russian-German Cultural History. The critical discourse analysis of the main exposition entitled *Ausgepackt* [Unpacked] showed that the narrative of repatriation is an important final part of the reconstruction of the 250-year history of the Russian-Germans. The entire historical path of the ethnic group is presented as a process of emigration to Russia and their subsequent return to their homeland, with the image of an unpacked suitcase symbolizing the end of this journey. Thus, the museum fully fits into the discursive space created by the integration institutions of Russian-Germans in Germany. Based on the works of Olga Zeveleva (2014a, 2014b, 2019) and our own research, we can conclude that the main discursive strand of this space is the narrative of repatriation, centred around the idea of a “fateful return” cultivated in several generations of Russian-Germans.

The Repatriation Narrative in the Autobiographical Memory of Russian-Germans in Germany

The analysis of the autobiographical narratives of Russian-Germans living in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia has given us a dual picture. On the one hand, it confirmed the conclusions of Olga Zeveleva about the presence of a standardized narrative of repatriation in most interviews (in 10 out of 12 interviews). On the other hand, the analysis of the historical experience of migration in autobiographical memory as a factor in the ascending biography curve shows that the influence of the repatriation narrative significantly depends on the age of the respondents. The autobiographical narratives of people aged 18–30 have only a few elements of this discourse, since for young Russian-Germans the experience of repatriation is mostly a childhood experience. Remarkably, all the interviews contain the images of Germany as a transit country, while the greatest preference is given to the countries of the Mediterranean and, first of all, Spain. A vivid example in this case is the upward curve of Marianne’s biography (18 years old), whose whole life is presented as a process of constant overcoming of institutional restrictions, where the experience of integration only strengthens her motivation for self-growth and development:

I have lived in Germany for seven years. I studied in Spain for a year at the university. When I came back, I realized how much people here are dissatisfied with their life, although they have everything they need. They have both financial and state security, insurance. In Spain it’s not like that. There everyone will say hello to you, wish you a nice day, no matter whether you are beautiful or not. People tell you what they think. They are not afraid to tell you their thoughts. Why should you be afraid? (Marianna, 18 years old)

The representatives of this age group consider their family past as an insignificant stage of their autobiography, demonstrating full acceptance of this narrative without

any critical reflection. For them, it is a given, since they cannot remember any other experience, except for the experience of repatriation.

In their autobiographical narratives, the people aged 30–50 were the most prone to interpreting their memory in line with the views on the Russian-Germans' past that are prevalent in the Western European discursive space. For example, they seemed more at ease talking about GULAG as a negative event and its impact than the other age groups. We found the largest number of elements of the repatriates' official narrative for the presentation of their family and autobiographical memory in the structure of the interviews of this age group. Since migration was a turning point for them, the level of openness to repatriation narratives was higher. Remarkably, they tend to view their family history and their own repatriation in line with the generalized family history in media, that is, as the story of their return to Germany. The example of an ascending biography curve is found in the narrative of Michael, for whom repatriation was not only about getting more opportunities but also about the fulfilment of an old family dream:

During my childhood it was always somehow emphasized that we were Germans. My relatives have been living here for 35 years. My mother's parents left a long time ago and when they came to us, they said that you would go there anyway, and somehow it was already implanted in the children's minds that we should leave as soon as possible. We only had to submit documents. (Michael, 40 years old)

A different situation is found in the case of a biography as a descending curve. For Elena (aged 36), migration marks the before/after watershed in her life. She perceives her emigration to Germany as forced because this decision was taken by her mother, who took part in the resettlement program. The main hypertext that frames the interview and runs as its leitmotif can be summed up by the phrase "I'm still looking for myself." This hypertext is found in almost all the sequences and is mainly represented by the arguments and dense descriptions. Furthermore, we found an internal text that can be summarized as "I am a Russian in Germany" in some descriptions and, to a greater extent, in a series of arguments at the end of the first part of the interview and in some answers to our questions. Despite the fact that the narrator puts some effort into constructing a chronologically sequential narrative, the rhythm of her story is broken in the sequences dedicated to her repatriation to Germany and the difficulties of the first years of life there.

Elena's case testifies to the dominance of the cognitive figure called by F. Schütze "Verlaufskurven" (life curve). Schütze (1983) illustrates his idea of life curve by discussing an autobiographical narrative of a seriously ill person, who tells how their illness began and progressed, how their place in the social space and their identity gradually changed. Retrospectively, the narrator strings all the events they reproduce into one thread—the formation and unfolding of the experience of the patient's suffering. In such a story, there is always a key moment that is a turning point for the narrator's life and biography: the memory of the starting point of the trajectory, of how the narrator felt sick or learned about their illness. In the case of Elena, such a turning point is her repatriation to Germany, which tore her life into two parts, "before" and "after". In this regard, the interpretive efforts made by Elena to present

her personal history only partially coincide with the biographical processes. Her intentional processes are insufficient to overcome the institutional restrictions, which creates the need for a constant reassessment of all the life's main stages. Migration and repatriation to Germany is interpreted and presented as a downward process, leaving unresolved the question of the biographer's further life strategy. During the subsequent inquiries, Elena said that she was caught between the two worlds and that she no longer thought of returning to Russia for good.

As for the people over 50, the situation was contradictory. This age group bears the family memory of the Soviet period, of deportation and discrimination. Therefore, we might have expected them to be the most ardent supporters of the use of the international narrative of repatriation as a mnemonic framework. However, only in half of their narratives did we find a connection with the official discourse of Russian-Germans similar to the one conveyed by *Volk auf dem Weg*. Their autobiographical experience after the repatriation sounds like the idea of returning to the land of their ancestors, as a result of the preservation of the German language and culture, as a positive result of the torments endured by the older family members in Soviet times. In this case, therefore, the elements of family and autobiographical memory are constructed precisely on the basis of the return narrative.

The other half of the interview demonstrated the persistence of the identity of Russian-Germans as "ordinary Soviet people", even though, by being subjected to discrimination, they were constantly reminded of their German origins. For them, repatriation was largely seen as a forced measure for economic reasons, and the experience of migration did not divide their life into before and after. Their accounts of their family history do not contradict the repatriation narrative, but rather provide a different perspective on it. An interesting example of such an interpretation of the topic of repatriation can be found in the autobiographical narrative of Eugenia (69 years old). In Eugenia's biographical narrative, we found two intertwining textualities. The main hypertext, which is the leitmotif, can be indicated by the phrase "I am a Soviet person and everything has always been fine with me." This hypertext is found in all the sequences and is mainly represented by the arguments. Furthermore, there is an inner text "I am a German, what can I do about it?" Here, ethnic identification is practically inseparable from her identification as a Soviet person. Telling about various life situations from her past and how she dealt with them, Eugenia always identifies herself as a Soviet person. Importantly, she makes a point of explaining who the Russian-Germans are and emphasizes that this ethnic identity does not contradict the Soviet identity. Concluding her story, Eugenia notes that she and her family came to Germany to "be Germans".

Identity Rediscovery in the Media Discourse of the Russian-Germans Living in Russia

In Russia, Russian-Germans use collective images of memory differently because they no longer act as repatriates but as a diaspora. It is important to note that after 1991, all the restrictions on the presentation of Russian-Germans as an ethnic group were lifted, which led them to rediscover their ethnic identity. In the summer of 1991, the *Soiuz v*

podderzhku kul'tury nemtsev SSSR [The Union in Support of the Culture of the Germans from the USSR], whose goal was to restore the good name of the Soviet Germans, to conduct cultural and educational work, to support scientific research, announced some important transformations: it sought to unite the already existing German meeting centers and centers of German culture from all over Russia⁶. The first major project of the Union was the All-Union Festival of the Culture of Soviet Germans in Moscow. In September 1995, in Anapa (Krasnodar Krai, Russia), the Union initiated the creation of the *Mezhdunarodnaia assotsiatsiia issledovatelei istorii i kul'tury rossiiskikh nemtsev* [International Association of Researchers on the History and Culture of Russian-Germans] uniting experts specializing on this topic. The Association's goal was to study and preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the ethnic group. Since then, the Union has regularly held conferences on the history of Russian-Germans, published scientific and popular science books and magazines, and conducted ethnographic expeditions.

Despite the fact that many people moved to Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Russia still has an established diaspora of Russian-Germans. We are talking about the institutionalization of the cultural experience of Russian-Germans in Russia. These processes are supported by a large number of organizations and cultural centers. For instance, in recent years, online portal *RusDeutsch*⁷ has turned into an integrative media center for Russian-Germans, providing information about all the main social and cultural events. For a more detailed analysis we chose the following rubrics of this website: the virtual museum of Russian-Germans, the electronic book of the memory of Russian-Germans, the history of the Germans in Russia, urban stories about the Germans in Russia, and the online exhibition “*Sovetskie Nemtsy v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny: Tragediia i Podvig*” [“Soviet Germans during the Great Patriotic War: Tragedy and feat”]. We also analyzed the newspapers *Sibirische Zeitung plus* [Siberian Newspaper Plus] and *Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung* [Moscow German Newspaper] for 2015–2021. We analyzed the fragments of their publications as well as illustrations containing references to family history.

The discourse analysis of the texts from *RusDeutsch* portal and from the newspapers of Russian-Germans shows us two main discursive strands: first, of Russian-Germans as repressed people and, second, of their outstanding role in the history of Russia. Let us look at each of them in more detail.

1. Repressed people. In this discursive strand, Russian-Germans are presented as one of the repressed peoples of the USSR. They are a nation that has been persecuted. The tragic stories of Russian-Germans are among the most important pages in the international history of the victims of political repressions. The stories of lives interrupted present the Stalinist repressions as an apotheosis of meaningless suffering. In other words, here we are dealing with the collective trauma caused by the mass persecutions and deportation of the 1940s. Importantly, this collective trauma involves elements of family memory as well as elements of the global memory of Stalinism and Stalinist repressions. In the last three decades, a substantial contribution to the construction of this global memory has been made by the international organization “Memorial”⁸ (in today's Russia it is recognized as a “foreign agent”).

⁶ <https://30.ivdk.ru/>

⁷ <https://rusdeutsch.ru>

⁸ Признан иностранным агентом Министерством юстиции РФ.

The international organization “Memorial” was created in the late 1980s as an attempt to use the memorial frame of the Holocaust in relation to the victims of Stalin’s political repressions and mass deportation of peoples. The discourse of Russian-Germans as “repressed people” fully fits into this pattern. Unlike the commemorative projects of “Memorial”¹, which actualize the theme of historical responsibility, the “repressed people” discourse of Russian-Germans avoids this topic and focuses entirely on the victimhood of this ethnic group. This gives the discourse an irrational dimension, pointing to the tragic fate of Russian-Germans in the era of persecutions. This topic is associated with empty spaces and silences in the narratives. Some vivid examples can be found in the online project of the book of memory of Russian-Germans (*Gedenkbuch*, n.d.), in the materials of the newspaper *Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung* [Moscow German Newspaper] (Larina, 2017), and in the documentary film *Russkie Nemtsy* [Russian-Germans] (2014). The film describes the history of two families, Eisner and Sieben, who survived the deportation and are still living in the Altai Territory. The history of these families appears as part of the history of the repressed people. It is significant that the questions asked to the members of the Eisner and Sieben families are exclusively related to the description of the hardships and difficulties of the war and post-war periods, their everyday grievances and problems with neighbors. The film, however, does not contain a single critical remark regarding the policies of the government and the Communist Party. It clearly illustrates the departure from the theme of historical responsibility (Eisner, 2014).

2. The outstanding role of the Russian-Germans in the history of Russia. The second discourse describes Russian-Germans as the people who have played a huge role in the technological and cultural development of Russia. This idea is conveyed through the description of the diligence and unity of the Russian-Germans living in the Volga region, Siberia, and near St. Petersburg. Significant attention is given to the big role of traditions in preserving the identity of Russian-Germans in their centuries-long history (Cherkaz’ianova, 2016; Smirnova & Tishkov, 2021).

It should be noted that this semantic line can be traced in the publications devoted to the history of Russian-Germans in Russia (Cherkaz’ianova, 2016; Smirnova & Tishkov, 2021). An important component of this discourse is the memory about Soviet Germans’ participation in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, which presents them as a group that suffered persecutions but remained loyal to their country (*Sovetskie nemtsy*, n.d.). In this regard, a good example is the story of Margarete Schulmeister that describes the history of suffering and the history of life of an ordinary Soviet person, who is helped not by the faceless state but by the good people around. In the interview for *Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung* [Moscow German Newspaper], she says:

At 96, I don’t have much time left for me today. With everything I’ve been through, it’s a miracle I’m still alive. I’ve seen a lot of inhuman things. But on my way, I have always met people who were like angels to me. The village school director Livshits, teacher Kogan, principal Mozhayev, the widow in Kokchetav—so many years have passed, but I often think of them. (Künzel, 2021)

Identity Rediscovery in the Autobiographical Memory of the Russian-Germans Living in Russia

As was shown above, the autobiographical narratives of Russian-Germans in Germany reproduce the narratives of repatriation (“narrative of return”) in their media discourse. However, speaking of the influence of media discourse on autobiographical memory, it is important to take into account the specifics of the host society itself as well as the tendency of the autobiographical and family memory to “resist” the discourse imposed by society. Therefore, after analyzing the discursive space constructed by Russian-Germans living in Russia, we are going to focus on the narratives of autobiographical and family memory. The analysis of biographical interviews with Russian-Germans in Russia showed the need to identify not only age groups, but also to consider their willingness/unwillingness to repatriate to Germany.

In our interviews with those Russian-Germans who are not planning to emigrate, we noticed the unequivocal dominance of the discourse about the outstanding role of Germans in the history of Russia. The narratives of suffering are least frequently observed in the interviews with people aged 18–30: for them, the German past itself is practically not articulated. In autobiographies, people of this age group demonstrate adherence to the same life values as ordinary young Russians. The family past is presented as a set of memories constituted by the stories of older relatives, but our respondents showed no desire to critically evaluate these stories. These respondents largely see their German origin as a circumstance that mattered in specific life situations:

My grandparents were going to leave for Germany. But they didn't succeed. They told me later that the German embassy recognized them and their children as German citizens but the Soviet government refused to give permission for their children to leave. They didn't return to this issue. But I didn't ask either. (Elena, student, 19 years old)

As a rule, the narrative about the outstanding history of Russian-Germans in Russia mostly deals with the achievements or the cultural role of grandparents or great-grandparents. The pages of the family history are presented as inseparable from the history of the country, the events in the story unfold against this background.

Among the 30–50-year-olds, we found three narrative strategies. The first narrative strategy was to describe the autobiographical and family history, where the most important driver is not the interviewee's ethnic origin, but the family life of the respondents and their satisfaction with their life in Russia. In this case, the narrative contains only fragmentary information about the tragic pages of the family's history and it does not directly affect the ascending curves of their stories. A vivid example is Inga's autobiography, whose main hypertext can be summarized as “I do what I love in this life.” As a subject of her life path, Inga makes interpretive efforts in presenting her life story in such a way as to be able to overcome the institutional limitations. The difficult family past appears here as a distant background which the narrator accepts with sadness but neither tries to analyze nor considers relevant to her present life. This

is clearly shown by the analysis of the internal text that can be summarized as “I am German, but I love Russia”:

It so happened that I have never been to Germany. I really want to go there. Of course, I need to see my closest relatives. My grandfather's brother corresponded with them for a long time. But in general, I am such a patriot of Russia ... despite all our stories that make life here uncomfortable and with all my admiration for Europe, I am convinced that I will not leave. I love to come back. I know there are all sorts of citizenship programs. And it would be nice to be there. I would not be able to live there permanently because I was born here. I love Russia very much and I love Samara very much ... For me, being a German is not something rational, something that can be broken into separate parts—one, two, three. For me, this is more of an emotional component. (Inga, journalist, 30 years old)

This trend is quite common among Russian-Germans: “discovering” new dimensions of their identity, our respondents did not associate it with the need to repatriate, instead pointing out the material and spiritual reasons to stay (Mamattah, 2012, p. 1927; Vedernikova & Kravchenko, 2021, p. 22).

The second narrative strategy is to keep silent about the repressions and deportation. The respondents deliberately talk about the positive pages of family history and their autobiography. In two interviews, as soon as the story touched on the issues of deportation and Stalinist repressions, the narrator immediately changed the subject:

Mother is a native citizen of Saratov region. My father's nationality is Russian, my mother is German. Naturally, grandparents from that side were also Germans. My father's parents were Russian. My grandfather was the director of the Trubechensky sugar factory, both under the capitalists and under the communists. Grandfather was married several times. My father is from his third marriage. At the age of 96, he went to the forest to get some mushrooms and never returned. On the mother's side, the story is very complicated: the repressions in 1942, 58th Article, Krasnoyarsk region, the village of Turukhansk. (Valery, retired pilot, 44 years old)

Further, the narrator abruptly changes the subject of the story and begins the story of the important role of Stalin and Beria in the career of his father, a military pilot. Thus, traumatic memories are supplanted by the “positive” history of the family, which, according to the narrator, is an inseparable part of the history of the country.

The third narrative strategy comes closest to those evaluations of the Russian-Germans' past that are given in international research literature on the crimes of the Stalinist regime. International memory images are used as a framework for self-presentation and reconstruction of autobiographical, family, and cultural memory and for reformatting the narrator's identity. We encountered the narratives of people preparing the documents for moving to Germany, which involved the reconstruction of family history in order to prove their German origin. Unlike other narrative strategies, in

this case, the experience of suffering of their family members turned out to be paramount. The mnemonic frame for them was not the memory of the repressed people but the narrative of the Holocaust. One of the narrators (Nadezhda, 62 years old) has shown us a prepared video material about the history of her family and its tragic pages. During the presentation of the video, we saw that she used music and footage belonging to the memory of the Holocaust (Soviet songs about Buchenwald, footage of the prisoners in Auschwitz) as a background. It is significant that the entire personal history of the respondents is described as a continuation of family suffering, which will be ended by moving to Germany. The narrative of suffering is linked with the narrative of return. Since the main hypertext of Nadezhda's biographical story is constituted by her involvement in the relationships with her relatives in Germany and by her dreams of repatriation, we may conclude that here we are dealing with an ascending biographical curve. The "German" side of her identity becomes a kind of a mirror in which her current life is reflected (Mamattah, 2012, p. 1934). Against this background, the efforts of the narrator to reconnect with the "German" side of her identity look completely understandable. To this end, she resorts to specific material practices: changing her Russian surname to her grandmother's surname, celebrating German holidays, restoring the recipe for baking "grandmother's" buns.

In the age group over 50, we are dealing with the biographies of "ordinary Soviet people". Therefore, the tragedy of the Russian-Germans is interpreted as a personal tragedy that affected the closest relatives. However, here we find the dominant factor, which is the need to move to Germany. In the cases where the respondent demonstrated a decision to leave for the FRG, the narrative strategy of returning dominated the autobiographical memory. Interestingly, it was not so much about returning to the land of their ancestors but about reuniting with the relatives who had left earlier. Thus, the German repatriation narrative was reproduced in a form that is specific to the autobiographical story:

Family should be there. As we all used to live, so we must live now. My brothers are all already in Germany. And I'm waiting for the permission. It turns out to be my second homeland. But the Motherland is where the native people are. (Anna, pensioner, 68 years old)

When the respondents do not intend to move to Germany, their autobiographical and family history elements are constructed around the two discourses at once—Russian-Germans as a repressed people and the role of the relatives in the formation and development of the country.

They ask me—why didn't you leave? I say, I can't answer the question openly. Mom and dad are here. They worked here, they raised the country. Because you were born here. Our language is Russian. There were various facts that kept me here. And Soviet society too ... we read books on Russian-Germans, history. We talk about holidays when we meet. It is hard to keep everything together without

a homeland. Everything seems to blur. You have to come to your historical homeland. (Erika, pensioner, 65 years old)

The use of the discursive framework of the outstanding role of Russian-Germans in the history of Russia acted as a kind of compensation for the losses and tragedies of the repressed people. This allowed us to reveal the upward curves of autobiographical stories in all the interviews of this age group.

Conclusion

The paper shows the potential of the synthesis of the biographical method and critical discourse analysis to shed light on how social discourses are adapted and transformed in the narratives of autobiographical and family memory.

The Russian-Germans living in Germany and in Russia are a peculiar transnational group whose identification varies depending on the project in which its members are involved. The boundaries of their identity are “fuzzy” and defined situationally, which, as we have shown, is connected to the differences in the processes of ethnicization of this group. For the German case, the processes of repatriation were of prime importance, while in Russia, this group has become a full-fledged diaspora over the past thirty years. Our article confirms the evidence of the previous research showing the strong influence of the host society and its discursive environment on the autobiographical and family memory narratives of Russian-Germans. We have also found, however, significant differences in the discourses themselves. In the media discourse of the Russian-Germans in Germany, the main discursive strand is the “return narrative” (repatriation narrative), which places the tragic history of Russian-Germans between the two waves of migration, from Germany to the Russian Empire and from the countries of the former USSR back to Germany. In the media discourse of the Russian-Germans in Russia, we found two main discursive strands: the former centres around the image of the repressed people without touching upon the problem of historical responsibility while the latter focuses on the outstanding role played by the Russian-Germans in the history of Russia.

Our study showed that the influence of the discursive media environment on the autobiographical and family memory of Russian-Germans living in Germany and Russia depends on the respondent’s individual life experience (the curve of their biography), age, and some peculiarities of their family history. Media discourse not only constructs but also in a certain sense “brings together” the elements of an autobiographical and family story, structuring and giving them a certain semantic orientation. People aged 30–50 were the most open to the influence of collective “standardized” narratives both in Germany and in Russia. This can be explained by the high level of their mobility, the need to integrate into the host society (in the case of Germany), and to pursue an active career (in the case of Russia and Germany). It was found that despite the fact of living in Russia, those respondents who were preparing to move to Germany demonstrated acceptance and active reproduction of the “return narrative”. They used international mnemonic frameworks to restructure their autobiographical and family story. The group of 18–30-year-olds in both countries used only certain elements of the media discourse of Russian-Germans, while for

those over 50, Soviet cultural practices and the perception of themselves as “ordinary Soviet people” were significant. At the same time, we found that for the older group, the German “return narrative” acquired a special significance for those respondents who intended to repatriate to Germany.

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