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*Alexander Makhov*

# **POPULAR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST IN DISCUSSIONS ON A CITY ONLINE FORUM**

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*Alexander Makhov*<sup>1</sup>

## **POPULAR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST IN DISCUSSIONS ON A CITY ONLINE FORUM**<sup>23</sup>

The article presents a study about discussions of the past on an online urban forum. This research addresses the question as to what kinds of knowledge about the past function in discussions on an online forum. To answer this question one needs to solve a number of concerns. First, we must understand what kind of source is provided by the chosen object, and how we should define the communication that takes place there, and how it influences the contents of statements on the past made by users of the online forum. Second, in the main part of this paper, I will examine the contents and the characteristics of popular knowledge of the past.

Keywords: Public Memory, Popular knowledge of the past, web-forum, online communication, Ekaterinburg

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<sup>1</sup> National Research University the Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia). The Poletaev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities (IGITI). Research assistant. E-mail: sun-arc@mail.ru

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Online debates about history are common and widespread. They can be found everywhere, on news sites and in online shops, on organizations' official websites, and in people's personal blogs. Internet users address historical questions in various forms and with different aims, and through their statements they produce popular discourse about the past. A study of these posts and discussions is interesting because it helps us to improve our understanding of the role that knowledge about the past plays in daily life, and reveals how this knowledge functions.

In this article, I will outline a way of studying popular knowledge of the past within the field of online communication. The target of the study was an online forum in the city of Ekaterinburg called E1.RU<sup>4</sup> (the reasons for this choice will be specified below). The research question addressed whether knowledge of the past functions in the discussions on an online forum. In order to answer this question, it necessary to firstly understand what kind of source is provided by the chosen target; how we should define the communication that takes place there, and how it influences the contents of statements made by users of the online forum about the past. Second, in the main part of this paper, I will examine the contents and the characteristics of popular knowledge of the past.

The aforementioned theme has not been studied in detail before, although in the last decade various works explored certain aspects of popular beliefs about the past and historical memory in the Russian segment of the internet. One of the first attempts to study the historical knowledge on Runet was by Irina Kaspje, who described and classified Runet's historical sites in the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>5</sup>. She also attempted to characterize the historical views of the creators of those sites and to classify their users.

Vera Zvereva's articles have also examined the use of the past in the mass media and on the internet<sup>6</sup>. Her work, and those of her colleagues who collaborated on the Memory at War project<sup>7</sup>, dedicated to 'wars of memory' and the memory of the War online, is particularly noteworthy. Similar topics have been studied in an article by Elena Trubina, where she analysed

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<sup>4</sup> Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: [www.e1.ru/talk/forum](http://www.e1.ru/talk/forum) (accessed 02.11.2014).

<sup>5</sup> Kaspje I.M. Predstavlenie istorii i predstavlenija ob istorii v russkom Internete // Istoricheskie issledovanija v Rossii-II . Sem' let spustja. M., 2003. P. 15-34.

<sup>6</sup> Zvereva V.V. Istorija na TV: konstruirovanie proshlogo // Otechestvennye zapiski. 2004. №5. P. 160-168; Zvereva V.V. Digital Diasporas and the Language of Memory in Russia and Ukraine // 'Memory at War' cultural dynamics in Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Cambridge: 2010-2012. URL: <http://memoryatwar.org/publications-list/Zvereva%20paper%20workshop%20June%202010.pdf> (accessed 02.05.2012); Zvereva V.V. On New Media, Memory and Identity in Russia // Memory at War: Blog. URL: <http://cambridgeculturalmemory.blogspot.com/2012/02/on-new-media-memory-and-identity-in.html> (accessed 02.05.2012); Zvereva V.V. Historical events and the social network "V Kontakte" // East European Memory Studies. 2011. № 7. P. 1-6. URL: <http://memoryatwar.org/enewsletter-nov-2011.pdf> (accessed 02.05.2012).

<sup>7</sup> 'Memory at War' cultural dynamics in Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Cambridge, 2010-2012. URL: <http://memoryatwar.org> (accessed 02.05.2012).

Russian language blogs in her study of the memory of WWII and its functions<sup>8</sup>. In his recent article, Roman Abramov presented a sociological analysis of collective nostalgia through blogs<sup>9</sup>.

In general, current online materials are underused as sources for research on popular historical knowledge. Perhaps the reason for this lack of interest towards an analysis of online communication is the stereotypical views of its virtuality and ‘otherness’, in comparison to ‘real’ communication. This stems from the lack of a suitable approach for studying these sources and analyzing the information they contain. This remains the main and general problem for all researchers who are currently analysing online resources.

### **The description and conceptualization of the online forum**

In order to understand popular knowledge about the past, which appeared on the online forum, the essential characteristics of the target must be defined, as must the communication taking place there, which can explain the meaning that this space has for its participants. This requires us to describe and analyse online communication in general, and the forum chosen for this study.

The Ekaterinburg forum was selected due to its importance as a space of communication for the city’s community. This was established based on statistics on the number of visitors to the forum and the general number of posts on it. According to these criteria, the Ekaterinburg forum E1.RU is one of the most successful on the Runet (Russian internet); every day it receives tens of thousands of visitors who leave around 70 million comments<sup>10</sup>.

The Ekaterinburg online forum is part of an informational online portal called Ekaterinburg Online<sup>11</sup>. The portal is a business venture and makes its money through advertising, by posting banners and hyperlinks on the site’s pages. The website was created in 1996, and was first owned by the ‘Golden telecom’ company, which made it ‘the most popular and profitable online resource in the Urals’<sup>12</sup>. In 2011, experts estimated that the website’s advertising turnover was 150,7 million rubles, that ‘in April of 2012, it attracted a daily audience of 387 279 people which was 77.2% of the city of Ekaterinburg’<sup>13</sup>. One of E1.RU’s most popular services is an online forum where a user can register for free and take part in discussions and polls. E1.RU has

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<sup>8</sup> *Trubina E.G.* Past Wars in the Russian Blogosphere: On the Emergence of Cosmopolitan Memory // *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. Issue 4. War, Conflict and Commemoration in the Age of Digital Reproduction. URL: <http://digitalicons.org/issue04/elena-trubina> (accessed 02.05.2012).

<sup>9</sup> *Abramov R.N.* «Sovetskij cherdak» rossijskoj blogosfery: analiz nostalgicheskikh virtual'nykh soobshhestv // *Internet zhurnal Gefter / Mihail Gefter: istorija i politika*. URL: <http://gefter.ru/archive/11282> (accessed 07.02.2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: [www.e1.ru/talk/forum](http://www.e1.ru/talk/forum) (accessed 02.11.2014).

<sup>11</sup> Karta forumov E1 // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum> (accessed 02.11.2014).

<sup>12</sup> *Druzhinin S.* Samye dohodnye i perspektivnye internet-proekty Ekaterinburga // *Delovoj Kvartal*. 18.06.2012. URL: <http://ekb.dkvartal.ru/news/samye-doxodnye-i-perspektivnye-internetproekty-ekaterinburga-236578057> (accessed 05.04.2013).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

existed for about ten years in its current format<sup>14</sup>. The most active traffic takes place on the 'Communication of the Auto Club' (CAC) page, and during peak hours about 1000 users access it. The forum is a large communication hub predominantly made up of citizens of Ekaterinburg and the regions surrounding it.

Since the E1.RU forum contains dozens of sections, each with their own topics and pages, it is not possible to examine them all. Therefore, I have chosen to discuss the section devoted to 'Communication of the Auto Club'. This is the main section where any questions about everyday life in Ekaterinburg can be discussed. Moreover, CAC is the most popular and dynamic part of the forum. The main criterion for the existence of a thread is visitors' interest in it, and so, the country's history is discussed here alongside that of the city's cafes and parking problems<sup>15</sup>.

Users communicate on the forum under nicknames, although a fair amount of users have already known each other for some time through their online communication, and so they are not completely anonymous. People on the forum find out about each other without any specific introduction, in a low-key style where information about the forum's users is revealed during their communication with one another. This information is usually inaccessible to an outsider, because it is not concentrated in one place but is dispersed throughout hundreds of comments and is accumulated only by dwellers. Some of them know each other offline because they organize public activity and spent leisure time together<sup>16</sup>. Usually a user is not just anonymous or open; some users may know them as a real person, and others may not know them at all. The fact that users know each other could mean that one's interlocutor is a real person and may encourage them to discuss questions more freely.

Various and rather strict rules concerning communication on the forum do not allow the conversation to die down. They also maintain equality between users, the forum's neutrality and interesting discussion content. The forum's rules include Russian laws and some of its own. The forum prohibits 'the creation of comments with false, discrediting, inaccurate, insulting, vulgar, aggressive or obscene content, or content that violates people's personal rights and is against the law'<sup>17</sup>. There is also a prohibition on advertising, the discussion of moderators' actions,

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<sup>14</sup> Statistika foruma za poslednie sutki: Karta forumov E1 // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum> (accessed 11.04.2014).

<sup>15</sup> Spisok utochnenij k pravilam forumov E1.RU / Centr podderzhki pol'zovatelej // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: [http://e1.ru/help/article.php?forum\\_rules\\_exception#67](http://e1.ru/help/article.php?forum_rules_exception#67) (accessed 21.04.2013).

<sup>16</sup> Pozdravlenie veteranov 2013 // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=11561255&t=11561255> (accessed 21.04.2013); Maslenitsa 2013...po tradicii // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=11463111&t=11463111&page=2> (accessed 21.04.2013).

<sup>17</sup> Pravila pol'zovanija forumami E1.RU / Centr podderzhki pol'zovatelej // Ekaterinburg online E1.RU. URL: <http://e1.ru/help/article.php?q=62> (accessed 21.04.2013).

‘flooding’, ‘trolling’, and provocative comments<sup>18</sup>. Moderators control communication, but since it is very lively, it is not always possible to control it completely. Therefore, there is an option on the forum to ‘notify the moderator’ underneath a comment. Often these flags force the moderator intervene; a moderator can remove threads and comments, issue warnings or block the accounts of transgressors for any amount of time<sup>19</sup>.

When examining discussions on the CAC forum, it is evident how important and relevant discussions on everyday topics are for people, given that problems on Ekaterinburg’s roads, increased prices and taxes, consumption and education in the city<sup>20</sup> are the main topics of communication. Users’ comments are rated not based on personal connections but according to a comment’s relevance to the discussion topic and whether it offers a good solution to one of the city’s problems. This gives the CAC forum more of a public character, and it provides a space for public dialogue where people’s common sense reveals itself. This feature - the relevance of discussions to urban problems, not the links to the users themselves – makes the forum an important urban public space, unlike a ‘circle of friends’ or a fan club. The public character of discussions on the CAC forum is facilitated by some of the site’s features, such as its popularity and people’s interest in discussing urban problems; the way in which people get to know one another; the equality of communication maintained by the forum’s structure and its rules, and, finally, the website owners’ economic interest in maintaining its popularity.

There are two essential points that ought to be noted when attempting to understand a forum as an object of research. First, an online forum is an active and developing space, which cannot be reduced to a set of comments left by its users. Second and most importantly, communicating on the CAC forum is a space for public urban discussion, not for idle chatting (although some users do just that). On the CAC forum, people look for mutually shared interpretations of urban problems, and the forum provides Ekaterinburg with a public space to that.

When analyzing popular knowledge of the past, I would like to stress that the way people communicate on the CAC forum defines how knowledge of the past emerges there. This environment is far from neutral; when analyzing popular knowledge about the past I will attempt to show how qualities of this space influence content and characteristics of this knowledge.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. URL: <http://e1.ru/help/article.php?q=62> (accessed 21.04.2013).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Den' parkomatov) Sakko i Vancetti // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=14622093&t=14622093>; Snizhenie urovnja zhizni // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=14620785&t=14620785>; Novye nalogi na malyj biznes // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=14621050&t=14621050>.

## **An analysis of discussions about the past on the forum**

It was previously mentioned that communication on the CAC forum dealt with all aspects of urban life, and so discussions about the past are intertwined with daily life, its routines and important events. Discussions of the past on the online forum are initiated on various occasions. These range from personal experiences to official commemorative events, and are often connected to an anniversary of an event, a film premiere, or a new TV programme. Discussions about Soviet history are the most active and popular, in particular the Great Patriotic War, the 1917 Revolution, space travel, the birthdays and deaths of Soviet leaders, the collapse of the USSR and a several other themes appear on the forum every year and attract a great deal of attention from users<sup>21</sup>. The titles of threads demonstrate that the past get relevant on the forum, and is linked to important themes which are well-known to Ekaterinburg's citizens: 'We know far from everything about the Great Patriotic War'<sup>22</sup>, 'Rurik's Slavic roots and the origin of the Slavic people...'<sup>23</sup>, 'The Map of Sverdlovsk, 1958'<sup>24</sup>, 'What we looked like in the 1990s'<sup>25</sup>. It is evident that the forum's users discuss not only the national past – Russian history and the world – but also the history of their city and their personal past. The link between the thread and public interest can be found in the users' comments beneath the thread. When opening up a new discussion, they tend to offer some arguments as to why it is important to them, such as: 'I always wanted to know where the Slavs came from <...>. Is it true that the name of our country was twice borrowed from foreigners? <...>. Meaning that they could not think of a name themselves', 'Walk through the old part of the city (preferably, in the summer) and look around. You can see traces left behind by a past civilization <...>. Once upon a time, the city was built for people, but who is it for now? For cars?' These and many other comments on the forum reflect the importance of the discussion topics for the public, and imply that they are not borne out of mere curiosity or interest. The polemical nature of the discussion, and the link between users' comments and significant events, demonstrates that discussions about the past acquired a public dimension on the urban forum: 'it seems ridiculous that mostly non-Russians have been

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<sup>21</sup> See threads: Avrora! Pli! // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=14624434&t=14624434>; On skazal: "Poehali" // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13657495&t=13657495&>; K 70-letiju snjatija blokady Leningrada // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13194721&t=13194721>; 5 marta 1953 goda, umer Iosif Stalin // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=11532920&i=11532920>

<sup>22</sup> Daleko ne vse my znaem pro WOW // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13944622&t=13944622>

<sup>23</sup> Slavjanskije korni Rjurika i proishozhdenie slavjan // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13275910&t=13275910&>

<sup>24</sup> Karta Sverdlovska 1958 // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=14181714&t=14181714>

<sup>25</sup> Kak my vygljadeli v 90h // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13916990&t=13916990&page=0&>

writing about the Russian state'<sup>26</sup>, 'trying to explain something to an ignorant Russophile <...> is almost the same as tilting at windmills'<sup>27</sup>. The past emerges in various contexts and encourages lively discussions or collective nostalgia. Therefore, the past can help users to reflect upon and make sense of their present.

However, although almost all active discussions about the past on the forum demonstrate a link to topics which are important for people, the discussions themselves are far from homogenous and differ widely from each other. The American public historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen were the first to point out the existence of various types or patterns of popular knowledge about the past. In their large-scale study called *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*<sup>28</sup> they have shown that a person's knowledge of the past is not homogenous, and is represented by a number of patterns which have different meanings in Americans' lives<sup>29</sup>. Using telephone interviews, the authors demonstrated how various past events are perceived by different people according to their life's circumstances<sup>30</sup>.

When examining discussions and statements about history and the past made by the forum's users, it is clear that they also tend to move in different directions, which could be classified into: discussions of national history (of the country or the world), local history (of the city and the region) and people's personal past.

Russian and world history is actively debated on the CAC forum, since these topics roughly coincide with the school curriculum and include discussions on important events, processes and people from world history. It is interesting that the public historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, as well as their followers Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, pointed out ordinary people's general lack of interest in national history<sup>31</sup>. They thought that people were more interested in their personal histories or their family's past, than that of the country. Conversely, users on the CAC forum have their most lively debates about national history. This difference can be explained through the context in which the past is addressed, where two cases are taken into consideration. First, the public historians came to their conclusions once they had studied individual telephone interviews by respondents, whereas the forum presents public communication, and so discussions about national history are more in demand here. Second, the reason behind the more political nature of these discussions and their links to the present could be because the forum's users try to find answers to crucial questions of

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<sup>26</sup> Slavjanskije korni Rjurika i proishozhdenie slavjan // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

[http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=13275910&i=13276093](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=13275910&i=13276093)

<sup>27</sup> Daleko ne vse my znaem pro WOW // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

[http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=13944622&i=13963574](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=13944622&i=13963574)

<sup>28</sup> Rosenzweig R., Thelen D. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York, 1998. 292 p.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 10, 12 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. P. 12-13, 21, 31; Ashton P. Hamilton P. *Connecting with History: Australians and their Pasts // People and their Pasts. Public History Today*. London, 2009. P. 30.



today by looking into the past. This is why the themes on Soviet history and changes in Russian political regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are the most popular discussion topics.

The past forms a basis for interpreting the current political situation, through discussions of national and world history. These topics turn into prolonged debates, where stances are determined by the users' ideologies and worldviews. Usually the past is linked to the present in the very first comment; an author compares the periods and asks others to evaluate the influence of past events on the present, as in: 'He took care of our country, and its independence. And now we are a supplier of raw materials'<sup>32</sup>, "I wonder what would have happened if there were no revolution in our former country? What would it have become?"<sup>33</sup> Often the mere titles of threads show that they merge debates on history and the present: 'the history of Russia 5:0 in relation to the West'<sup>34</sup>, 'The Russian education crisis: a look into the past'<sup>35</sup>, 'A letter from the past to our liberals'<sup>36</sup>.

The discussion of national history inevitably leads users to real problems. An overview of the USA's past military conflicts mutated into a discussion about Americans and their way of life<sup>37</sup>, and the topics about Joseph Stalin were became debates about the events of the late Soviet period; the causes and consequences of the USSR's collapse, and contemporary Russia's problems<sup>38</sup>. Connections to the present are evident even in discussions about the distant past, for example, in the thread about Peter I: 'when everyone was drinking in Europe, we only had mead and kvass <...> all problems were imported from Europe'<sup>39</sup>. National history on the urban web-forum becomes a place where ideologies clash, and where the Soviet or Imperial past serves as a landmark for contemporary Russia: 'REGARDLESS OF a 'small group of speakers' they won the Great patriotic War, travelled to space, built factories'<sup>40</sup>, or 'they put 'the Iron Curtain' up

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<sup>32</sup> Stalin // Ekaterinburg online URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=11522791&i=11522791](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=11522791&i=11522791) (accessed 26.04.2013).

<sup>33</sup> Istorija bez revoljucii // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5597491](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5597491) (accessed 26.04.2013).

<sup>34</sup> Istorija Rossii 5:0 v pol'zu Zapada // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=11616949&i=11616949>

<sup>35</sup> Krizis obrazovanija v Rossii, vzgljad v proshloe // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=6396655&i=6396655> (accessed 26.04.2013).

<sup>36</sup> Poslanie iz proshlogo nashim liberalam // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=5255626&i=5255626>

<sup>37</sup> ISTORIJA I BUDNI OBSHCHELOVEKOV! // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=3410011&i=3410011> (accessed 26.04.2013).

<sup>38</sup> Za chto Stalin vyseljal narody? // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=8329931&t=4370404&page=0>;

Stalin Iosif Vissarionovich // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=5900901&t=5762440&page=0> (accessed 26.04.2013); hleb dlja stalina // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=10946892&i=10946892>;

Stalin // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=11522791&t=11522791>.

<sup>39</sup> segodnja Den' rozhdenija e.i.v. Petra Velikogo // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

[http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=10228005&i=10242798](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=10228005&i=10242798) (accessed 26.04.2013).

<sup>40</sup> Istorija bez revoljucii // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5598002](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5598002)

and cut the country off from the global economy and pushed its scientific, technological and economic development 50 years back'<sup>41</sup>.

However, the connection between the past and the present and the politicization of the past can be explained not only by the fact that communication on the urban forum is public, but also by the way in which this kind of knowledge is construed. Here, the past is a united purposeful process in the development of states, people and humankind. Even when discussions about the past are not linked directly to the present, they are still dominated by the logic of a society's teleological development: 'it is normal for 'politary' Oriental despotisms to 'develop' cyclically'<sup>42</sup>, 'WWI would have begun under any ruler, this was a geopolitically determined process'<sup>43</sup>, 'history has repeated itself, is it possible or will happen'<sup>44</sup>. This characteristic of popular knowledge about history makes people think of the past as a source of real knowledge, which may be a 'guide' for the present: 'it will be broadcast again for those who did not learn history, in real time'<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, the arguments of participants in these debates on the past and present events are interwoven and construed according to presentism logic. It is unsurprising that discussions about the national past contain heterogeneous elements, including scientific, rhetorical and historiosophical arguments; comedians' jokes; well-publicized copies of documents; famous phrases and references to Wikipedia and statistics and personal experience all of which can be used to demonstrate a person's opinion. Everything that can be presented as an argument, or strengthen one's position, is used, from an opponent's personality, or the ethnicity of a historical figure.

As a result, the past loses its unique content, and what remains is just its external form. Events and people turn into timeless 'symbols', which are placed in an ideological framework, and can personify achievements and progress, or conversely, decay and degradation. Similarly, Michael Yampolsky maintains that: 'a place of memory in a general sense is replaced by a name. A name gives the illusion of constancy to two completely different realities'<sup>46</sup>. Consequently, world history is presented as a development of large supra-individual subjects, such as states, nations, people and humankind. These 'beings' are almost palpable for the forum users, and the participants do not doubt their existence. Therefore, they do not see a gap between the past and the present, and different epochs are developmental stages of one 'meta-subject', which has preserved the same set of characteristics over centuries. Moreover, it seems that these forum

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5598009](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5597491&i=5598009)

<sup>42</sup> Pro nashu istoriju // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=8943917&i=8944415](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=8943917&i=8944415)

<sup>43</sup> Jekskursija v istoriju // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5179459&i=5180087](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5179459&i=5180087)

<sup>44</sup> Ubito 6 mln chelovek // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

[http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=10018930&i=10020387](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=10018930&i=10020387)

<sup>45</sup> Za chto Stalin vyseljal narody? URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=4370404&i=4370541](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=4370404&i=4370541).

<sup>46</sup> *Jampol'skij M.B.* Nastojashhee kak razryv: zametki ob istorii i pamjati // *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. 2007. № 1. URL: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2007/83/ia6.html> (accessed 10.06.2014).

users think that these ‘supra-being’ are in a state of teleological development, constantly moving towards a goal, which remains the same for centuries. The interpretation of history in this form is reflected in comments on historical knowledge, which cannot vary or change, but should be true and describe ‘what really happened’. This knowledge is possible and absolute, and is determined by the view of the reality of ‘super-subject’ (such as state and nation)<sup>47</sup>.

These characteristics are typical and regularly reproduced in discussions of national history on the forum, and so it could be said that they create a set pattern of popular knowledge about the past. The core of this knowledge, which constitutes historical thinking, is the idea of the teleological development of ‘supra-beings’ such as states or nations.

The local past demonstrates another clear pattern of discussions about the past, which can be found on the CAC forum. Local history is discussed regularly and avidly by the users, and some threads have been continuing for months or even years<sup>48</sup>. The popularity of these discussions is explained by the fact that the CAC functions as an urban public space, where local history get relevance.

These discussion threads are based on users’ personal memories of the city, which are usually confined to the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is evident from the names of the threads: ‘last in the Union’, ‘K. Liebknecht Street in 1973’, ‘the anniversary of 4 October 1988 is coming closer’. The focus here is on material things, phenomena and relations in everyday urban life. A good illustration of this point is the thread entitled ‘a merchant in the past!’<sup>49</sup>, dedicated to the memories of Ekaterinburg’s first supermarket. Here, communication is focused on the consumption of household items and food in Sverdlovsk: ‘I could stay there for hours, and gaze at a clattering conveyor belt with iron baskets on those belts’<sup>50</sup>, “there was nothing to buy there, but people were enchanted just by walking through the empty hall <...> walking along an electric miracle of a till’<sup>51</sup>. Most often, the discussion about the urban past focuses on material objects, such as houses, streets, factories, transport, natural objects or food and their prices. There are also descriptions about people’s relationships at work, in the neighborhood or between friends, although this is less common.

Unusual events, people or phenomena are significant for the users of the forum, who remember what was extraordinary about it. The stranger it was, the more eager they are to

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<sup>47</sup> See thread: Rebenok izuchaet istoriju v 4 klasse // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=9600336&i=9600336](http://www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=9600336&i=9600336)

<sup>48</sup> Kurtka Boing 90-e // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=9211005&t=9211005](http://www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=9211005&t=9211005); Nashel tut fotki starogo Ekaterinburga // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13091331&t=13091331](http://www.e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=13091331&t=13091331)

<sup>49</sup> +++ kupets v proshlom! // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=2201115&t=2201115&page=0> (accessed 19.04.2012).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=2201115&i=2201146](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=2201115&i=2201146)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=2201115&i=2201302](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=2201115&i=2201302)

remember it. An example of this could be a thread called 'does anyone remember Bella??'<sup>52</sup>, which starts with the memories of Sverdlovsk's first transvestite, who 'roamed the city in the 80s wearing a woman's dress'<sup>53</sup>. Later the users turn to other 'weird' city dwellers: 'there was one – he used to hang out around the university and gave dirty poems to girls'<sup>54</sup>, 'Golizdrin, who raped a carp in the pond and sat in the barrel'<sup>55</sup>. With the exception of 'weird' citizens and various politicians linked to the city's history (such as Catherine I, Vassilii Tatishchev, Nicholas II, Boris Eltsin), there are almost no people in these memories, they simply merge into the urban background. There are also no references to the city's authorities and their work. The city administration, the communist party, politics and the official discourse of power are all excluded from people's memories.

The nature of communication between users also has nothing to do with the discussions of national history. Different opinions do not lead to conflicts and the users limit themselves to retelling their memories and commenting on each other's posts. Besides, users are often in agreement about their evaluation of the past, as nostalgic memories prevail here. It seems that this kind of communication is unexpected for the users too; one of them comments in surprise: 'it is as if we all were sitting outside and remembering ... all in a good mood <...> 800 plus comments, and no abuse... great...'<sup>56</sup>.

The lack of connection between the knowledge of the local past and ideology creates a special relationship to the present. They are not opposed, as in national history, but instead juxtaposed and compared. The urban past is interesting for users as something that no longer exists. It is no coincidence that many threads begin with a photo that encapsulated how the city used to look, its streets, houses and layout<sup>57</sup>. The discussion that follows offers comparisons and descriptions of old and new perceptions of Ekaterinburg, and its urban practices and norms: 'almost a hundred years have passed, and you can still find out where a photo of a church, or a mansion was taken, because you can go there now'<sup>58</sup>, 'there was an old wooden house between these two <...> my aunt lived there'<sup>59</sup>.

The urban past is not limited to the users' memories; they turn to stories told by their parents and grandparents, and then to books and reference materials; they go further back in

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<sup>52</sup> a kto-nibud' pomnit bjellu?? // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10113583> (accessed 12.05.2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10112904](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10112904)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10113659](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10113659)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10113558](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=10112904&i=10113558)

<sup>56</sup> Legendy Sverdlovskaja // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=11410940&i=11423221](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=11410940&i=11423221)

<sup>57</sup> K. Libknehta v 73 godu // Ekaterinburg online. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=11306996&i=11307764&page=2#11307764>; Ugadajte mesto v Sverdlovsk. URL: <http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&i=11419204&t=11419204>

<sup>58</sup> Ekamag v 1920 godu uzhe byl! // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=9807681&i=9807774](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=9807681&i=9807774)

<sup>59</sup> K. Libknehta v 73 godu. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=11306996&i=11307418](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=11306996&i=11307418)

time, from the 1970-80s to the 1920-30s and then to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: ‘few people know that there is a district in Ekaterinburg, which was planned almost a hundred years after Paris’s main square’<sup>60</sup>. The users also look at historical documents, searching for maps, photos and archival videos and study the way their city was before, and what has changed since.

Besides the aforementioned discussions, there is another kind of thread about the local past, which focuses on the place of the past in the city’s current daily life. The specific feature of this discourse is the strong influence of contemporary life on how the past is evaluated. The contents of these discussions is usually linked to the problem of preserving the city’s historical view (in threads such as ‘buried past’, the ‘Khimmath of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. – the destruction of the monuments to the past’). For some people, the mere historicity and authenticity of these objects defines their great value: ‘I love all these old things of the century-before-last <...> here is a wall with old brickwork ... I want to stroke it’<sup>61</sup>, ‘what is important is not the architectural value of these houses (although it is high enough), but the fact that these houses were standing there at the time of Napoleon and Alexander I’<sup>62</sup>. For others, there is nothing valuable in this past because it does not reflect their aesthetic preferences or utilitarian requirements: ‘a monument of the past should have some artistic value <...> Old things by themselves have no value’<sup>63</sup>, ‘I am fed up that there are no normal parking spaces, and their number, or absence, to be precise’<sup>64</sup>. These debates on the forum reflect its public character, as, in these discussions, the citizens of Ekaterinburg try to interpret their city’s historical heritage and understand its place in their everyday life.

Therefore, discussions about local history are another kind of knowledge about the past, which differs from national history but exists alongside it, and is rooted in the city’s everyday life. The ideological component is absent here, and there are no historical symbols with contested interpretations. This defines the discussions’ content and character

The last type of discussions about the past found on the CAC is linked to the users’ personal past. These threads are very popular with the users, who share memories of their childhood and youth, and their past emotions and impressions. The threads on people’s personal past tend to discuss old things, childhood hobbies, and their experience of public institutions. Discussions about things from the past are the most popular, particularly as the creator of one thread explains: ‘... I have come across things, whose true value has been forgotten. There is a

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<sup>60</sup> Legendy Sverdlovska. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=11410940&i=11433606](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=11410940&i=11433606)

<sup>61</sup> Planiruetsja uzakonit' snos 54-h starinnyh zdanij // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=35&t=1347236&i=1347296](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=35&t=1347236&i=1347296) (accessed 19.04.2012).

<sup>62</sup> Himmath 19 veka - razrushenie pamjatnikov stariny // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=35&t=1208986&i=1210061](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=35&t=1208986&i=1210061) (accessed 19.04.2012).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=35&t=1208986&i=1209396](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=35&t=1208986&i=1209396)

<sup>64</sup> A chto est' "Istoricheskij Centr Ekaterinburga // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=9878392&i=9880496](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=9878392&i=9880496) (accessed 19.04.2012).

reason why I called the thread THINGS (in capital letters. For at that time these were really the THINGS!!!<sup>65</sup>. This quotation shows how important things are in images of the past, such as clothes, household items and food. Everything related to the past has become a topic of lively conversation<sup>66</sup>.

Together with their memories of TV sets and tape recorders, the users tell stories from their lives which are linked to these items: 'my parents bought a Mayak-202 tape deck on credit, and I broke something in it immediately, used to listen to fairy tales on it'<sup>67</sup>, 'the 'grown-ups' used to walk along the streets with cassette tape recorders! And I looked at them and dreamed that my day would come too'<sup>68</sup>. These scrappy reminiscences reflect the wider context of the past with its values, views and relationships: 'I remember that in the early 80s I watched a TV programme, like 'the Time' ... it was about a camp of Palestinian refugees, and I was surprised to see that all the men there wore jeans and leather jackets! In our country at the time only directors of supermarkets were dressed like that'<sup>69</sup>, 'only the rich and those who travelled abroad had video players'<sup>70</sup>.

Material things seem to be the main topic of these discussions. Army service and people's school years are described though things that were common then; they are considered as objects, and their memories add to the memories about various life experiences: 'We used to take a metal detector and purposefully go to Chinese Zhou Li for plum wine, with an aluminum pot'<sup>71</sup>, 'we used to have an Australia club <...> they sent us puzzles, 2 sets, probably the only ones in the city in 1983'<sup>72</sup>. This focus on the material is the most important characteristic of the discussions about the personal past. Interestingly, public historians have reached similar conclusions. Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton maintain that museums and historical places have a high value for respondents because they consider them to be witnesses to the past. This approach to things is supported by the concept of direct access to the past, through immersing oneself in its experience<sup>73</sup>. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen also discuss the importance of museums, exhibitions and historical places for Americans<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> VESCHI iz proshlogo // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5378923&i=5378923](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5378923&i=5378923)

<sup>66</sup> See more on the topic: *Makhov A.S.* «Eto byli dejstvitel'no VESHhI!» Material'noe v pamjati o proshlom (analiz diskussij na veb-forume) // XIII Aprel'skaja mezhdunarodnaja nauchnaja konferencija po problemam razvitiya ekonomiki i obshhestva: sbornik studencheskih rabot. M.: Izdatel'skij dom VShE, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Privet iz proshlogo // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=7901855&i=7903594](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=7901855&i=7903594)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=7901855&i=7903588](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=7901855&i=7903588)

<sup>69</sup> "Sovremennye deti" // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513488](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513488)

<sup>70</sup> VESCHI iz proshlogo. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=5378923&i=5379329](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=5378923&i=5379329)

<sup>71</sup> Armejskie bajki // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=11486152&i=11487054](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=11486152&i=11487054) (accessed 18.05.2013).

<sup>72</sup> Uvlechenija iz proshlogo // Ekaterinburg online. URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=6826591&i=6829266](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=6826591&i=6829266) (accessed 18.05.2013).

<sup>73</sup> Ashton P., Hamilton P. Connecting with History: Australians and their Pasts. P. 31, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Rosenzweig R., Thelen D. The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life. P. 105.

At the same time, memories of family, friends, and personal relationships seem to be pushed to the peripheries, and are not a significant topic for communication. There are very few memories of national events, although these dramatically transformed the forum users' lives. An absence of the link between personal memories and the national past creates a friendly nostalgic manner of communication, where the users rarely argue among themselves: 'I'm reading comments, it all really happened like that, when I remember it, I feel like crying'<sup>75</sup>.

One more characteristic of these discussions is specifically linked to the space of the web-forum. People's memories are not focused on personal biographies or family narratives, but on various aspects of collective experience, such as material things, institutions or hobbies. The users discuss their personal past as part of a collective experience of consumption, participation, and interaction. There is a considerable difference between this and what Rosenzweig and Thelen claim about Americans' knowledge of their personal and family past, where personal memories and the family narrative is the basis upon which memories are built<sup>76</sup>. An explanation for this probably lies in the difference between the sources used to reach their conclusions, since the American historians used individual telephone interviews. The forum creates a different way of communicating which is public and makes users view their past within the framework of a collective experience, where each user can share others people's experiences and relate theirs. These conclusions indicate how important it is to understand the nature of the space where knowledge about the past emerges and is used.

## Conclusion

To conclude this study's results on popular knowledge of the past, this knowledge exists on the web-forum as a multi-layered phenomenon which is closely linked to the space in which it has been shaped.

Coming into question the space (where popular knowledge about the past emerges) helps us to understand how various aspects of the web-forum, which is linked to the technological, social, and economical aspects of communication, influence the emerging knowledge of the past. It also aids an understanding of how the public character of this space can be revealed in different ways in various discussions about the past, such as through national history and people's local and personal pasts. The past is connected to today's current problems through discussions of national history, while discussions of local history focus on problems of city life.

The analysis of the different patterns of popular knowledge about the past has demonstrated how changeable it can be in its characteristics and content. The borders become

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<sup>75</sup> "Sovremennye deti". URL: [http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513850](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513850)

<sup>76</sup> Rosenzweig R., Thelen D. Op. cit. P. 37-38.

clear when comparing national and local patterns, since both belong to the same users from the same forum, but they are surprisingly different. These ‘histories’ have practically nothing to do with each other either in terms of content, way of communicating, or their heuristic qualities. Discussions about the national past are focused on a few symbolic events of ‘big’ history, which are contested in the battle for the present, and local history is based on people’s personal memories of the city’s past. Unlike big history, the local and personal past has a consensual character, where users do not argue but instead build the image of their past together. The past is considered to be something which has happened and is interesting as an experience of another, albeit close point in time, in another society. However, we have seen that in certain circumstances the local past can be politicized and becomes a place where various groups’ interests conflict.

The discussions about local history are close to those of the personal past in terms of their characteristics, which are based on everyday life experiences and focused on the material aspects of the past. It should be emphasized that in the public space, the personal past loses its individual perspective and is built on collective experiences.

Therefore, knowledge about ‘big’ history, which, is firstly viewed as historic, is in fact, an empty form without any historical content, because it is not stimulated by interest in the past as the other patterns, but by the struggle to disseminate the opportunistic interpretations of historical events. Alternative knowledge of history exists at the same time, which is rooted in people’s daily life and human experiences. At first glance, this does not appear related to what we usually term “history,” and is focused on ‘unimportant’ things and phenomena. However, it encourages interest in the past as something ‘other’; another world, unlike the present one, something that is interesting to examine and compare with the present, even though it is not a real alternative to the present.



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## **Threads on the web-forum**

Sovremennye deti // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

[http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go\\_to\\_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513488](http://e1.ru/talk/forum/go_to_message.php?f=67&t=1513468&i=1513488)

5 marta 1953 goda, umer Iosif Stalin // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

<http://e1.ru/talk/forum/read.php?f=67&t=11532920&i=11532920>

A chto est' "Istoricheskij Centr Ekaterinburga // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

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Avrora! Pli! // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

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Daleko ne vse my znaem pro WOW // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

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Ekamag v 1920 godu uzhe byl! // Ekaterinburg online. URL:

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**Corresponding author:**

Alexander Makhov

National Research University the Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia).  
The Poletaev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities  
(IGITI). Research assistant. E-mail: [sun-arc@mail.ru](mailto:sun-arc@mail.ru)

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