

Shared Histories, Distinct Memories

A comparison of Chinese and Russian official media discourses on World War II



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October, 2023

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Extended summary

This report is the product of an unprecedented study of Russian and Chinese narratives on World War II. Combining quantitative, qualitative and comparative analyses, it examines a trilingual dataset comprising well over 14,000 news articles published by Russian and Chinese state-controlled media outlets over a time span of some two decades. The objectives of this large-scale investigation were to discover (a) how the two authoritarian regimes are mobilising official memory of World War II for political ends, and (b) whether and where their narratives on this critical episode in their recent history are converging to support their professed “no-limits” friendship. This study is thus unparalleled not just in scope but also in its innovative aims. Russo-Chinese relations have so far been studied and understood mainly in “hard” military-strategic and economic terms. We believe that adding a historical-ideational dimension to the mix will significantly enhance existing understandings of the nature, depth and potential durability of their partnership.

The result is a hefty report comprising 110 pages of analysis and another 50 pages of appendices and reference material. Given the groundbreaking nature and scope of the research, we see it as an important task to provide readers with a complete picture of our investigation and supply fellow researchers with detailed data and the necessary material to allow them to effectively build on our study, supplement our findings and redress any oversights in our work. At the same time, we are aware that this aspect may concern only a limited segment of our intended readership and that not all potential readers will have the time or stamina to plough through numerous pages of analysis, graphs and examples. It is with a view to this wider readership that we have provided this extended summary. By including cross-references to relevant sections of the report, we hope to enable our readers to effectively navigate this study and allow them to benefit from our research.

Essential context: The past in the present

Historical narratives matter. They are important not just for historians but also for practitioners, policymakers and the broader public. In recent years, historical statecraft has enjoyed a growing interest from scholars in the political sciences and international relations. This is because historical narratives shed light on the **world views and self-images** of those who create, promulgate and sustain them. In states governed by authoritarian regimes,

particularly, they can help uncover the strategic aims that inform policymaking but cannot be otherwise retrieved from the “black box” in which these processes take place and state actors operate. Historical narratives thus serve as invaluable “shortcuts” to understanding a regime’s strategic intent, ideology and propaganda aims.

This is especially true for official discourse on existential conflicts in modern history. War makes states as much as it unmakes them. Conflicts such as **World War II** tend to be at the very heart of nation-building narratives and national myths. This has been the case in Putin’s Russia from his first day in office as president, which coincided (though not coincidentally) with the celebration of Victory Day on 9 May 2000 ([section 3.3](#)). In Xi Jinping’s China, the “discovery” of World War II as an empowering foundational myth of the modern nation was of a later date, but the effort has been no less zealous and the result similar ([section 4.3](#)). In this process, our research suggests, Beijing has viewed Moscow not just as its main memory partner but also as an important model and source of inspiration ([section 5.4](#)).

In the past decade, Moscow and Beijing have taken various steps to align and connect their national commemorations of World War II. The first tentative signs appeared around 2010 but the trend really took off in 2015, when the state leaders visited each other during their national victory celebrations and delegations of their armed forces participated in each other’s military parades. To facilitate further alignment and **joint commemoration**, since 2014 the two sides have introduced new commemorative holidays, renamed existing holidays and aligned the dates of these official holidays. Moscow and Beijing have also joined hands in organising commemorations on minilateral and multilateral platforms, including the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the United Nations ([section 1.1](#)).

The importance both regimes attach to the memory of World War II is furthermore reflected in the introduction of new laws and measures in both countries aimed at protecting “correct” memory and criminalising the harmful “distortion” of history. In Russia, these **memory laws** specifically target the memory of World War II and the role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazism. In China, similar but more widely cast memory laws have been introduced and invoked to penalise and eliminate “incorrect” memory of World War II and state-endorsed war “heroes”. Developments such as these show that Moscow and Beijing agree that there is a single “correct” view on World War II and its legacies, and that it is up to them to promulgate, police and protect it.

Key findings (1): Narratives and discursive frames

Russian narratives

To map and systematically examine Russian state-sponsored media discourse, we performed a structural topic modelling (STM) analysis on two distinct text corpora containing news articles on World War II published between 2005 and 2022:

- An English-language text corpus comprising 2,784 news articles published by *Russia Today*, Sputnik and TASS.
- A Russian-language text corpus comprising 5,581 news articles published by TASS (Информационное агентство России ТАСС).

The STM analysis of the English-language text corpus resulted in a list of 16 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic and then clustered under four basic discursive frames ([section 3.2](#); [Annex 4](#); [Annex 7](#)):

- [Frame 1](#): Commemorating the Great Patriotic War (36.7%)
- [Frame 2](#): Documenting and preserving “historical truth” (27.0%)
- [Frame 3](#): Memory contestation and historical revisionism in the West (33.6%)
- [Frame 4](#): WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia (2.7%)

In our quantitative and qualitative analyses of trends over time ([section 3.3](#)), we found that Russian state-owned and state-controlled media since 2005 have produced a distinct and consistent discourse on World War II that centres on disseminating, defending and glorifying the “**historical truth**” of the war and its outcomes. This core “truth” holds that the Soviet Union was both central and indispensable in defeating Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and hence in achieving final victory both in Europe and Asia.

This “sacred truth” must at all costs be upheld and protected, the discourse suggests, as it provides a critical **basis for peaceful relations** with neighbouring states and the world at large. Distorting the “truth” inevitably endangers peace. This fixation explains why Moscow’s rhetoric hardened when governments of other post-Soviet states and EU member states began to resist Putin’s “truth” as “myth”. It also explains why the intensity and defiance of the rhetoric sharply increased following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In recalling the “truth” of World War II, moreover, Russia’s might, morality and victoriousness take centre stage, rather than the peace or freedom that resulted from it. The discourse thus explicitly links the memory of the war to Russia’s inherent **great-power status** and ambitions. This is furthermore reflected in the extensive coverage of military display and weaponry during the V-Day parades. By prioritising an abstract “truth” over concrete outcomes of the war (with some exceptions), the discourse aims to validate Russia’s prestige as global leader and urge the world to acknowledge and accept this prestige.

At the same time, the discourse also reflects the gradual “**personalisation**” of the Great Patriotic War by Putin. Reports on his family’s wartime experience and sacrifices, his solemn participation in the Immortal Regiment marches, and his fervent study of history and state archives reinforce the president’s domestic image as guardian of the “sacred” Victory Day holiday and as Russia’s “dutiful son” who keeps the national memory alive. Distorting Moscow’s truth thus not only equates to rejecting Russia’s major-power status but also signifies a direct attack on Putin as guardian of the national identity.

We found significant differences between Moscow’s international and domestic media output on World War II ([section 3.4](#)). Compared to the international news, domestic representations deal significantly less with the international aspect of war commemoration. To the extent that international memory contestation is covered, it focuses on the regional level. East Asia (Frame 4) and joint commemoration with China are virtually absent in the Russian-language corpus. This **divergence between external and internal discourses** suggests a lack of depth and substance to Moscow’s commitment to the memory partnership with Beijing.

Chinese narratives

To map and systematically examine Chinese state-sponsored media discourse, we performed an STM analysis on two distinct text corpora containing news articles on World War II published from 2005 to 2022:

- An English-language text corpus comprising 2,455 news articles published by *China Daily*, *China.org*, *Global Times* and *Xinhua*.
- A Chinese-language text corpus comprising 3,279 news articles published by *People’s Daily* (人民日报) and *Global Times* (环球网).

The STM analysis of the English-language text corpus resulted in a list of 20 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic and then clustered under four basic discursive frames ([section 4.2](#); [Annex 5](#); [Annex 8](#)):

- [Frame 1](#): China's victory and contribution to world peace (25.3%)
- [Frame 2](#): Japan's historical role and responsibility (18.4%)
- [Frame 3](#): Russia's Victory Day (20.5%)
- [Frame 4](#): Global legacies and lessons of World War II (26.6%)

In our quantitative and qualitative analyses of trends over time ([section 4.2](#)), we found that Chinese official media discourse on World War II is in a **state of flux**. Shifts and trend breaks were observed across all four frames. As a relative latecomer to the group of states in which leading elites use the memory of World War II as a moral foundation of national identity, state policy and – in this case – party legitimacy, flexibility is still apparent in the discursive framing and use of the “memory” of that conflict, particularly in the international context.

The most remarkable trend in the Chinese corpus is the spectacular rise of references to “**Russia**” across all topics, which also resulted in a separate frame for Russia's Victory Day. However, qualitative analysis indicates that these references are largely confined to contemporary events, such as Russian military parades and joint narratives on the lessons of World War II. Stories of wartime cooperation between China and Russia (the Soviet Union) or other episodes of shared history are scarce. Instead, the discourse is limited to the official, government-to-government level of the present-day bilateral relationship.

Our analysis demonstrates that Beijing's framing of the “**lessons**” of World War II is multilayered and multifocal, differentiating between domestic, regional and global audiences. For China's domestic audiences (which include the overseas diaspora), the “lessons” of World War II are used to foster national unity and coherence. In relation to Japan, the main lesson is that Tokyo must acknowledge its wrongdoings and refrain from expanding its military capacity and alliances. As to the global lessons of World War II, the main takeaway is that the international community must recommit to the principles of the UN Charter, defend multilateralism and facilitate the rise of developing countries.

In terms of the contemporary “lessons” of World War II and related notions of global order, it is worth underscoring that Beijing's narratives tend to **prioritise “outcomes” over the “truth”**

of World War II (with only a few exceptions). This may reveal Beijing's focus on the "harder" geopolitical dimensions of the war's "unfinished business", as reflected for example in its sovereignty and territorial claims (Taiwan, East China Sea, South China Sea) and its opposition to Western attempts to reform the UN and dilute non-intervention norms.

We found some notable differences between Beijing's international and domestic media output on World War II ([section 4.3](#)). Compared with the external narratives in the international dataset, the domestic representations of World War II remain more focused on Japan and pay less attention to Russia and the world at large. These **differences between external and internal discourses** suggest a lack of depth and substance to Beijing's commitment to the memory partnership with Moscow.

Key findings (2): Narrative convergence and divergence

Official Russian and Chinese narratives on World War II have several points in common. Both discourses emphasise that Russia (the Soviet Union) and China constituted the two major battlefields of World War II, made the greatest contributions to the defeat of fascist forces, and paid the highest price in securing the Allied victory. Both Moscow and Beijing directly link this **historical contribution** to their special position and prestige as major powers in the post-war global order. In comparing the Russian and Chinese media discourse on World War II we found that a substantive convergence of narratives was particularly strong around the following two common themes ([chapter 5](#)):

- **World order.** Particularly since 2015, both sides have routinely used the memory of World War II to profess their continued commitment and advocate worldwide recommitment to the principles of the "UN-centred, multilateral world order" and pragmatic cooperation between the major powers – the former allies and victors in World War II. Starting from 2020, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, this appeal has been concretised and also rephrased in negative terms to urge resistance to tendencies of unilateralism, isolationism and decoupling. Increasingly, Russia and China are presenting themselves on the global scene as status-quo powers and the US and the West as revisionists.
- **Historical truth/lessons.** There has been a growing consensus on the importance of remembering World War II and heeding its lessons. Both the Russian and Chinese discourses on World War II have attached increasing importance to preserving the

“historical truth” of World War II and protecting it against (what they denounce as) distortions by antagonist forces, particularly in their respective neighbourhoods (Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states for Russia; Japan for China) but with the support of the EU and the US. Again, it is the West (but here including Central Eastern European and some post-Soviet states) that are presented as revisionist. To some degree, the two discourses replicate each other’s narratives to support this.

At the same time, however, there are manifest limitations to Moscow and Beijing’s efforts to align their official memories of World War II. We have identified the following key limitations to the abovementioned trend of converging narratives:

- **Asymmetry.** A stark asymmetry was observed in their efforts to align World War II memory. While we found a striking rise in the prevalence of “Russia” as a topic and keyword in Chinese media discourse on World War II, Russian articles rarely reference China. The observed convergence is thus largely one-sided and reflective of shifts in the Chinese discourse, which tends to be more abstract and more volatile than the Russian one. Recently, there have been signs of regression in Beijing’s discursive alignment with Moscow following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.
- **Thin convergence.** Actual convergence is limited to high-level strategic narratives and reflects neither a concurrence of historical interpretations nor an apparent attempt to explore these. Particularly in the Russian corpus, but also in the Chinese one, stories of wartime cooperation and camaraderie focus more on the US than on the other. To the extent that wartime Soviet–Chinese cooperation features at all, the two sides favour different periods and events, in part reflecting diverging views on who deserves credit for defeating Japan.
- **Weak domestic basis.** Any convergence of international narratives is not grounded in their respective domestic discourses. In both cases, but particularly the Russian one, we found striking differences between English-language and native-language media articles. The Russian-language corpus contains very few references to China. Beijing’s domestic media output is more focused on Japan and pays less attention to Russia than its international one. There have been virtually no attempts on either side to cultivate or popularise a shared “memory” of the war.

These divergences may reflect differences in state identity, world outlooks and ambitions. Contemporary Russian discourse on World War II appears to be structured around the Russian “Self” principally along **ethical-thematic lines** with strong universalising, ideological undertones that are prone to inviting principled external opposition (or support). Contemporary Chinese discourse on World War II, on the other hand, appears to be structured around the Chinese “Self” principally along **spatial-thematic lines** with a more diversified focus on ad hoc, pragmatic goals in and beyond the region that may incite opposition (or support) on specific issue areas. Overall, Moscow appears to be clinging to the past more desperately and reactively than Beijing, which seems more intent on completing a practical, pro-active and forward-looking agenda.

Implications: De-escalate, do not emulate

Our research provides important evidence for the conclusion that the strategic friendship between Moscow and Beijing **lacks an ideational basis grounded in common historical narratives**. Despite a professed friendship that is rhetorically framed as boundless and timeless and that in theory could draw (though selectively) on a rich shared past of cooperation and solidarity, Russian and Chinese state-controlled media have produced very distinct, if not isolated “memories” of this critical episode in their recent histories. The lack of substantive convergence of historical interpretations sheds light on the inherent limitations to the nature and depth of their strategic friendship.

At the same time, however, the observed convergence, even if shallow and one-sided, gives cause for concern. Memory contestation may lead to justifications of acts of aggression and shooting wars. To prevent the expansion of current conflicts and eruption of new conflicts, it is crucial that existing memory disputes be dialled down. Although there are cautious signs that Beijing has sought to dissociate its historical statecraft from that of Moscow in the wake of the 2022 Ukraine invasion, official “memory” in China remains volatile. Minimising and **de-escalating memory conflicts** is a shared responsibility that rests upon actors on both sides of any geopolitical divide, and hence includes European actors.

This point is habitually overlooked in public debates in the West. Rather than mirroring Moscow and Beijing’s increasingly authoritarian memory governance practices, **European actors** should in our opinion refrain from dictating, codifying, authoritatively “fact-checking” and thereby ultimately securitising historical interpretations. Against this background, the

recent emergence of new memory laws across Europe and resolutions of the European Parliament regarding the causes of World War II are concerning developments that deserve to be critically reassessed and reconsidered. At the same time, committed efforts must be made to (continue to) ensure a safe and open environment at home for public and academic debate on controversial political topics.

Additional research is necessary to enhance our limited understanding of Russian and Chinese memory practices. Studying state-controlled media is important but insufficient. For a deeper understanding of the structural trends and the hand of the state in shaping domestic historical discourses it is necessary to examine historical representations in other media, such as standardised textbooks, museums (particularly in places nearby the Russo-Chinese border), and films and multimedia. We hope that future studies can build on this work, the methodological innovations on which it is based, and our findings.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Project aims and rationale

Eighty years have passed since the four major Allied powers of World War II signed the Moscow Declaration. In this statement, the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union and Republic of China pledged to work toward the establishment at the earliest possible date of a permanent global organisation for peace: the United Nations. Eight decades on, as living memory of World War II is fading, the official memory of that global conflict has become a battlefield of its own. With geopolitical and ideological tensions rising, strategically **mobilising history** helps national leaders not only to shore up legitimacy at home but increasingly also to legitimise and bolster foreign policy agendas. Possibly reflecting this trend, there are strong indications that Russian and Chinese historical narratives – and particularly those on World War II – have been converging in step with the growing strategic alignment and professed “no-limits” friendship between the two neighbouring powers.

A first such indication has been the **growing importance of World War II commemorations** in both countries. In Russia, World War II has consistently been at the core of the national narrative since 1945, but Vladimir Putin’s personal and political mission to memorialise, monopolise and mobilise this history, which grew with each new term in office and culminated recently in the introduction of memory laws glorifying the Soviet Union’s role in World War II, point to a heightened urgency and salience of the topic (Wood 2011; Edele 2017; Kuposov 2019; Radchenko 2020). In China, there has been a notable surge in public remembrance of what is officially known as the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, exemplified by the establishment of two national holidays to commemorate the war, the emergence of massive commemorative events nationwide, and the structural revision of history textbooks and museum exhibitions (Chang 2021).

A further indication is that top leaders of both countries have increasingly engaged in **joint commemorations** of the war. This started in 1995, when then Chinese president Jiang Zemin visited Moscow to partake in the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the victory in World War II. The trend was continued by his successor Hu Jintao but really took off in 2015, when

Xi Jinping attended Russia's Victory Day on May 9 and Russian President Vladimir Putin reciprocated during China's September 3 celebration, and the two states exchanged guards of honour to participate in each other's national military parades (Chang 2022a). That same year, China and Russia joined hands in initiating commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the victory of World War II at various multilateral forums, such as the UN Security Council, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS.

Recent years have seen a further **alignment of official dates and names** of Chinese and Russian national remembrance days. In February 2014, China's legislature passed a resolution creating a new national observance on September 3 to commemorate the "Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression". In April 2020, Putin signed into law a new bill that changed the anniversary of the end of World War II from 2 September to 3 September, thereby aligning the Russian commemoration of victory over Japan with that of China. In June 2023, the State Duma passed a bill to rename the 3 September anniversary from "Day of Military Glory" to the "Day of Victory over Militaristic Japan and the end of World War II", echoing official terminology in China (TASS 2023a).

A final indication is that Russia and China since 2015 seem to have begun actively **pushing a common narrative** aimed at denouncing perceived attempts in Europe, the United States and Japan "to distort history or whitewash fascism and militaristic aggressions during World War II" (*China Daily* 2015b). In September 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic raged, the Chinese and Russian ambassadors to the US published an open letter in which they urged Washington to honour the history and spirit of World War II and refrain from aggression, unilateralism and decoupling from the global economy (Chang 2022b). More recently, in a joint statement issued by Xi and Putin on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the two leaders again underscored the need to "uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order [and] resist attempts to deny, distort, and falsify the history of the Second World War" (Kremlin 2022).

These trends seem to be part of a broader dynamic which has seen the two "dissatisfied" powers working towards aligning historical narratives and sanitising official Sino-Russian history. Korolev and Portyakov (2019) have observed that "while there are cases of Russian war memorials being profaned in Eastern Europe and some post-Soviet countries, China has restored the existing monuments and built new ones to commemorate the Soviet soldiers". Looking at earlier stages of the historically fraught relationship between the two neighbouring

states, it is worth noting that Chinese textbooks since the end of the previous century have begun to downsize negative references to those “Tsarist Russians” who were among the imperialist powers that invaded China (Albers 2022). During a videoconference with Xi in 2021 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Sino-Russian treaty of friendship, Putin claimed that the document “absorbed centuries of positive experience of the development of ties between our states” (Kremlin 2021a).

Despite these strong hints of memory alignment, however, there has been no attempt to gauge the extent and depth of any convergence of Russian and Chinese historical narratives. This project combines innovative digital approaches and qualitative analysis to examine and compare official narratives on World War II. The goal is to assess if and how the two states are leveraging the past as a strategic resource for cultivating and deepening their proclaimed “friendship”. This adds an important dimension to the study of China–Russia relations, which so far have been examined and understood mainly in “hard” military-strategic and economic terms. By foregrounding the historical-ideational premises – or any absence thereof – of the evolving China–Russia relationship, this study will **enhance current understandings of the nature, depth and durability** of this important partnership.

1.2 Project design, methods and limitations

For this study, we analysed a total of 14,122 articles published by Chinese and Russian state-controlled media outlets between 2005 and 2022 that reference World War II. We divided our data into the following four text corpora: (1) English-language articles from Chinese outlets (CNEN), (2) English-language articles from Russian outlets (RUEN), (3) Chinese-language articles from Chinese outlets (CN), and (4) Russian-language articles from Russian outlets (RU).

Data collection and preprocessing

As this research aims to comprehensively analyse Chinese and Russian state media narratives on World War II between 2002 and 2022, news articles from all Chinese and Russian state media outlets within the chosen timeframe would theoretically be of interest. However, in view of time limitations and other practical constraints, we chose to limit our data corpora to relevant output from three Russian media outlets (*Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, *TASS*) and four Chinese outlets (*Xinhua*, *Global Times*, *China.org*, *China Daily*) that we believe are

representative of official positions. A detailed description of these outlets and the rationales for selecting them is included in [section 3.1](#) and [section 4.1](#) of this report.

The data extraction for this project took place in March and April 2023. The raw data for this study were selected by performing full-text searches with predefined [search terms](#) and retrieved either through automated web-scraping (using the R-packages [Rvest](#) and [RSelenium](#)) or by collecting the data from third-party commercial databases (such as [Factiva](#) and [Ringdata 锐研数据](#)). For details, refer to [Annex 2](#). We used parsing techniques based on regular expressions to transform the raw data to structured textual data and to extract relevant document-level metadata, such as dates of publication, names of media outlets, weblinks, and titles of publications. We then performed the following pre-processing steps to clean up and prepare the raw textual data for our computational analysis:

- **Word segmentation/tokenization.** As Chinese writing does not use spaces between characters, computers often cannot (reliably enough) discern individual words in Chinese texts. To solve this, we first segmentised the Chinese-language corpus using the R-package [JiebaR](#). This step was not necessary for the English-language corpora or the Russian-language corpus.
- **Trimming.** We used R-packages to remove punctuation, symbols and stopwords¹ from the text corpora. In this project, we chose to retain all numbers, as in the context of World War II memory these often have relevant connotations.²
- **Stemming.** We used the R-package [stm](#) to stem words. This is particularly important for the Russian-language corpus, as Russian is a highly inflectional language.
- **Matrix.** To allow for STM-based analysis, we used the R-package [Quanteda](#) to convert each of the four text corpora into a document feature matrix (DFM), which essentially constitutes a table listing the frequency of all words in all documents from that text corpus.

For our analysis, we excluded all articles from our corpora that were published from 2002 to 2004 because of the low quantity of data for these years. We furthermore removed all articles published in 2023 from our corpora. Data patterns and substantive content in this case are

¹ In NLP, words that are so commonly used that they contain little useful information are known as stop words: for example, 'a', 'the' and 'it' in English.

² For example, 1945, 70th anniversary, 300,000 victims and so on.

strongly associated with specific dates, such as dates of major commemorations and anniversaries (May in Russia; September in China, alongside other dates). As the data collection for this project was concluded in April 2023, the analysis for 2023 would not have included data on major anniversaries in that year. This would have presented an incomplete and unrepresentative picture of what World War II narratives in Russia and China look like in 2023. This does not mean that we excluded the data for 2023 altogether from our qualitative analysis; at several instances throughout this report, and particularly in [section 5.4](#), we reference news items published after 2022.

Data analysis: mixed methods

A principal aim of this research is to explore if and how Chinese and Russian media narratives on World War II history are converging against the background of the increasing strategic and normative alignment between the two powers. Shared narratives and discursive posturing may reflect shared geopolitical aims, whereas the absence of any expected convergence may reveal limitations in the depth of their professed friendship (Lams et al. 2023). This study therefore focuses on narratives aimed at **international audiences**, which is why the analysis of English-language news articles from Russian and Chinese media outlets is central in this study. However, contrary to the few available studies on Russo-Chinese strategic narratives, which tend to leave out native-language sources, this study also includes news items published during this period in the Russian and Chinese languages. This serves an important secondary goal: to assess whether (and where) there are significant divergences between domestic and international discourses and thereby to achieve a deeper understanding of how deeply embedded the international narratives are.

This project utilises a mix of sophisticated digital and qualitative methods. Computerised methods allow the analyst to “defamiliarize” from the data and reduce selection bias (King et al. 2017; Albers 2022). Concerns regarding loss of context in quantitative approaches (Yan and Vickers 2019) can be addressed in part by using NLP techniques that perform content analysis with reference to contexts, such as structural topic modelling (STM) and keyword-in-context dictionary methods (Benoit 2020). In this project we used STM to (a) identify topics in the four text corpora and (b) expose correlations between topic prevalence and document metadata (such as time of publication), allowing us to detect discursive shifts and follow up with in-depth qualitative analysis. Details of the STM process are provided in [Annex 3](#). Aside from topic modelling techniques, we also used dictionary methods to assess the convergence

between Russian and Chinese narratives and generate geographical patterns of memory contestation and memory alignment on controversial issues. This is discussed in [section 5.2](#) of the report.

Limitations

This research cannot and does not intend to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data included in the four text corpora or to explain all variations in topic proportions over time. Not all variations are plausibly caused by, or even correlated with, geopolitical incentives or strategic context. In other words, variations in observed topic proportion cannot always be explained by “what the state wants the narrative to be”. The following factors may help explain this:

- **Cyclicity and chance.** Commemorative activities are held more extensively during major war anniversary years (2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020). For instance, China only held the Victory over Japan Day parade in 2015. A spike in topic proportion in these years of news articles discussing World War II commemoration does not necessarily indicate a discursive shift in the narratives. At the same time, the production and timing of news nevertheless remains random insofar as it reports on unexpected events, such as archival finds, sensitive visits or salient remarks by politicians.
- **Data quality.** Issues of data quality may account for (unexpected) variations in the graphs (see [Annex 8](#)). This problem is mainly expressed in the low number of Chinese articles between 2005 and 2010 collected by this project, which may be the result of fewer commemorative events during these years, but also because some outlets periodically remove older articles from their website. Either way, if the total number of articles for the year in the corpus is low, a single article will have a larger impact on topic proportion statistics.
- **Data production.** Other factors that may contribute to inflation or distortion of observed trends are the gradual rise of duplicates of identical news articles in the Chinese corpus as a result of increased recycling both across and between outlets and the emergence in later corpus years of photo reports comprising multiple web pages, which each count as individual articles. These limitations underscore the importance of using caution when making inferences and engaging in qualitative analysis in the context of the existing literature.

In addition to data-related issues, there are limitations as to the quality and accuracy of our observations. The labelling of topics, classification of thematic frames, explanation of trends, selection of examples and analysis of narratives all rely on interpretation and inferences that are prone to unintended bias and subjectivity. This is inherent in any qualitative analysis, and particularly in cases where there are few precedents in available scholarship and research. Where possible, we have endeavoured to benefit from, triangulate with and incorporate existing knowledge and scholarship. Nevertheless, as our research ventures into uncharted waters, additional research will be needed to deepen and refine our findings. For a reflection on the methodological contributions and limitations of this study see [Annex 9](#).

1.3 Contents of this report

Organisation of this report

This report is organised as follows:

- [Chapter 2](#) provides a brief outline of **historical Sino-Russian relations**. This essential background provides readers with a basic reference for evaluating what elements of their shared history are highlighted or overlooked in contemporary narratives disseminated through state media.
- [Chapter 3](#) contains our analysis of the **Russian text corpora**. It focuses on the English-language corpus but also includes a broad comparison with the Russian-language dataset. We chose to start the analysis in this report with Russian media discourse on World War II, primarily because this became established earlier than the prevailing Chinese discourse, which likely has been partially inspired by developments in Russia.
- [Chapter 4](#) contains our analysis of the **Chinese text corpora**, focusing again on the English-language corpus but also including a broad comparison with the Chinese-language dataset. The analysis here is somewhat more extensive than that of the Russian discourse on World War II because the current Chinese memory paradigm is newer, discursively less stable, and even less well-known among Western audiences and analysts.
- [Chapter 5](#) contains our analysis of the **convergences** (and key differences) between the Chinese and Russian media discourses on World War II.

- [Chapter 6](#) contains our conclusions of this study and highlights the significance of our findings in the context of Sino-Russian relations and global politics.

Author contributions and acknowledgments

The idea for this project originated with Dr Vincent Chang after attending a series of inhouse workshops on quantitative research methods given by Eric Siyi Zhang MSc in the course of 2022. The idea was to supplement, expand and advance his research on Beijing's historical statecraft and memory partnerships by adding sophisticated quantitative and critical comparative dimensions to it. The authors came together in December 2022 to design the project and discuss it with LAC management, who gave their full support.

The division of work was as follows. Eric Zhang performed the quantitative research and did all preparatory work for it, including data extraction, data pre-processing and STM, with constant input from Vincent Chang. Both authors reviewed (samples of) articles from all text corpora and labelled the STM topics, save for the Russian-language text corpus, which was reviewed exclusively by Eric Zhang. The qualitative analysis was largely performed by Vincent Chang, with important and regular input from Eric Zhang.

After completion of the STM analysis in the summer of 2023, the authors analysed and discussed the results and planned the report. Vincent Chang designed the basic structure for the report, which Eric Zhang populated with results from quantitative analyses and their corresponding graphs. Most chapters were initially drafted by Vincent Chang and then reviewed and supplemented by Eric Zhang, but for some sections this process was reversed. Eric Zhang summarised the data for the Appendices.

LAC managing director Floris Harm and LAC academic director Dr Florian Schneider were kind enough to read parts of the report and provide useful input. Dr Stephen Acreman proofread and corrected the manuscript. LAC staff member Emma Burgers reformatted the manuscript and converted it into LAC house style, with the help of Koen van der Lijn. We thank these people and the LAC for their support. The report was finalised on 30 October 2023. The authors alone are responsible for the final report and its contents.

2. Outline of historical Russo-Chinese relations

Russian and Chinese leaders like to portray the relationship between their countries as one of good-neighbourliness and friendship. However, China–Russia ties have historically been fraught, and this is especially true for the period encompassing World War II. While a comprehensive review of these historical ties remains beyond the scope of this report, some critical moments in their trajectory must be outlined here as essential background. This serves to highlight the complex historical relationship between the two “friends” and provide a basic reference for assessing what key events in their shared history are either highlighted or overlooked in contemporary narratives disseminated through state media.

Tsarist Russia and Qing China (1689–1911)

Russia was among the first foreign powers to establish formal relations with the Chinese empire. In 1689, Tsarist Russia signed a peace treaty at Nerchinsk (尼布楚) with the Qing government of China, which defined the territorial boundary between their respective empires and settled jurisdictional, diplomatic and commercial issues. A second bilateral peace treaty, concluded in 1727 at the border town of Kyakhta (恰克图), gave the Russian tsar the right to send trade expeditions to Beijing and station diplomatic envoys in the Chinese capital. It also provided for the establishment of an ecclesiastical mission and a church in Beijing as well as a Chinese-language school for Russians. Securing the Russo-Chinese border in turn helped the Manchus to extend the state’s northwestern frontiers and expand into present-day Xinjiang.

In the 19th century the Russian tsardom took advantage of the severe crisis which the Qing found itself in following the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion. In an attempt to forestall war on an additional front, the Qing entered into negotiations with Tsar Nicholas I in 1858. The resulting Treaties of Aigun (璦琿) and Beijing forced the Qing to give up vast parts of its ancestral homeland Manchuria. The treaties, which saw the Qing state ceding some 600,000 square kilometres to the Russian Empire, would later be listed among a long series of “unequal treaties” with foreign imperial powers that successive Chinese governments sought to abrogate and that came to signify the “century of humiliation” in China’s irredentist, nationalist narrative, which persists to this day.

The Qing's humiliating defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) provided the Russian empire with new opportunities to exploit the weakened Chinese state. Using railway construction to expand into China's northeast (Manchuria) and unfold a program of economic colonisation, in 1898 Russia secured a 25-year lease of the Liaodong Peninsula. In the summer of 1900 the Russian army occupied Manchuria under the pretext of suppressing the Boxer rebellion, which saw an international force comprising troops of the eight major imperialist powers (including Russia) invade Northern China and capture Beijing. The Russian invasion of Manchuria led to a bloody conflict at the border town of Blagoveshchensk (海兰泡), where Russian Cossacks massacred thousands of Chinese as they sought to expel them from the Russian side (Zatsepine 2011).

The Soviet Union and the Republic of China (1922–45)

The end of empire and the emergence of a socialist state in Russia caused the new leadership to adopt an ambivalent attitude towards their southern neighbour as it sought to reconcile an anti-imperialist ideology with geopolitical imperatives. On the one hand, Soviet Russia continued to rely on military interventions in the 1920s and 1930s to ensure continued exploitation of the China Eastern Railroad in Manchuria and turn Xinjiang province into a de facto satellite state. On the other hand, revolutionary ideals coupled with mounting concerns over a rising Japan incited a growing interest in a more progressive and stronger Chinese state. This explains why Moscow simultaneously supported both the Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists and twice pushed for an “anti-imperialist” coalition between the two contending parties, first to unseat the feudal warlord regime in China (1924–27) and later to combat the Japanese invaders (1937–45).

Anxious to contain the Japanese expansion and prevent a direct security threat on its eastern border, the Soviet Union became the first foreign state to support China's resistance against Japan during **World War II**. In August 1937, just six weeks after the outbreak of war between China and Japan, Stalin concluded a non-aggression pact with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. Under a secret arrangement codenamed “Operation Zet”, Moscow dispatched “volunteer” air force squads to China consisting of professional Russian combat pilots who joined the Chinese army in a private capacity, thereby avoiding any formal links with Moscow. Under this arrangement, the Soviet Union transferred some 1,000 aircraft, 2,000 pilots, 500 military advisors, and large amounts of arms, munitions and supplies to China from 1937 to

1939. The flow of military aid notably slowed down with the outbreak of the war in Europe until it ceased altogether in 1941 following the conclusion of the Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact (Chang and Zhou 2017).

From 1941 onward, the United States and Britain began to support China's struggle. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor at the end of that year marked the beginning of a formal alliance between these countries in the common fight against the Axis powers. Although the Soviet Union did not join this alliance until the end of the war, the governments of the four powers issued a joint declaration in October 1943. In this statement, known as the Four Power Declaration, they pledged to work toward the establishment at the earliest possible date (after the defeat of the Axis powers) of a permanent international organisation for peace: the United Nations. In the ensuing weeks, US President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill successively convened with China's Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek at Cairo and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at Tehran to discuss strategies for defeating the Axis powers and the foundations of a post-war order. The year 1943 saw several turning points across various theatres and battlefronts. By the end of the year, the Axis powers had lost all prospects of winning the war (Chang and Zhang 2023).

The Soviet Union's early military aid had come at a critical juncture in China's lone struggle for survival. However, the onset of war in Europe and lingering distrust between the Chinese and the Russian sides prevented the Sino-Soviet quasi-alliance from developing into a full-fledged partnership (Garver 1988; Sun 1993). This distrust did not wane when Moscow denounced its pact with Japan in April 1945 and the Soviet Union and China finally became formal allies in the fight against Japan. Pursuant to a secret agreement struck earlier at Yalta between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, unbeknownst to Chiang Kai-shek, the Soviet Union was to be given a long-term lease of the naval base of Port Arthur at the tip of the Dalian peninsula and given back control of much of Manchuria, as reward for its entry in the war with Japan. In August, Soviet troops moved into Manchuria to attack the Japanese. In the process of occupation and subsequent withdrawal, they brutalized the local Chinese population with instances of mass rape, murder and pillaging (Heinzig 2004; Spector 2008).

[The Soviet Union and the PRC \(1949–91\)](#)

Stalin continued to support the Chinese Nationalists after the war. Essentially restoring former Tsarist privileges in Manchuria and taking away Mongolia from China, the Sino-Soviet

Treaty of Friendship of 14 August 1945 broadly reaffirmed the terms of the Yalta pact in exchange for Moscow's pledge to offer "moral, military, and other material assistance" exclusively to Chiang Kai-shek's government. As the Communists began to gain the upper hand in China's civil war, however, Stalin simultaneously intensified his practice of shadow diplomacy with Mao Zedong's Communist Party. In October 1949, the Soviet Union was the first state to formally recognize the People's Republic of China. However, mutual trust between Stalin and Mao remained minimal. In the ensuing years, PRC-Soviet relations sharply declined, culminating in the Sino-Soviet split of 1959-61 and a border conflict in 1969. Official ties were mended only in 1989 on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse.

[The Russian Federation and the PRC \(1991–present\)](#)

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Sino-Russian relations quickly improved. On 16 July 2001, Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin signed a treaty of good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. The treaty continues to serve as a cornerstone of the "special relationship" between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, which during Xi Jinping's state visit to Russia in June 2019 was upgraded to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era". In February 2022, when Putin visited Beijing for the Winter Olympics, the two leaders proclaimed that the friendship between their countries "has no limits" and that there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, transpiring days later, has led China to pursue a balancing act of neither openly backing nor denouncing or obstructing Russia's war effort. Beijing's strategic ambivalence and a stepped-up summit diplomacy in Central Asia have renewed questions of China's commitment to Russia and the depth of their relations.

3. Russian media discourse on World War II

3.1 STM analysis

Source selection and data extraction

Our analysis of Moscow's international media discourse on World War II involves a total of 2,784 English-language news articles published between 2005 and 2022 by three major Russian media outlets (RT, TASS and Sputnik). In Russia, not all major media outlets are controlled by the state. As we aim to analyse state-sponsored narratives, we selected only state-controlled Russian media outlets. Of these three, RT and Sputnik were created specifically for international audiences.

- **TASS:** TASS's predecessor – the St. Petersburg Telegraph Agency – was founded in 1905 as Russia's first state news agency. During the October Revolution, the agency was among the first institutions which was taken under the control of the Bolsheviks.³ TASS is currently the largest online media outlet in Russia, operating services in Russian, English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic.
- **RT (formerly *Russia Today*)** was created in 2005 as a branch of RIA-Novosti (a larger state-controlled media outlet), with funding from the Russian federal budget. According to the channel's chief editor, *Russia Today* "aspires to become a Russian BBC, and promote Russia's world view, and to make Russia more visible".⁴ Targeting international audiences, RT is known for its provocative style and regularly accused of spreading disinformation in support of the Kremlin (Elswah and Howard 2020).
- **Sputnik** is a Russian government-owned news agency that replaced *Voice of Russia* in November 2014. The latter was the legal heir of Radio Moscow, which was set up in 1929 as the Soviet Union's official international broadcasting station. With offices in various regions and countries, including the United States and China, Sputnik covers

³ <https://tass.ru/110-let-tass/1406180>.

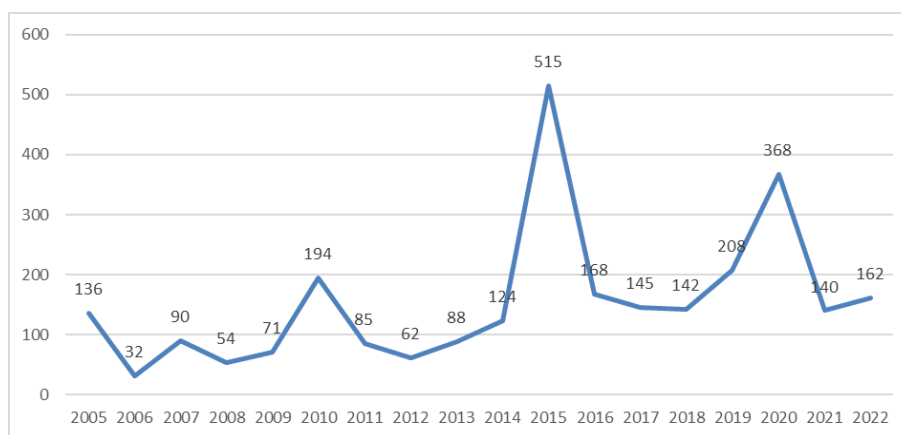
⁴ <https://lenta.ru/news/2005/06/07/channel/>.

“global political and economic news targeting an international audience”.⁵ It maintains services in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Farsi.

In Russia, World War II is generally known as the “Great Patriotic War”. Strictly speaking, this term exclusively denotes the Soviet–German conflict that started on 22 June 1941 (when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union) and ended on 8 May 1945 (when Germany signed the Act of Unconditional Surrender). In other words, the “Great Patriotic War” is regarded in Russia as merely a part – though by far the most crucial part – of World War II, which according to Soviet and Russian historiography lasted from 1939 to 1945. While the latter term has a global scope, it does not encompass the entire Sino-Japanese conflict, which lasted from July 1937 (or September 1931) to September 1945. Based on the various denotations of World War II in English-language Russian sources, we operationalised a list of nine search terms, which included “Victory Day” and “V-Day” among others (see [Annex 1](#)). These search terms were used to collect the data (see [Annex 2](#)).

English-language text corpus

The above steps resulted in a main text corpus comprising 2,784 English-language news articles from the three aforementioned Russian media outlets. A graph showing the distribution of news articles in this corpus over the period reviewed is included below:



⁵ <https://sputnikglobe.com/docs/index.html>.

This graph shows that the distribution of news articles over the years is uneven. We make three observations in this respect that deserve consideration when interpreting the findings presented in this report (see also [Annex 9](#)):

1. **Cyclicity.** The graph clearly reflects the cyclical nature of war remembrance practices. The number of retrieved articles shows apparent spikes in each of the 5-year jubilee anniversary years (2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020) commemorating the victory of World War II. Special 5-year anniversaries of Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany in June 1941) have no apparent impact on the quantity of publications.
2. **Rising trend.** The quantity of retrieved articles is structurally higher for more recent years. This may reflect the heightened topicality of World War II in Russia since 2015. As subsequent sections will show, several previously insignificant topics have become more salient in Russian state media discourse during the 2010s, whilst new topics have also emerged. At the same time, however, the observed trend could also be caused by additional factors unrelated to possible discursive shifts (see the next point).
3. **Data limitations.** There are data-related factors that may distort and minimise earlier trends for multiple reasons. In the 2000s, media outlets were far more reliant on non-digital platforms such as newspapers. Even if news articles were digitised at the time of their publication, it is still possible that they were removed later. More generally, it is possible that older articles have subsequently been removed from the web.

3.2 Corpus-level findings: conceptualising Russian narratives

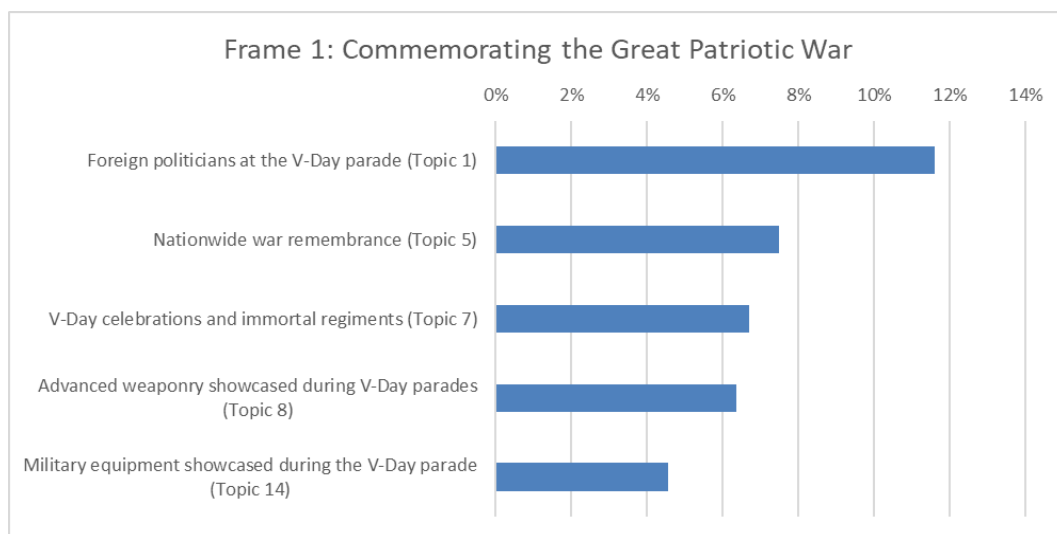
Topics and frames

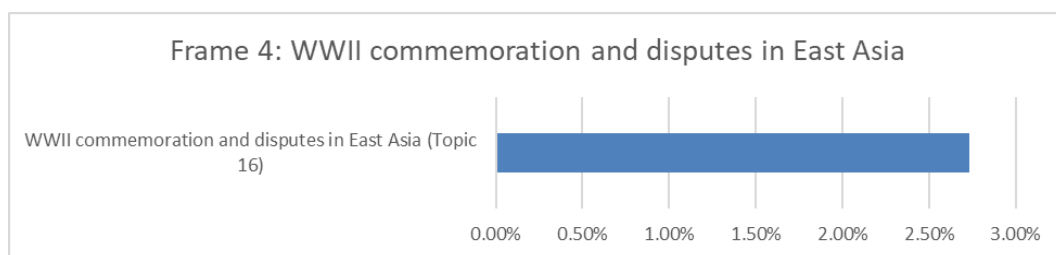
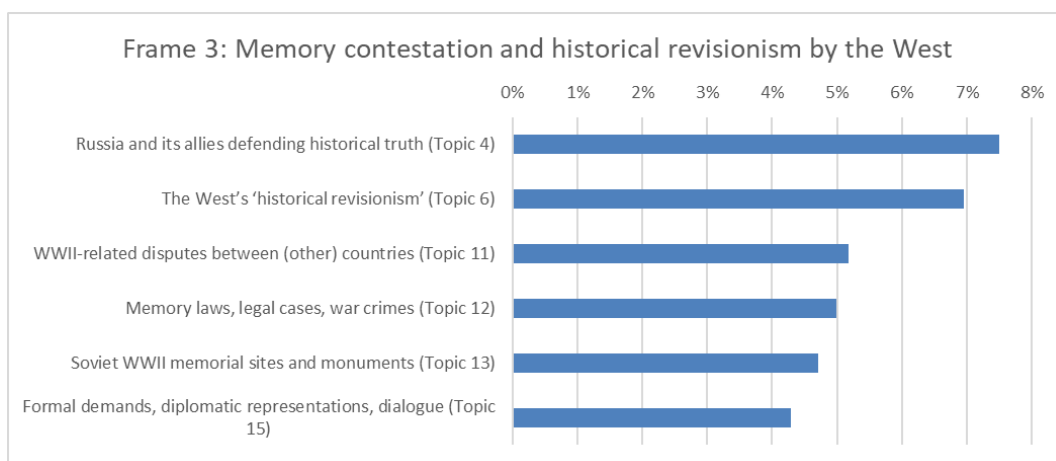
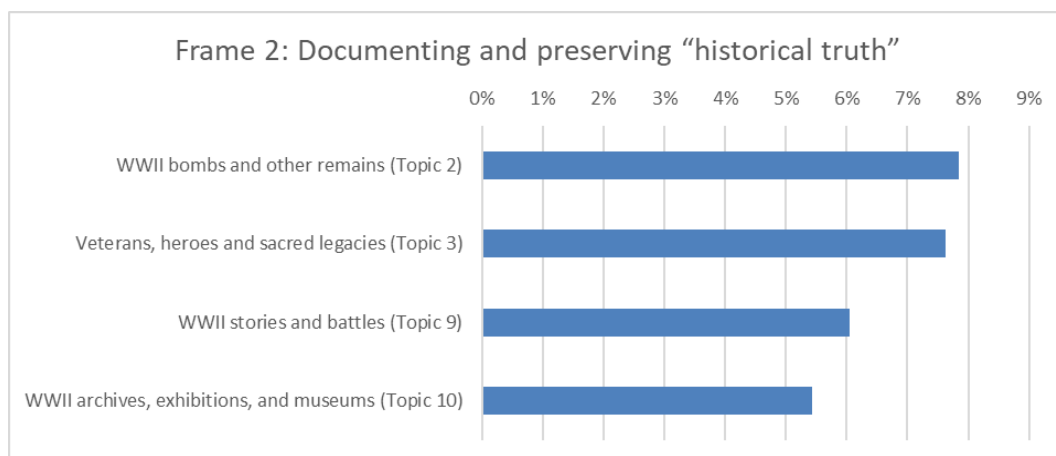
The STM analysis of the (English-language) Russian corpus resulted in a list of 16 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic. A full list of the 16 topics (labels) and relative topic proportions is included in [Annex 4](#).

For the purposes of analysis and discussion, we clustered these topics and classified them under four basic (conceptually sometimes overlapping) thematic frames. This classification follows broad understandings in the literature about (the successive stages of) the use of World War II history in Russia under Putin (Wood 2011; Edele 2017; Fedor et al. 2017). This

began in the early 2000s with a revival of the practice of **Commemorating the Great Patriotic War** ([Frame 1](#)). This was followed by efforts to sanitise and fix the official history of World War II and the role of the Soviet Union in it by **Documenting and preserving “historical truth”** ([Frame 2](#)). The attempt to monopolise key episodes of national history was not only a response to but also a catalyst of **Memory contestation and historical revisionism in the West** ([Frame 3](#)). As these developments facilitated joint commemorations by Moscow and Beijing, particularly from 2015 onwards, Russian war narratives gradually began to pay more attention to **WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia** ([Frame 4](#)), though this accounts for only a small proportion of the discourse.

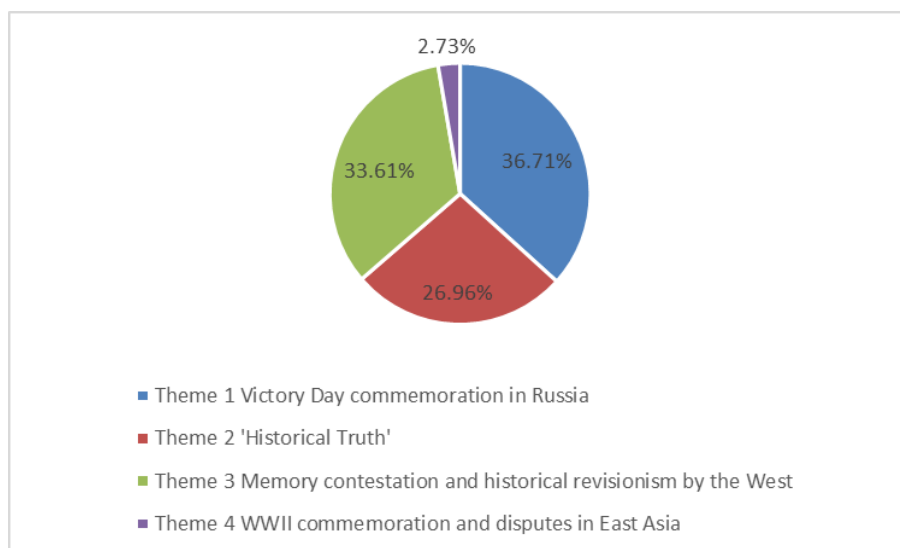
Below we include a graph for each of the four Frames depicting the proportion (relative to the entire English-language corpus) of each topic classified under that frame. For details on the absolute and relative prevalence of these topics and their frames, see [Annex 7](#).





It should be noted that classifications like these are based on interpretations that may not always be consistent with the automated topic modelling. For example, it is possible that articles belonging to [Topic 10](#) (WWII archives, exhibitions and museums), which we classified under [Frame 2](#) (Documenting and preserving “historical truth”) based on their content and topic label, are also – or sometimes substantially even more closely – related to our [Frame 3](#) (Memory contestation and historical revisionism by the West), and vice versa. These uncertainties partially follow from the interpretation and labelling of the topics, which involve human selection and thematic classification, and are impossible to eliminate in any STM

analysis (see [Annex 9](#)). Despite these limitations, we believe it is helpful to provide a broad picture of the main discursive themes on the corpus level. The below chart shows the four frames and their respective proportions. In [section 3.3](#) we take a closer look at individual topics within each of these frames.



Trends over time

The illustrations presented above provide wholesale representations of the Russian news articles on the aggregate corpus level. This means that changes over time are not discernible. Before delving more deeply into selected topics and topic clusters in the next section, it may be instructive to note some high-level trends in the evolution of Russian news articles on World War II during the period reviewed (i.e., from 2005 to 2022). For illustrative purposes, we include below three word clouds that provide snapshots of the top 50 words with the highest relative frequency for the years 2005, 2015 and 2022 (from left to right).



Comparing these word clouds and the underlying data (see [Annex 6](#)) suggests that the top 25 words with highest relative frequencies has remained fairly stable and consistent during the period reviewed. The following observations nevertheless merit attention:

- **Victory vs world.** The following five words consistently appear in the top 10 keywords for each year presented here: “war”, “world”, “Russia”, “May” and “victory”. The term “victory” became more prominent in 2015, climbing from 6th place in 2005 to 2nd place in 2015 and 2022. This happened at the expense of “world”, which dropped from 4th to 10th place.
- **Military parade vs veterans.** The terms “military” and “parade” both entered the top 25 keywords in 2015 and continued to rise to become the 1st and 5th most frequent word, respectively, in 2022. This came at the expense of the term “veteran”, which ranked 3rd in 2005 but did not make it into the top 25 in either 2015 or 2022.
- **Nazi.** The term “Nazi” witnesses a similar rise, entering the top 25 keywords only in 2015 and climbing from 17th to 9th place in 2022. As will be explained in the next section, this may be a result of the intensified “memory war” in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, when Moscow began to equate critique on the Soviet Union’s role in World War II, particularly in Ukraine, with the glorification of Nazism.
- **China.** The term “China” only appeared in the top 25 in 2015, ranking 22nd, but dropped from the list again in 2022. As the analysis in the next section shows, events such as joint Russo-Chinese commemorations, participation of military troops in each other’s parades, and mutual visits of state leaders in 2015 likely account for the (temporary) rise in frequency for that specific year.

3.3 Topic-level findings: examining Russian narratives

Frame 1: Commemorating the Great Patriotic War

From the start of his first term as president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin made it his mission to revive and glorify the memory of the Great Patriotic War as a means of unifying the nation and securing his power. It was not by happenstance that his first day in office on 9 May 2000 coincided with the celebration of Victory Day (Wood 2011). Following a long process of decline under his predecessors Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Putin decided to imbue the former Soviet holiday with new stature and meaning. That summer, he set up a “victory

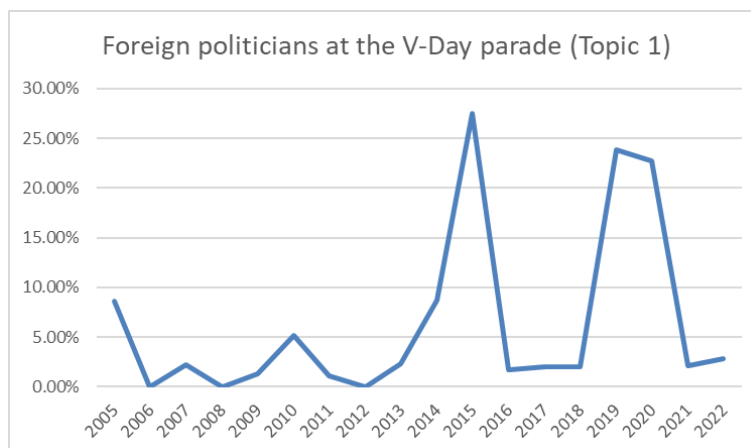
committee”, which was tasked with planning and preparing the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Victory Day in 2005. To boost his image, the Russian leader also began to “personalise” the holiday and the history of war in the ensuing years by publicly talking about the sacrifices and contributions of his family members in the war. By 2008, Victory Day had reemerged with full force in Russia (Bernstein 2016).

Starting from 2007, groups of veterans, citizens and journalists across various cities in Russia began to organise local processions on Victory Day, where marchers would carry portraits of their relatives who had died at the front in World War II or during the postwar period. The initiative sparked wide public interest and grew into a nationwide and even global civil movement, known as the “Immortal Regiment” march. Described by one scholar as “an attempt to seize power from the state monopoly and to assert the history of the war as a family history” and as a response to “military-patriotic propaganda” by the state, the Russian regime has since attempted to co-opt the popular movement and absorb it in its own remembrance practices (Kurilla 2021). In 2015, more than 50,000 people took part in an Immortal Regiment procession on the Red Square, where it was held for the first time. Vladimir Putin, holding a portrait of his veteran father, was among the marchers.

[Frame 1](#) (36.71%) of the English-language Russian text corpus brings together five topics concerning the commemoration in Russia and elsewhere of the Great Patriotic War and the losses, contributions and ultimate victory of the Soviet Union in that war against Nazi Germany (Topics 1, 5, 7, 8 and 14).

Within this broad frame, [Topic 1](#) (Foreign leaders at V-Day parade; 11.60%) focuses on the attendance by world leaders and foreign dignitaries of the annual national Victory Day parades in Moscow. The graph below depicts the proportion of this topic, expressed as a percentage of all articles included in the corpus and originating from the given year. It shows peaks during 5-year jubilee anniversaries of the 1945 victory, with major spikes in 2015 and 2019–2020. A causal link with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 seems plausible. Highlighting the attendance of foreign leaders during Russia’s national remembrance of World War II and the battle against Nazism serves to support Moscow’s message that its actions in Crimea have not led it to become diplomatically isolated. The fact that joint commemorations were planned with China that year may be an additional explanation. Compared to other topics in the corpus, a relatively large portion of articles belonging to this

topic include references to China (16%) and its leader Xi Jinping (9%). This also includes some coverage of the V-Day parade held in Beijing.



[Topic 5](#) (Nationwide war remembrance; 7.49%) deals with activities of remembrance of the Great Patriotic War across Russia as well as in the former Soviet republics. Articles belonging to this topic have a dual focus. On the one hand they deal with remembrance of the German invasion of 1941 and its impact on the homeland and the people. Accordingly, a considerable segment in this topic comprises reports on tribute being paid to fallen soldiers, war heroes and other compatriots who “were killed in action, tortured by the Nazis, died of hunger and backbreaking labour, or became disabled and suffered greatly” (Sputnik 2008). Many of these articles about sacrifice, loss and mourning appeared (across various corpus years) around 22 June, which in 1996 was designated the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow. Another major segment of articles in this topic, typically published around Victory Day (9 May), focuses on the end of the Great Patriotic War and the contributions of the Russian people in defeating Nazism. This topic also includes reports on the commemoration of wartime allies “who fought alongside the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War”, including “Chinese and Mongolian allies” (TASS 2021e) and, notably, US soldiers.

Articles recounting the wartime cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Allies reflect the ambivalent nature of Moscow’s post-Cold War attitude toward the West, and particularly the US, which mixes cooperative aspirations with antagonistic realities of the present. The following two excerpts on Soviet-US wartime cooperation and historical revisionism in the West (on this, see [Frame 3](#)) exemplify this:

“The memory of the allied relations during World War II should help Russia and the United States to build partnership to repel new challenges and threats, Russia’s Charge d’Affaires in the United States Sergei Koshelev said on Sunday during a wreath-laying ceremony at the Spirit of the Elbe memorial plaque at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington. The Russian diplomat stressed that the meeting of Soviet and US forces on the River Elbe on April 25, 1945 is a special date in bilateral relations. ‘Mankind was in expectation of the triumph of freedom, justice and punishment of the Nazi for their atrocious crimes,’ he said. [...]

‘Our common duty is to stop dishonest interpretation of World War II lessons and not to let anyone take away the Great Victory from Russian and American veterans.’ ‘Our countries must cherish the Spirit of the Elbe. The memory of our allied relations must help us build partner relations in our fight against common challenges and threats of the 21st century,’ he added” (TASS 2021a).

“According to an ICM Research poll conducted exclusively for Sputnik News Agency, 13 percent of Europeans responding to the questionnaire think that the Soviet Army played a key role in liberating Europe from Nazism. Over 40 percent of respondents thought that United States actions were decisive in freeing the continent. ‘The reason that such a low percentage of Europeans believe that the hardest part of the war was fought on the Eastern front is the Cold War, which is again being fueled,’ Stevan Gajic, research fellow at the Institute for European Studies in Belgrade, Serbia, told Sputnik. Even fewer are aware of the role the Soviet Army played in the fight against Japan on the mainland, according to Gajic. ‘All mention the battle in the Pacific Ocean – Americans against the Japanese – but little is said about the fact that millions of Soviet soldiers together with the Chinese and the Mongols fought together against Japan’” (Sputnik 2015c).

Compared with mentions of the US, articles belonging to this topic pay relatively little attention to China or to cooperation between the Soviet Union and China during World War II. There is no mention, for example, of the Soviet pilots who served in China during the early stages of the war and sacrificed their lives there, a topic which Xi Jinping has cited as an example of their wartime cooperation (see [section 4.3](#)). Instead, articles that delve into the wartime relations between the Soviet Union and China tend to focus on the Soviet Union’s interventions in China’s northeastern regions (Manchuria), bordering Russia’s Far East, and Mongolia. Some of these accounts provide remarkably abundant historical detail, but there is no mention of the brutalities inflicted on the local Chinese populace by the Soviet troops in the course of these interventions (Sputnik 2015f; see also [Frame 4](#)).

Finally, it is worth noting that several articles in this topic highlight the importance that Putin attaches to protecting the “truth” of the history and memory of the Great Patriotic War, a

theme that features more prominently in [Frame 2](#) and [Frame 3](#). In anticipation of the analysis and discussion there, the following excerpt may serve as an illustration of the interplay between the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War, national identity and great-power aspirations in Putin's Russia:

"Russia will preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and protect its truth, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday during the ceremony of laying flowers beside the Eternal Flame near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow. 'I am sure that we will preserve this memory, this truth about the war. We are doing everything that we can to ensure that our country, our motherland is a great and mighty power, and we will continue to do so. We will always be grateful to the victors made immortal, to all those who gifted life and peace to us, the future generations,' the Russian leader said. 'Here, at the Eternal Flame, we bow our heads before all those who did not return from war, to all the veterans that passed away. Today, on the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow, all our thoughts'" (TASS 2021d).

Articles associated with [Topic 7](#) (V-Day celebrations and immortal regiments; 6.7%) describe the Immortal Regiment marches and Victory Day celebrations held across Russia and around the world to commemorate the victory of the Great Patriotic War. While they share similarities with the two previous topics, the emphasis in these articles is on the celebration of Victory Day as a national holiday. Apart from reports on Immortal Regiment marches and victory celebrations across Russia, there are also items that provide accounts of similar events in other places of the world, notably in the former Soviet states, in Europe and in the US. This includes reports on Immortal Regiment marches held in Ukraine over the years and attempts by "nationalist provocateurs" to sabotage these events. The following two excerpts provide examples contrasting the grandeur and international significance of the victory celebrations in Moscow with the violent disruptions by Ukrainian nationalists:

"Massive crowds took to the streets in Moscow with portraits of their relatives who fought and defeated the Nazis during WWII. It is a Victory Day tradition in Russia, where the war left almost no family untouched. Countless people, some of them sporting replicas of Soviet military uniforms, walked together through the capital's main street and entered the iconic Red Square where the Victory parade concluded a few hours earlier. They carried old photographs of their relatives, who participated in WWII, many waving flags of Russia and the USSR. That said, US and British banners also flew high in Moscow, with people paying tribute to the Western allies in the battle against the Nazis. President Vladimir Putin joined the rally, holding a portrait of his father who volunteered to join the military and was severely wounded while fighting to lift the German blockade of Leningrad. Even the heavy rain and hail, which hit Moscow later in the day, wasn't enough to make people disperse" (RT 2019a).

“Despite violence and provocative behavior from radical nationalists, thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets to hold Immortal Regiment marches and other events to mark the 72nd anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. According to Ukrainian interior ministry spokesman Artem Shevchenko, some 600,000 citizens attended commemorations across Ukraine. ‘It was a difficult day for law enforcement agencies,’ Shevchenko told the TV channel 112 Ukraine... Marchers chanted ‘Fascism will not pass!’ and ‘Thank you Grandfather for your Victory!’ As the procession passed by the offices of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), far-right activists threw bottles, eggs, potatoes, smoke bombs and bags of paint, injuring a police officer. Police then arrested 24 of the nationalists. Nationalist provocateurs then tried to block the procession from entering the Park of Eternal Glory. Though police managed to clear the way, several fights broke out between marchers and nationalists who continued shouting slogans by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” (RT 2017).

Whereas the corpus contains numerous reports on Immortal Regiment marches held in the United States and Europe, there is only one item (of a total of 180 belonging to this topic) that mentions such an event in China. It is worth quoting here, as it illustrates how the movement has been appropriated by the Russian state even beyond its borders:

“Over one hundred people took part in the march in the Chinese capital of Beijing, according to a Sputnik correspondent. The event was organized with the help of the Russian Embassy in China. The participants marched across the Chaoyang park stopping at the sculpture symbolizing a Soviet pilot, then sent air balloons with the name of the event up in the sky before honoring the memory of the war victims with a minute of silence. Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov took part in the ceremony and laid flowers at the memorial” (Sputnik 2017).

[Topic 8](#) (Advanced weaponry showcased during V-Day parades; 6.35%) and [Topic 14](#) (Military equipment showcased during V-Day parades; 4.57%) are the final two topics in this frame and have the lowest relative prevalence. However, their substance is highly similar, and when combined, their relative proportion exceeds 10% of the entire corpus, thereby underscoring the significance of “military-patriotic propaganda” in Moscow’s international discourse on World War II. Both topics deal with military equipment showcased during military parades held across the country to mark Victory Day. The main difference is that in [Topic 8](#) the focus lies on advanced weaponry, notably combat aircraft and cutting-edge weapon systems, whereas [Topic 14](#) deals primarily with infantry divisions, ground vehicles, artillery systems and historical military equipment. The great majority of articles deal with Russian military hardware and soldiers, but there are a handful of brief references to the 2015

military parade in China and Chinese participation in planned joint commemorations in Belarus:

“About 12,000 servicemen as well as 500 units of military hardware and over 200 military aircraft took part in a military parade dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two, that was held in Beijing, China” (Sputnik 2015g).

“Servicemen of the Russian and Chinese armies will not take part in the military parade in Minsk on May 9 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s Victory over Nazi Germany in the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War, spokeswoman for the Belarusian Defense Ministry Natalia Gavrusic told TASS on Thursday. ‘In view of the epidemiological situation in the world, the Russian Federation and China have decided against sending their personnel for taking part in the parade in Minsk’” (TASS 2020c).

Frame 2: Documenting and preserving “historical truth”

Following efforts during his first two terms to resuscitate and refashion the celebration of Victory Day in Russia, Putin gradually turned his attention to documenting and securing a “truthful” historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War. As early as May 2009, during Medvedev’s presidency, a Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History was established. Two years later, Putin, as prime minister, revealed his personal reading list on World War II (Wood 2011). But it was during his third term that the Russian leader emerged as a historian, marking a turn to ideology and history (Torbakov 2016). From then on, he often spoke extensively about the historical trajectory of World War II at various public events, including high-level political meetings and informal conferences with historians (see, e.g., *Ukraine Today* 2014). In December 2019, during an informal summit with leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Putin cited at length from archival documents piled up in front of him as he spoke extensively about the causes of World War II (Radchenko 2020). At that occasion, he also announced his intention to write an article on the history of World War II, which appeared the following year (TASS 2020d).

Under Putin, history has effectively become a “positivist” science, in which “historical reality”, once established through “objective” analysis, is beyond discussion and debate (Edele 2017). This is reflected in the increased use of laws, also known as “memory laws”, to protect “historical truth” (Koposov 2015). In May 2014, in the midst of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Putin signed a law that criminalises the public denial of facts established by the Nuremberg trials as well as the public distribution of “lies” about the activities of the Soviet Union in the Second World War (Edele 2017; Koposov 2022). In July 2021, Putin signed another memory law on

World War II in a further attempt to monopolise and securitise historical memory of the conflict. The new law criminalises comparisons between the goals, decisions and actions of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and the denial of the humanitarian mission of the Soviet Union in the liberation of European countries and the decisive role of the Soviet people in the defeat of Nazi Germany (Domańska 2022).

[Frame 2](#) (26.96%) of the English-language Russian text corpus brings together articles belonging to five topics that pertain to attempts by the Russian state to establish, reinforce and secure the “historical truth” of World War II by invoking both “objective” historical remnants, from bombs to archives, and testimonies of “true” heroes and veterans.

[Topic 2](#) (WWII bombs and other remains; 7.85%) deals with the discovery and disposal of objects from “the times of the Great Patriotic War”, including bombs and other unexploded ordnance (UXO; artillery shells, mines and grenades) but also surviving shipwrecks and human remains. The majority of articles belonging to this topic report on discoveries across Russia and other former Soviet states but there are incidental reports about unearthings and precautionary evacuations across Europe and the Asia-Pacific as well as on joint expeditions by Russian and foreign experts (e.g., from Sweden, Germany and the US). The tone of these reports is largely matter-of-fact, though emphasis is often placed on the difficulty, cost and risk involved in the detonation or disposal of dangerous items. Some longer articles provide historical context, presenting the discoveries as witnesses of time and of major battles against Nazi Germany, such as the Battle of Stalingrad. This tendency is perhaps at its most pronounced in a 2016 piece on the unearthing of a German bomb in Crimea:

“A World War II German air bomb has been found on a road near Sevastopol - a Russian Black Sea port city and naval base in Crimea, the deputy chief of the city’s Emergency Ministry’s office, Anatoly Popov, has said. [...] The operation to dispose of the potentially deadly item in a controlled explosion has been scheduled for the morning of March 11. [...] The fragments’ killing radius is 850 meters. Ten police posts will cordon off the endangered area. Bomb disposal specialists of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet and the Emergency Situations Ministry will use 25 tonnes of sand to minimize the effects of the blast.

During World War II, Sevastopol withstood intensive bombardment by the Germans in 1941-1942, supported by their Italian and Romanian allies during the Battle of Sevastopol. German forces were forced to use railway artillery and specialized heavy mortars alongside air bombardments to destroy Sevastopol’s extremely heavy fortifications. After fierce fighting, which lasted for 250 days, the fortress city finally fell in July 1942. It was liberated by the Red Army on May 9, 1944 and was awarded the Hero

City title a year later. Cases in which unexploded ordnance is unearthed in Crimea, Sevastopol, in particular, are still frequent. [...] All in all 1,453 pieces of World War II ammunition were disposed of in the city last year" (TASS 2016).

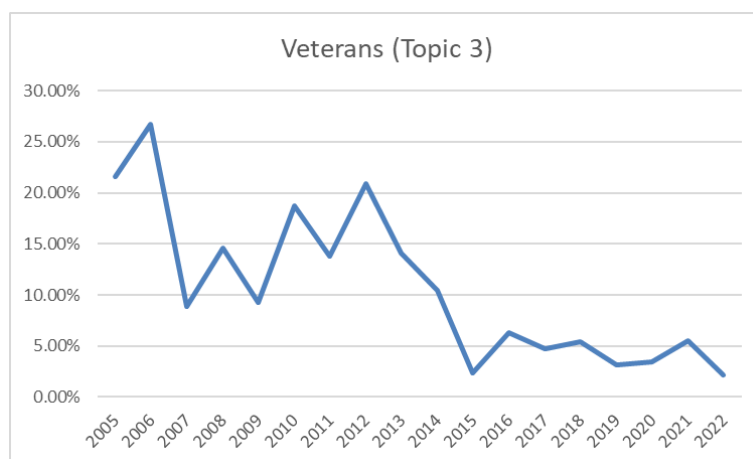
There are a small number of articles that report on the discovery in Russia's Far East and in Asia of UXO originating from warfare between Japan and the Allies. This includes two articles about the discovery of World War II bombs in Hong Kong. There is only a single item (of a total of 212 in this topic) that references the Chinese mainland, though it is unrelated to UXO. That article reports on the planned visit of *The Pallada*, a Russian sailing ship, to several Asian ports to mark the 70th anniversary of World War II victory in 2015, including the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian:

"Russian sailing ship The Pallada sails off for a training voyage dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War from Russia's Far Eastern city of Vladivostok on Saturday. The ship owned by the Far Eastern State Technical University of the Fishing Industry will call at Singapore, Brunei and China's Dalian, where the crew will visit memorial places and will neaten graves of Russian soldiers, the University's press service told TASS on Friday. In Dalian, the crew and students will visit the Russian cemetery in Port Arthur - China's biggest burial ground of foreigners. More than 20,000 soldiers and officers of the Russian Army are buried at this cemetery. The Pallada crew will lay [a] wreath to the tombs of Russian soldiers" (TASS 2015a).

[Topic 3](#) (Veterans, heroes and sacred legacies; 7.62%) is concerned with the recognition of war veterans and the enduring legacies of their sacrifices and contributions. This topic incorporates four broad themes centring on the "heroism and unprecedented courage" of those servicemen who "defended the Motherland from the merciless enemy and saved the world from Nazism" (TASS 2005b). A first theme pertains to the provision by the Russian government of material aid to veterans, victims and widows of deceased servicemen in the form of bonuses on state pensions, housing and daily necessities such as mobile phones and SIM cards. A second theme concerns the symbolic recognition by the state of veterans in Russia and neighbouring states through decorations, awards, presidential greetings and similar official acknowledgments. A third theme frames the common memory of war and the values of unity and solidarity as demonstrated by war heroes as a foundation for friendship between the peoples and governments of post-Soviet states, including disputed territories such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which Moscow has recognized since 2008 as sovereign states, rather than as part of Georgia):

“Russian President Vladimir Putin has congratulated a number of foreign leaders on the 72nd anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany, the Kremlin press service said in a statement. ‘The Russian president has congratulated the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the citizens of Georgia and Ukraine, on the 72nd anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War,’ the statement reads. In his messages, Putin stressed that ‘the Victory Day is a sacred date and a symbol of the extraordinary courage of our fathers and grandfathers who fought side by side on the battlefield and worked hard in the rear during the war to save their Motherland and the entire world from Fascism.’ The Russian president also said that ‘cooperating in the fight against attempts to distort history and justify the deeds of Fascists and Nazis will be the best way to pay tribute to the soldier liberators.’ Putin was confident that the tradition of friendship and mutual assistance, strengthened in the times of the war, would remain the basis for the development of allied partnership and cooperation aimed at ensuring regional stability and security” (TASS 2017).

While congratulating leaders of post-Soviet states on key commemorative dates has been a routine practice for Putin, he started to include the “citizens of Georgia” from 2008 onwards and the “citizens of Ukraine” from 2014 onwards in his addresses instead of the leaders of these states. This reflects the Kremlin’s position that the Georgian and Ukrainian governments after those time points are illegitimate. This is another example of how World War II commemoration is mobilised in Putin’s Russia for geopolitical purposes.



A fourth and final theme directly links the fate of war veterans to morality and state ideology. It does so by equating the sacred duty to protect “true heroes” with the sacred duty to defend “the truth about the war” and preserve its memory. This is critical, the official narrative claims, to avoid future conflict and repetition of past mistakes. Whilst reporting on the conditions of veterans gradually declined over time, official rhetoric along this line became stronger and

more prevalent as regional tensions rose and conflicts with neighbouring states (Georgia, Ukraine) deepened, with the largest increase occurring in the most recent years. This theme will be explored in more detail in [Frame 3](#). Suffice it here to provide some examples:

“Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev believes that ‘the loss of memory about events of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) leads to new victims.’ ‘Events of the last few weeks show that if the historical memory fails someone, unfortunately, problems begin and people die,’ Medvedev noted. In this regard, ‘lessons of the war should always stay in our memory’” (TASS 2014).

“Defending the true heroes of the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War is a sacred duty in conditions when in some countries they ‘shamelessly lie to their children’ about the war and ‘are betraying their ancestors,’ Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a speech at the Victory Parade in Moscow’s Red Square... ‘Our sacred duty is to defend true heroes. We are bowing to all the veterans of the generation of victors,’ the Russian leader stressed. The veterans of the Great Patriotic War are now living in different countries but their feat ‘cannot be divided.’ ‘We will always honor all of you, glorify the Victory that was and remains one for all’” (TASS 2019).

““Today, it is our moral duty to carefully preserve the memories of those tough years and pass them on to the new generations. We should stand together to strongly oppose attempts to distort and falsify history, revise the outcome of the Great Patriotic War and justify the heinous atrocities committed by the Nazis and their collaborators,’ Putin said” (TASS 2021b).

““I am sure that we will preserve this memory, this truth about the war. We are doing everything that we can to ensure that our country, our motherland is a great and mighty power, and we will continue to do so. We will always be grateful to the victors made immortal, to all those who gifted life and peace to us, the future generations’” (TASS 2021b).

[Topic 9](#) (WWII stories and battles; 6.05%) includes stories about the Great Patriotic War, its effects, and aspects of human interest as recounted by veterans, victims, eyewitnesses or their family members and descendants. Articles belonging to this topic tend to be longer and provide substantively rich accounts based on witness reports, diaries, letters, photo archives, films, exhibitions, historical analyses and so on. They tell personalised stories of various events and experiences in the war against Germany, mostly at the Eastern Front, including major military campaigns, epic battles (Stalingrad) and deadly sieges (Leningrad); air raids and air battles; wartime atrocities, human suffering and loss; cooperation and solidarity (including Allied cooperation); and heroism and victory. It also includes a “very sincere and intimate” story written by Putin in 2015 on the wartime experiences of his family, offering another example of how the Russian leader has personalised the history of the war:

“Russian President Vladimir Putin shed light on his family's hardships during the World War II, in an op-ed published in the Pioneer magazine.

‘Frankly, Father did not like even to touch this topic. [...] Usually I would listen to the adults share their memories. It's from these adult conversations that I drew all the information there was to know about the war and everything that had happened to my family, although sometimes they would talk to me directly,’ Putin wrote.

Putin's father Vladimir was drafted into the Navy in the 1930s and served as a sailor on a submarine in Russia's port city of Sevastopol. He was working at a military plant in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) when the Nazis attacked the USSR in 1941. He went to the front as a volunteer and was severely wounded in the leg during an assault:

‘The injury was a heavy one. He lived all his life with shell fragments in his leg that hadn't been taken out... They left the smaller bits inside so as not to fracture the bone.’

While his father was at war, Putin's elder brother was taken to an orphanage to be evacuated from the Leningrad siege, but died of diphtheria. His father returned home to find his wife Maria bedridden and close to death. He nursed her back to health and both Putin's mother and father lived to their late 80s.

Putin had a large family on his father's side, but, like most Russian citizens, many of his relatives died in the war. ‘[Father] had six brothers, five of whom died. It was a disaster for the family. Mother also lost her relatives. I was a late child. She gave birth to me when she was 41,’ the president wrote.

‘Despite all this grief, misery and tragedy, they harbored no hate for the enemy, which was difficult for me to understand. Frankly, it still is... Mother was a very kind, gentle person... She said: ‘How can you hate these [German] soldiers? They were ordinary people who died at war too... How can you blame them? They are hard workers like us. It's just that they were sent to fight’” (Sputnik 2015d).

Very few stories in this topic touch upon the Allied war against Japan, though there are some references to the 1944 Battle of Saipan and the American “Flying Tiger” aviators. Remarkably, there are no stories in this topic that relate the wartime experiences of Russian pilots or soldiers in China during the early or final stages of the war. There is, however, one article about the encounters of Chinese people in the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War. It recounts the experiences of daughters of China's senior Communist leaders Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi during their time at a children's home in Ivanovo, a city located 250 kilometres northeast of Moscow. In a 2015 interview with a TASS correspondent in Beijing, they shared their recollections of life in wartime Russia, including the German air raids and the destruction it caused and the hunger they suffered, but also the solidarity of the Russian people, the

American supplies of canned food (which “tasted not very palatable but we got accustomed to it too”) and the victory celebrations (Tass 2015d).

[Topic 10](#) (WWII archives, exhibitions and museums; 5.44%) deals with efforts in present-day Russia aimed at documenting, preserving and exhibiting the “truth” of the Great Patriotic War. It includes reports on various academic, educational, cultural and information events related to the history of the war, often held around major anniversaries. This includes international conferences and projects; joint educational programs and revision of textbooks; photo exhibitions and museum cooperation; films, documentaries and multimedia projects dedicated to important battles of the Red Army; and international commemorations, including at the United Nations in 2010 and regularly with leaders of CIS member states. Recurring themes in this topic are the discovery, collection, digitization, declassification and public dissemination by government bodies of historical documents and archives related to the war. The aim of doing so, the articles make clear, is to protect the “truth” and “rebuff attempts at glorification of Nazism and falsification of history”:

“Resistance against attempts to rewrite the history of World War II must be based upon well-argued truth, Russian President Vladimir Putin said at a meeting in the Lipetsk Region.

Answering a question on how such attempts can be countered, the head of state replied: ‘With the truth. Only the truth must be presented, but it must be well-argued.’

Putin reiterated that Russia intends to create a public information resource based on archived documents. According to the head of state, this project must employ ‘good specialists, who can get things across to millions of people in an impressive, comprehensible manner.’

‘As for archived materials, we probably have more of those than anyone else,’ President Putin concluded” (TASS 2020a).

“‘It is not a secret that several media outlets — in the Baltic States, in Poland, in several Eastern European countries — release materials that openly distort the truth about the war. The only thing we can offer to counter that is to provide objective and honest information, precise analysis, historical documents,’ [TASS deputy director] Gusman noted. ‘Our task is not to allow the distribution in the informational space of distortions or inconsistencies in the historical truth about the Great Victory,’ he concluded” (TASS 2020b).

Articles in this topic also mention the role of law in protecting “historical truth”, although not as extensively as may be expected in view of the introduction in Russia of memory laws during this period. A 2020 article reports on a proposal introduced by a Duma committee to

reinforce legal measures and introduce a law that prohibits publicly equating the goals and actions of the Soviet authorities, command and servicemen with those of Nazi Germany during World War II (TASS 2020e). The article notes that Putin agreed with the proposals and the suggestion that this must be done carefully, in view of freedom of historic discussion. A ban to this effect was signed into law by him in July 2021 (Kremlin 2021b), but none of the articles in this topic (or elsewhere in this corpus) appear to cover this. This topic includes one article reporting on a demand from Russia's cyber administration and media watchdog Roskomnadzor in 2021 that Facebook delete an Instagram post that insults the memory of World War II veterans, as it constitutes a criminal offence (TASS 2021c).

Frame 3: Memory contestation and historical revisionism by the West

The Kremlin's growing obsession with documenting and policing "historical truth" was simultaneously a response to and a catalyst of historical revisionism and memory contestation in Russia's neighbouring countries and the West. The 2003–4 colour revolutions in post-Soviet states (Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan), the enlargement of both the EU and NATO in 2004 with the inclusion of Eastern European and Baltic States, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, caused Putin's "truth" of World War II to come under growing threat. Building on the decommunization laws movement that started in the 1990s, several post-Soviet states in the region began formulating policies and laws aimed at investigating Soviet war crimes and dismantling Soviet monuments. The Estonian parliament was among the first to adopt such a law in 2007. Similar laws were adopted elsewhere in Eastern Europe, including in Poland, where the 2016 "Street DeCommunization" Law was amended in 2017 to incorporate the removal of monuments (Belavusau 2018). In 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that recognised the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as the direct cause of the outbreak of World War II (EP 2019; Domańska 2022).

Putin's consistent response has been to double down on his practice of historical statecraft and authoritarian memory governance, thereby further fuelling escalatory dynamics in the region. There is a direct link between memory laws and the prospect of renewed future conflict. Memory laws on controversial topics (as they tend to be) may stir up memory wars, which potentially can lead to justifications of acts of aggression and shooting wars (Edele 2017; Fedor et al. 2017; Koposov 2017). In recent years, particularly following the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, memory conflicts over interpretations of World War II have spread to the

global level, with the former Allies today increasingly finding themselves split across two emerging rival camps. As Russia under Vladimir Putin and China under Xi Jinping have been refashioning and aligning the memory of World War II both for their own domestic and shared strategic ends, Europe, the US, Australia and Japan have sought to counter this through contentious remembrances, controversial lawmaking, binary “fact-checking” portals and active historical revisionism of their own (Chang 2022c).

[Frame 3](#) (33.61%) of the Russian text corpus brings together articles belonging to six closely related and partially overlapping topics pertaining to these regional and global contestations of World War II memory. Given the substantive resemblance and overlap between the topics, our analysis focuses predominantly on the first two topics ([Topic 4](#) and [Topic 6](#)), which not only are the most prevalent but also the most revealing topics in this frame.

[Topic 4](#) (Russia and its allies defending “historical truth”; 7.50%) brings together news articles in the Russian corpus reporting on Moscow’s longstanding efforts, ambitions and achievements with respect to defending “historical truth” together with befriended states, peoples and leaders. This is one of the most instructive topics in the Russian corpus in terms of this project’s aims, as this is where references to official Chinese statements and narratives are most abundant and where substantive convergence with Chinese narratives is to be expected. The majority of the articles belonging to this topic report on high level meetings and joint statements between Russia and its partners on the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, often around the time of major war anniversaries. The core of the recurring message reflected in these statements is that the “truth” of World War II must at all costs be defended and upheld as it serves as an indispensable basis for brotherly relations among neighbours, constructive partnerships between nations, and global peace.

The main cast featured in these articles revolves around those members of the former “anti-Hitler” coalition (and their successor states) who continue to support Russia today in its sacred mission of defending “historical truth”. These present-day allies and friends include, over time, neighbouring post-Soviet states and peoples (e.g., CIS member states); Eastern and Southern European states (e.g., Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Serbia, Greece); Latin American states (e.g., Cuba, Venezuela); Israel and Syria in the Middle East; India in South Asia; and China, Mongolia and North Korea in Northeast Asia. Incidentally, leaders of Western European states (e.g., Sarkozy, Macron, Merkel) and the United States (Bush, Trump, Biden) are mentioned in the context of joint commemorative events or constructive conversations.

Apart from individual countries, the articles also mention joint commemorations or interpretations on the level of international groupings and organisations. In addition to the CIS and the associated Collective Security Treaty Organization, these include BRICS, the SCO, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the United Nations.

This topic does not deal substantively with specific adversaries in Russia's ongoing memory contestations. While the main culprits are incidentally referenced in the articles – e.g., the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, the European Union, the US and Japan – the diplomatic parlance quoted or echoed in these articles in most cases impedes such explicit mention. It simply talks about “other countries” and “political circles” that are falsifying the truth of World War II and defaming those who defended them by disseminating “dishonest statements”, “blatant distortions” and “cynical lies” about the deeds of the Soviet Union and the Red Army. The basic claim is that those forces that “equate aggressors with those who fought them” (i.e., compare the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany) not only slander the “true” war heroes but also glorify and revive Nazism and thereby pose an existential threat to the rest of the world. The surges in absolute topic proportion and to a lesser extent also relative proportion, including after the 2014 Crimean crisis, demonstrate how closely related this topic is with acute geopolitical tensions and domestic legitimacy concerns.



As indicated, Russian–Chinese joint commemorations constitute an important theme within this topic. With 32 of a total of 203 articles (16%) containing references to China and joint commemorations, Beijing emerges as Moscow's most important and most valued memory partner (see also [section 5.3](#)). The majority of these references deal exclusively with their shared commitment to “jointly safeguard the results of World War II and pursue their foreign

policy to defend peace in the world". The news reports cite joint statements to this effect regularly from 2014 onwards. Below is an excerpt of the most recent such statement in the corpus, issued on 4 February 2022, just three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

"The sides intend to strongly uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order, defend the authority of the United Nations and justice in international relations, resist attempts to deny, distort, and falsify the history of the Second World War. [...]"

In order to prevent the recurrence of the tragedy of the world war, the sides will strongly condemn actions aimed at denying the responsibility for atrocities of Nazi aggressors, militarist invaders, and their accomplices, [and that] besmirch and tarnish the honor of the victorious countries" (TASS 2022a).

While most articles in this topic are concerned with high-level commemorations and official narratives, some shift the focus from present-day leaders to the historical context, offering interesting perspectives on and perceptions of their shared wartime experiences. In most cases, this serves the apparent goal of underscoring how the Soviet Union at the time helped China (and the world) to deliver the final blow to Japan and bring an end to the war. Exemplifying these points, below we have included excerpts taken from two news items reporting on, successively, an interview with Putin in 2015 for a documentary titled *Russia and China: The Heart of Eurasia*, and a video message by Russia's foreign minister Lavrov:

"'It's common knowledge that the USSR extended help to China back in the early 1930's when the neighboring country came to grips with the Japanese aggression,' Putin recalled. 'It helped (the Chinese people) consistently as of 1931.' 'Then there came the Battle of Lake Khasan (the Changkufeng Incident) and combat operations on the Khalkhyn Gol river, and the USSR kept up brotherly assistance to the Chinese people even in 1942 at the peak of fighting against the Nazi aggressors on the European swathes of Russia.' 'It put period to World War II hostilities by joining a war (with the Japanese forces) in line with the Yalta accords'" (TASS 2015f).

"The groundwork for the relations between Moscow and Beijing laid during World War II contributes to the continued stability all over the world, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday in a video message as part of the 'Heroes of the last battle of World War II' campaign. 'In late August 1945, the last battle of World War II in China ended when the soldiers of the 1st Far Eastern Front's 25th Army eliminated the centers of resistance of Japan's invading forces in Dongning,' the Russian top diplomat recalled. 'More than 1,500 Soviet soldiers and officers were killed in the battles for the Dongning Fortress. The peoples of the USSR and China supported each other during the harsh realities of the wartime, fought side by side against fascism and militarism for the sake of protecting peace and progress, defending human dignity and freedom.' 'At the cost of

enormous human losses, together, we defeated the enemy and laid a solid foundation for the development of ties between our countries. [...] Lavrov emphasized that over 80 military memorial sites of Soviet soldiers were carefully preserved by the Chinese authorities” (TASS 2021f).

Interestingly, apart from these scarce examples, there are no indications that the Russian government has been intent on popularising historical narratives such as these among the broader public (see also [section 3.4](#) below). These high-level narratives are also not supported by the dissemination of historical evidence or accounts of personal recollections (see [Frame 2](#) and [Frame 4](#) above). Equally interesting is that the Chinese side seems hesitant, and perhaps increasingly so, to embrace, let alone replicate, these interpretations. During a 2005 telephone call with Putin, then Chinese president Hu Jintao was reported to have “stressed that the victory in the war against militarist Japan became possible due to the crucial role of the Soviet Army, which will never be forgotten by the Chinese people” (TASS 2005c). Ten years later, his successor Xi Jinping also spoke appreciatively of “Russia’s political and moral support” during World War II but avoided the suggestion that this contribution had been critical to Japan’s defeat, as he merely stated that “the Chinese people will always remember those Russians, both military and civilians, who gave their lives for independence and liberation of the Chinese nation” (TASS 2015f).

The themes and content of [Topic 6](#) (The West’s “historical revisionism”; 6.95%) in many ways resemble those of Topic 4, and it even includes several (near) identical articles. However, generally speaking, Topic 6 is less concerned with Russia’s official statements, policies and rhetoric of defending “truth” and more with the substantive positions of its main memory adversaries, for example on the nature of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the role of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states at the end of and after World War II. Interestingly, this topic also includes coverage of domestic debates within Russia on these and other similar topics (including the role of Stalin and the content of school textbooks), particularly during the first ten corpus years. This decreased notably after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the rhetoric hardened and the focus shifted to denouncing revisionism in NATO-countries against the background of military build-up in the region and Western economic sanctions. The following excerpt exemplifies this:

“Having US and former Axis leaders attend the 80th anniversary of WWII, but not inviting Russia, shows the event in Poland has nothing to do with paying respects to history, and everything to do with present-day politics. The German invasion of Poland on September

1, 1939 is universally considered as the start of the Second World War. To mark 80 years since that fateful date, the Polish authorities have chosen to invite ‘present allies and partners in NATO and the EU’ to a commemoration that has been moved to Warsaw for the occasion. This means US Vice President Mike Pence will be at the ceremony, alongside the leaders of many countries that were members of the Axis during the war – from Germany and Italy to Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Romania. Yet Russia will not be welcome. [...]

Especially forgotten is how, once Hitler broke his word yet again and attacked the USSR in June 1941, it was the Soviet soldiers who would do the lion’s share of fighting and dying to defeat the Nazis – about 80 percent of it, to be exact. Or how anywhere up to 27 million Soviet citizens perished in the war the USSR did not start, but certainly did finish. Instead, the West and its newest allies harp on Molotov-Ribbentrop, tear down monuments to the Red Army, or celebrate the SS – only to act bewildered when Russia tries to correct the record” (RT 2019c).

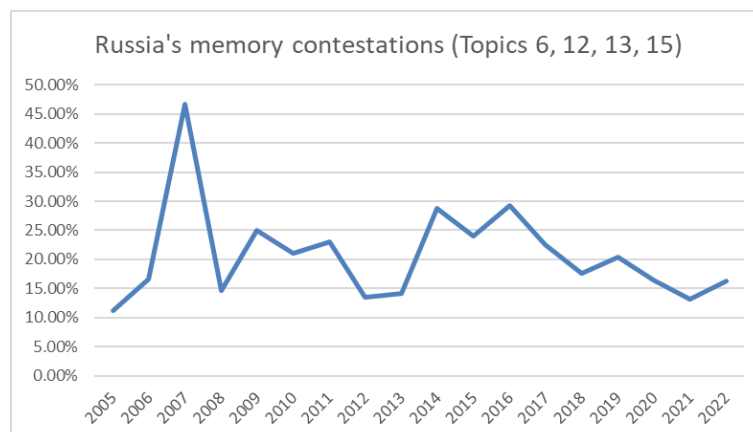
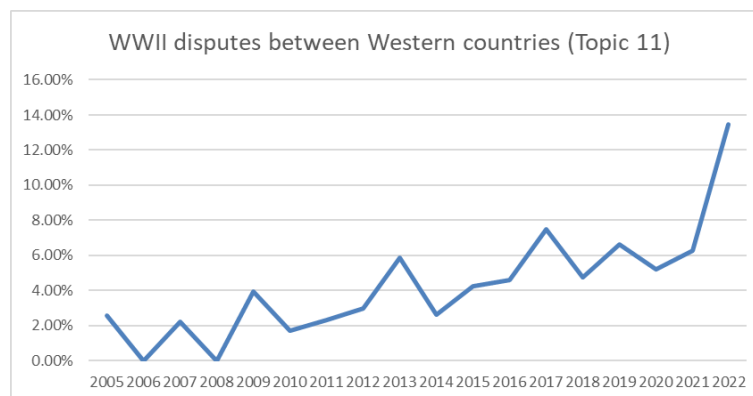
“Moscow won’t fail to take note of the White House decision to completely exclude the Soviet Union from its message marking Victory in Europe Day, the Foreign Ministry said, calling the act a “distortion’ of World War II history. ‘The US officials have found neither the courage nor the desire to ... do justice to the indisputable role of the Red Army and of the Soviet people, and to the enormous sacrifices they made in the name of humanity,’ Russia’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement. It added that ignoring the historical facts due to current political likes or dislikes was unthinkable. We are planning to have a serious talk on the issue with American officials. The Soviet Union bore the brunt of fighting Nazi Germany, with at least 27 million of its people killed in WWII. Few families were left untouched, and so celebrations of Victory Day and remembering that war’s tragic toll are still a big deal in Russia. This is why many reacted with disbelief when media cited a message from the White House that said ‘on May 8, 1945, America and Great Britain had victory over the Nazis’ and failed to even mention their Second World War ally, the USSR” (RT 2020).

As these and other examples show, the focus of Moscow’s historical disputes is mostly on the interpretation of the war in Europe and the importance of the Eastern front. However, as was the case in Topic 4, there are incidental references to the war in Asia, which tend to focus on the American decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are also articles containing references to China, including some duplicates of articles discussed in Topic 4 above. Particularly noteworthy in this context is a 2015 article that cites a Chinese professor who believes that shared understandings of World War II and shared concerns over historical revisionism bring China and Russia closer together. What is interesting, however, is that his comments also show that each side has its own distinct concerns, with different contexts and implications:

“‘Russia and China have similar positions on questions related to the Second World War,’ Professor Jin told the broadcaster. ‘Both countries made an enormous contribution to the war, and for both the price of victory was very high.’

The professor noted that moreover, ‘both China and Russia are faced with the threat of historical revisionism; for example, at present, Japan is attempting to escape from its historical responsibility [for crimes committed in China and elsewhere]. There is a similar situation in Eastern Europe: in Lithuania and Estonia, for example, there have been cases of the destruction of monuments to soldiers of the Red Army. Moreover, in the Baltic countries, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Soviet soldiers are occasionally placed on a par with the Nazis. And this is very offensive.’

Jin explained that ‘in addition to the joint threat of historical revisionism, China and Russia have a similar historical experience, including the relations of the US toward both these countries. Together, these factors bring Moscow and Beijing closer together, pushing them toward political cooperation’” (Sputnik 2015b).



The remaining four topics in this frame (Topics 11, 12, 13 and 15) elaborate on the themes discussed above and provide further context to various specific types of memory contestations, but add little new to the discursive positions and narratives analysed above.

- [Topic 11](#) (WWII-related disputes between (other) countries; 5.17%) deals with interstate memory disputes related to World War II mostly between third countries (but in some cases involving Russia). This includes, for example, recent Greek and Polish demands for German war reparations and transnational cases concerning Jewish properties seized during World War II.
- [Topic 12](#) (Memory laws, legal cases, war crimes; 4.99%) pertains to World War II-related laws and legislative proposals, individual court cases and (accusations of) war crimes. While some articles focus on events and developments in Russia (but not the 2021 memory law), most are interested in neighbouring countries whose governments have distanced themselves from Moscow's historical statecraft, such as Estonia, Poland and Ukraine.
- [Topic 13](#) (Soviet WWII memorial sites and monuments; 4.71%) is concerned with the present-day fate of Soviet war memorials abroad. Many articles report about (and revile) acts of desecration, defacing, dismantling or relocation of Soviet memorials and soldier monuments in "usual-suspect" countries such as Georgia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, but similar incidents elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe are also covered. In addition, it also includes reports on instances of unveiling, restoring or honouring war monuments in Russia and friendly countries.
- [Topic 15](#) (Formal demands, diplomatic representations, dialogue; 4.29%) is closely connected to both the above topics, but focuses on formal diplomatic statements, protests and negotiations in connection with historical disputes related to World War II, including disagreement (and in some cases concurrence) over historical interpretations, war commemorations and war monuments.

China does not feature much in these topics but to the extent that it does, Beijing is presented as one of Moscow's staunch memory allies, in line with what has been discussed above. A good example is Topic 13 (Soviet WWII memorial sites and monuments), where China is mentioned in just one (of a total of 127) articles. Though not explicitly, the ongoing efforts in northeast China to restore and preserve monuments for Soviet soldiers – in some cases with Russian support – serves as a clear and instructive counterpoint to unwelcome recent trends and developments in Europe:

"Restoration work will be conducted at Russian military memorials in China by the 60th anniversary of Victory, a source in the Russian Embassy in Beijing told on Friday.

The main event will be the unveiling of the restored monument to Soviet soldiers in the city of Changde, the northern province of Hebei, on May 9. The city administration earlier received a 10,000-dollar check from the Russian diplomatic representation to restore the memorial, which consists of an obelisk and two common graves where 52 Soviet soldiers are buried. They participated in the fighting to liberate China from Japanese invaders at the concluding stage of World War II.

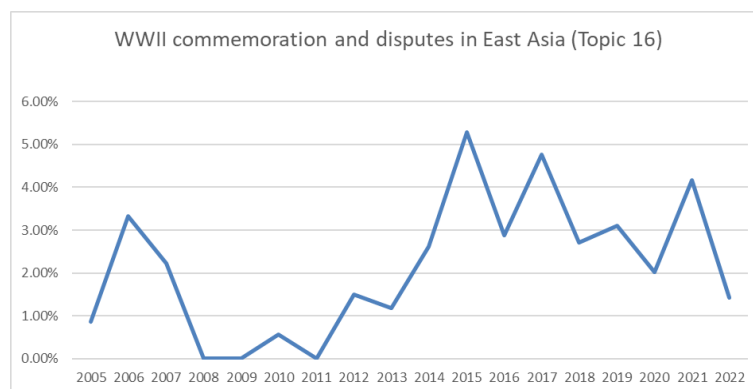
Work is also planned to put everything in order at the memorial in the city of Chifeng, the Inner Mongolia autonomous region. Units under the command of general Issa Pliyev and the 17th army of the Trans-Baikal Front liberated the city on August 19, 1945, during the operation to liberate China from Japanese invaders. A monument – a four-sided obelisk with a five-pointed star – was erected at the railway station square in the city. Forty Soviet soldiers were buried in a common grave there. In 1992, when the square was rebuilt, the memorial was brought to another place with the consent of Russia and with all the procedures observed. The memorial was re-erected at the Park of Heroes.

The Soviet burial memorial in Harbin will be also taken from the area that is in a park near entertainment facilities to the territory of the Orthodox part of the Hongshan cemetery. Funds are already earmarked to restore the memorial in the cities of Dalian and Zhangbei.

There are more than 13,000 places of burial of Soviet soldiers and officers and about 50 monuments in China. On the whole, they are in satisfactory condition. In 1998, China took the decision to include Soviet military memorials in the list of main sites of patriotic cultivation of the Chinese youth. The Russian Foreign Ministry and China have regular consultations on military memorial issues” (TASS 2005a).

Frame 4: WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia

Russian discourses and history texts generally pay scarce attention to the modern history of Russia–China ties. A perennial preoccupation with the West as perpetual “Other” or “enemy-brother” of the Russian “Self”, combined with a deep-seated belief in the intrinsic superiority of European culture, Christianity and “Russianness”, has kept national historical accounts typically gazing West (Laruelle 2017; Lukin and Yakunin 2018). In line with this West-centric and Eurocentric focus, Russian accounts of the Great Patriotic War have long focused exclusively on the war in Europe and the Eastern Front. Consequently, Russia’s Far East and the war in Asia have consistently been outliers in Moscow’s discourse on World War II, at least until 2015, when Moscow and Beijing initiated a range of joint events to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory of the war and tensions between Russia and Japan over the disputed Kuril Islands (or “Northern Territories”) intensified.



The Russian text corpus corroborates this long-standing blind spot in Moscow's discourse on World War II. There is only a single topic on East Asia, which accounts only for a small fraction of the entire dataset ([Topic 16](#) / [Frame 4](#): WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia; 2.73%). Moreover, only 10 articles belonging to this topic were published during the decade from 2005 to 2014. Of the remaining 63 articles, 25 were published in 2015 and around 5 (on average) in each of the subsequent years. Whereas earlier articles report on a range of issues, including Russian veteran gatherings at Sakhalin Island and the search for remains of Russian and Japanese soldiers, the later articles increasingly converge around four broad themes, which are outlined below.

The first theme revolves around Japan's historical role during World War II and the continuing responsibility vis-a-vis neighbouring states that results from it. This theme features in these articles on three levels: (1) Tokyo's lack of remorse for the atrocities it inflicted in the region, particularly in China and Korea, and refusal to recognize the existence of wartime sex slaves; (2) efforts by the Japanese government, spearheaded by the Liberal Democratic Party, to expand its military capabilities and join the US in provocative military exercises in contravention of its pacifist constitution; and (3) Japan's unwillingness to accept the "results" of World War II and acknowledge Russian sovereignty over the Kuril Islands. Of these three issues, the first is discussed mostly in the context of complaints from South Korea or North Korea, whereas the latter is exclusively confined to Russo-Japanese relations. The second point – Japan's increasing militarisation – echoes a well-known Chinese concern (see [section 4.3](#), [Frame 2](#)), and while tensions between China and Japan are often mentioned in this context, the trend is presented as problematic in itself and may be indicative of the presence of similar concerns in Moscow.

A second recurring theme in these articles concerns the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The gist of the analysis in these articles is that the bombings were not necessary to bring the Japanese Empire to its knees; that Washington had ulterior motives (i.e., containing the Soviet Union); and that the act constituted a crime against humanity. Included below is a key excerpt of a longer article on the topic that appeared in 2019:

“The bombings have always been presented to young Americans in school history texts, and to Americans in general by government propaganda, as having been ‘necessary’ to end the war quickly and to avoid American ground troops having to battle their way through the Japanese archipelago. But later evidence – such as frantic efforts made in vain by the Japanese government to surrender through the Swiss embassy, and later reports that Japan’s real concern was not the destruction of its cities, but rather fear that Soviet forces, victorious in Europe, had joined the Pacific war and were advancing on Japan from the north and into Japanese-occupied Korea – has undermined that US mythology. In fact, it would appear that President Truman and his war cabinet didn’t really want a Japanese surrender until the two bombs that the Manhattan Project had produced had been demonstrated on two Japanese cities. The target audience of those two mushroom clouds were not Japanese leaders in Tokyo, but rather Stalin and the Soviet government” (RT 2019b).

A third theme revolves around the contribution of Soviet troops to the liberation of Northeast China during the Manchurian offensive. Although it features only in a small number of articles, it is important here because it implicitly frames the wartime relationship between the Soviet Union and China as one of a powerful, morally just force coming to the aid of a weaker party and defeating an enemy that had subjugated large parts of China for more than eight (or fourteen) years. In view of the objectives of this project, it is worth citing some relevant parts in detail:

“China celebrates on Wednesday the 70th anniversary of Japan’s surrender in the Second World War, when the Soviet Union came to Beijing’s aid on the eastern front. [...]

China, which suffered from Japanese militarism from as early as 1931, when the Imperial Japanese Army occupied the northeast region of Manchuria, will hold a number of events on September 2-3, commemorating the anniversary of Japan’s surrender. A major military parade will be held on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, with delegates from a total of 30 countries, including Russia, expected to attend. [...]

On August 8, 1945, the Soviet Union officially joined the 1945 Potsdam declaration, a statement that called for the surrender of all Japanese armed forces in World War II, in

line with the decisions made at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, and formally declared war on Japan. [...]

During the final stages of World War II, the Red Army conducted the Manchurian offensive from August 9 to September 2, in order to defeat Japan's Kwantung Army, liberate the northern and northeastern Chinese provinces Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, the Liaotung Peninsula, Korea, and eliminate a bridgehead of Japanese aggression on the Asian continent and the country's major regional military and economic potential.

On August 10, Mongolia joined the war against Japan. Soviet warplanes bombed the enemy's military installations in Harbin, Changchun and Jilin, as well as troop formations, communications networks and lines of communication near the Soviet border. The Pacific Fleet sailed into the Sea of Japan, cut shipping lanes linking Korea and Manchuria with Japan, with its warplanes and ships hit Japanese naval bases in Yuki, Rashin and Seishin.

Units from the Trans-Baikal Front crossed arid deserts and steppes and the Greater Khingan Range to defeat the enemy in the Kalgan, Solun and Hailar regions. On August 18-19, they approached Manchuria's major industrial and administrative centers.

On August 18-27, Soviet paratroopers landed in Harbin, Jilin, Changchun, Mukden, Port Arthur, Pyongyang and other cities.

On August 19, Japanese forces began surrendering en masse.

With the defeat of the Kwantung Army and the loss of its military and economic potential in northeastern China and North Korea, Japan was no longer able to continue the war.

On September 2, 1945, Japan's then-Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu, acting as a representative of the Emperor and Government of Japan, and General Yoshijiro Umezumi, then chief of the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff, signed the instrument of Japan's unconditional surrender aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay at 9:04 a.m. Tokyo time" (Sputnik 2015f).

While this quote provides a considerable amount of historical context, the focus is squarely on high-level strategic and tactical military aspects. It does not introduce any personal recollections of veterans or recount stories of Russian and Chinese soldiers engaged in a shoulder-to-shoulder fight against the common enemy, as some articles on Soviet-US cooperation do. Remarkably, the articles belonging to this topic also do not mention the substantive military aid provided by the Soviet Union to China between 1937 and 1939 in the form of combat aircraft, advisors and aviators. Much less is there any mention of the brutalities inflicted on the populace in Northeast China by the Soviet troops in the course of their

interventions. In short, the narrative of the Soviet Union's help to China remains not only incomplete but also strictly sanitised and highly stylised.

A fourth and final theme embodied in this topic centres on the massive Chinese victory celebrations and the military parade in Beijing in 2015, which Putin attended and in which troops from the Russian armed forces participated. Items reporting on the unprecedented event show a dual focus. On the one hand, the reports pay considerable attention to the military hardware and troops showcased in China's victory parade (see, e.g., Sputnik 2015e). On the other hand, and more importantly overall, the reports are clearly interested in the attendance of foreign leaders during China's victory celebrations and, above all, the absence of senior leaders from the United States and Japan. Their decision to skip the event, which inspired European leaders to follow their example, was portrayed in Russian media articles as insensitive and informed by ideological concerns and resentment about China's rise. It was just another demonstration of Western attempts to invalidate the outcomes of World War II, which should be forcefully opposed:

"For their part, the Russian government, activists and social organizations have long-stressed that Russia has not forgotten China's sacrifices, nor its contribution to the victory against global fascism. As Russia-China Friendship Association Vice President Galina Kulikova emphasized in an interview for Xinhua this past June, 'Russia and China, as the two main forces fighting in WWII in the Western and Oriental battlefields, have come through great hardships and won the war with terrible loss of human life. The upcoming commemorative events in China mean that our countries stand against the falsification of the results of WWII'" (Sputnik 2015f).

3.4 Comparing Russian-language narratives

To assess whether there are major divergences between Russian domestic and international media discourses on World War II, we furthermore examined a corpus comprising 5,581 Russian-language articles published on that topic during the same period. This corpus was compiled by performing online searches using the 22 Russian search terms specified in [Annex 1](#) of this report and collecting relevant articles from the Russian-language editions of TASS (Информационное агентство России ТАСС).

Corpus-level comparison

The STM analysis of the Russian-language corpus resulted in a list of 19 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic. A full list of the 19 topics (labels) and relative topic proportions is included in [Annex 4](#).

We found these 19 topics in the Russian-language corpus to be broadly similar to the 16 topics in the English-language corpus and representative of the same four basic discursive frames specified above. There are, however, some apparent differences in **topicality and focus**, which suggest a strong domestic focus across all discursive frames and a relative lack of attention to the broader international aspects of World War II memory:

- **Joint commemoration.** In terms of [Frame 1](#), the Russian-language corpus pays little attention to international aspects of war commemoration. Contrary to the English-language corpus, there is no separate topic in the Russian-language corpus on foreign leaders' presence during Russia's V-Day parades, though there is one on the attendance of Russian politicians. There is hardly any mention of foreign leaders attending Russia's V-Day celebrations other than references (particularly from 2015 onwards) suggesting that Western dignitaries were "not invited", that their attendance was "unknown" or that their absence was irrelevant because V-Day is a *national* holiday. There is virtually no mention of Chinese leaders or joint Russian-Chinese commemorations in the Russian-language corpus.
- **Military display.** There are no separate topics and very few articles dealing with military equipment showcased during parades, whereas there were two topics dedicated to this in the English-language corpus. This suggests that coverage of this topic is predominantly intended for external rather than domestic consumption.
- **Historical truth.** As to [Frame 2](#), the focus is predominantly on the contributions and sacrifices of the Soviet Red Army and the sources and the channels through which historical knowledge is preserved, disseminated and popularised among domestic audiences. For example, there are separate topics on Soviet losses during the war (Topic 18) and the interment of soldiers and veterans (Topic 8), as well as films, paintings and literature that depict the Great Patriotic War (Topic 2).
- **Historical revisionism.** In terms of [Frame 3](#), the Russian-language corpus is almost exclusively focused on memory disputes in the region rather than on the global level. Contrary to the English-language corpus, there is no separate topic in the Russian-

language corpus on the West's historical revisionism, although the theme does feature under a number of topics (Topic 15, and less so in Topic 7 and Topic 11).

There is a separate topic on “Historical revisionism in Ukraine” (Topic 3), underscoring the relative importance of this topic in the domestic discourse.

- **East Asia.** [Frame 4](#) is virtually absent in the Russian-language corpus. Contrary to the English-language corpus, there is no separate topic dealing with World War II commemoration and disputes in East Asia. Russian media outlets appear not to feed their domestic audience with content on World War II in Asia. Only a dozen or so articles cover the dispute between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands. In a corpus containing more than 5,500 articles, only 24 mention China. A small handful of these cover the historical disputes between China and Japan.

These differences are remarkable and significant. Foreign policy actions and international events often are used in domestic discourses to bolster regime legitimacy or, alternatively, require justification through domestic discourses (Huijgh 2012; Lams 2018). While differences in emphasis or scope between international and domestic discourses as such are not surprising, one would still expect a considerable degree of overlap between the two sets of discourse. The absence of such overlap, particularly in terms of the Russian–Chinese memory partnership, underscores the apparent lack of domestic support for or interest in joint commemorations and the superficial nature of international narratives concerning wartime cooperation between China and Russia.



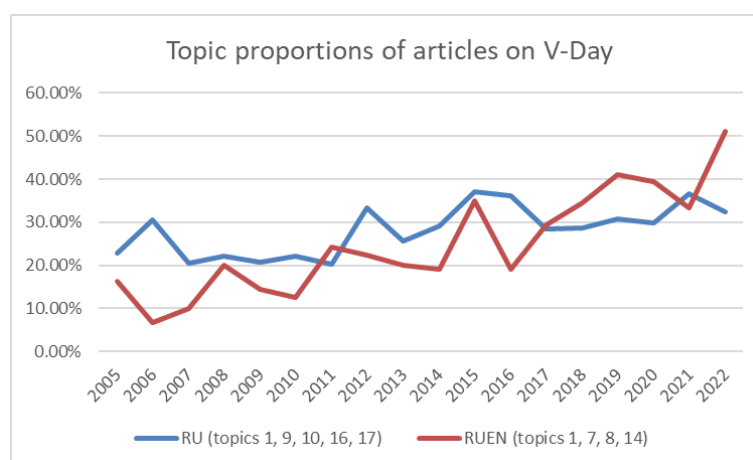
The three word clouds above provide snapshots of the 100 keywords with the highest relative frequency for the corpus years 2005, 2015 and 2022 (from left to right). In terms of **trends** over time, the general trend broadly resembles that of the English-language sources, except that

the list of the top 25 words with the highest relative frequencies is even more stable over time in the Russian-language corpus and that it does not include any (manifest) references to external actors outside the Russian “Self”, such as “Nazi” (нацист) or “China” (Китай). For each of the three years represented here, the top 3 keywords were “war” (войн[а]), “victory” (побед[а]) and “great” (велик[ий]). The term “veteran” (ветеран) dropped out of the top 10 keywords after 2005, giving up its 4th spot to “patriotic” (отечествен[ый]) in both 2015 and 2022. The term “military” (воен[ый]) also made its entry into the top 10 in 2015.

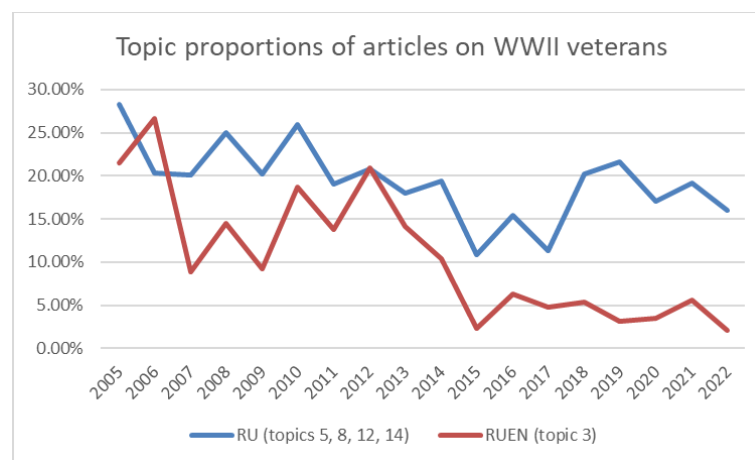
Topic-level comparison

To identify differences between the English-language text corpus and the Russian-language text corpus we compared (clusters of) topics from the two sets. In this section we outline the results of these broad comparisons.

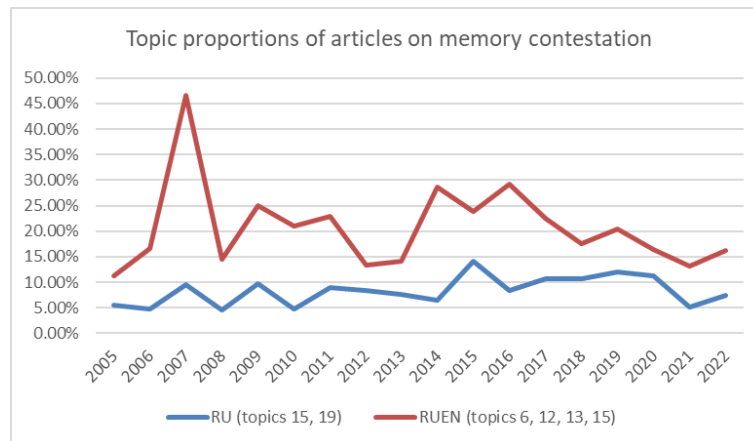
With respect to [Frame 1](#) (Commemorating the Great Patriotic War) we did not observe major quantitative differences in coverage on the international versus the domestic level. The number of topics is almost the same for both corpora, although with five topics instead of four the domestic discourse is slightly more diversified. As the below graph indicates, the (combined) proportions for the two sets of topics were roughly at the same levels throughout the period reviewed. The trendlines are also similar, although the international coverage seems to have grown at a slightly faster pace, particularly after 2014. In qualitative terms, however, there are significant differences between the two sets of discourse, as we already observed in the corpus-level comparison above, particularly in terms of coverage of participation by foreign leaders in Russia’s V-Day celebrations.



In relation to [Frame 2](#) (Documenting and preserving “historical truth”), we already noted above that the prevalence of the term “veterans” in the English-language corpus decreased considerably after 2005. The below graph shows the differences in relative proportion of this topic between Russia’s international and domestic discourses. It shows how veterans continue to be an important and relatively stable theme in the domestic discourse, with 21% of the corpus dedicated to Russian veterans and policies targeted to them (Topics 5, 8, 12 and 14) as opposed to 7.6% in the English-language corpus (Topic 3), which shows a stronger negative trend.



As pointed out above, the salience of [Frame 3](#) (Memory contestation and historical revisionism by the West) is considerably greater in Russia’s international media discourse than in its domestic discourse, both in terms of number of topics (4 vs 2) and in terms of their combined proportion (21% vs 8%) on the corpus level. The below graph shows that this was consistently the case during the period we reviewed. Moreover, in terms of geographical extent, the domestic narratives are predominantly concerned with Russia’s immediate vicinity, with around half of the articles having to do with memory contestation in Ukraine (Topic 19). The remainder focus largely on Poland and the Baltic States, with only a few mentions of Western countries and Japan. See also [section 5.3](#) below.



As already mentioned, [Frame 4](#) (WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia) is absent from the Russian-language corpus. Of a total of more than 5,500 articles, only 24 mention China. A handful of these items cover the historical disputes between China and Japan. There are also a small number of articles about the children of Chinese revolutionaries who grew up in the Soviet Union during the war (referenced in [section 3.3](#) above under Frame 2) and on memorial sites in China honouring Soviet soldiers (referenced in [section 3.3](#) above under Frame 3).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has found that Russian state-owned and state-controlled media since 2005 have produced a distinct and consistent discourse on World War II across the four discursive frames that centres on disseminating, defending and honouring the “historical truth” of the Great Patriotic War and its outcomes. This core “truth” holds that the Russian “Self” – as the inherent core of the Soviet Union – was central and indispensable in defeating Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and hence in achieving final victory both in Europe and Asia.

This “sacred truth” must at all costs be upheld, the discourse suggests, as it provides a critical basis for peaceful relations in the region and the world at large. Distorting it therefore inevitably endangers peace. This securitisation of war memory explains why Moscow’s rhetoric hardened when governments of other post-Soviet states and EU member states began to denounce Putin’s “truth” as a “myth”. Resembling an arms race in a classical security dilemma, this fuelled an escalatory dynamic of intensified historical statecraft and revisionism on all sides of the disputes.

At the same time, the media discourse also reflects (and facilitated) the gradual “personalisation” of the Great Patriotic War by the Russian president. Reports on his family’s wartime experience and sacrifices, his solemn participation in the Immortal Regiment marches, and his extensive study of history and state archives reinforce Putin’s domestic image as guardian of the “sacred” Victory Day holiday and as Russia’s “dutiful son” who preserves and protects the national memory (Wood 2011).

In recalling this “truth”, it is Russia’s intrinsic might, solidarity and victoriousness that take centre stage, rather than the peace or freedom that resulted from it. The discourse explicitly links the memory of the war to Russia’s great-power status and ambitions. This aim is also reflected in the coverage of military display and weaponry during the V-Day parades. By thus favouring the “truth” over the outcomes of war, the discourse aims to validate Russia’s prestige as global leader and enjoin the world to acknowledge and accept this prestige.

There is only one theme where the “outcomes” of the war are prioritised over “truth”, and this is in relation to the ongoing territorial dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands. Here, the discourse aims to support a clearly delineated vestige of “unfinished business” of the war. On the whole, however, the East Asian theatre hardly features in Moscow’s West-centric discourse on World War II. To the extent that it does, it is primarily to underscore that it was the Soviet Union, not the US, that delivered the decisive blow to Imperial Japan.

To illustrate this critical contribution, several articles in the Russian corpus include accounts of the “Manchurian offensive” of August 1945, which saw Soviet troops invading the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and defeating the Kwantung Army. This campaign nevertheless plays at best a supporting role in the main narrative on the Great Patriotic War. There have been no apparent attempts to substantiate this “memory” with historical sources or personal accounts and to popularise it either domestically or in Russia’s ties with China. The apparent lack of interest in wartime episodes of Russian–Chinese history and shared experience is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that Beijing since 2015 has emerged as Moscow’s most important “memory partner” and helped defend its “historical truth” on the increasingly contentious global stage.

There are significant differences between Moscow’s domestic and international discourses on World War II. The domestic narratives largely ignore the international aspect of World War II commemoration in Russia and by the Russian government. There is hardly any mention in

the Russian-language corpus of foreign leaders attending Russia's V-Day celebrations (let alone of any Chinese leaders) and the same is true for joint Russo-Chinese commemorations and joint narratives. This remarkable divergence between external and internal discourses indicates that international narratives concerning wartime cooperation between China and Russia are superficial and not supported by the broader public at home. By extension, this suggests that the historical-ideational underpinnings of the Russo-Chinese friendship are weak.

4. Chinese media discourse on World War II

4.1 STM analysis

Source selection and data extraction

Our analysis of Beijing's international media discourse on World War II involves a total of 2,455 English-language news articles published between 2005 and 2022 by four major Chinese media outlets and portals. These four outlets were selected because they are controlled by the Chinese state and/or the CCP and provide state-endorsed information services in English targeted at international audiences, even though their editorial policies may differ somewhat.

- **China.org** is a state-run web portal operating under the auspices of the State Council Information Office and the China International Communications Group. The portal states that it “offers broad access to up-to-date news about China, with searchable texts of government position papers and a wealth of basic information about Chinese history, politics, economics and culture”.⁶
- **China Daily** is China's national English-language newspaper. A subsidiary of the *People's Daily* (the official Chinese-language newspaper of the CCP Central Committee), *China Daily* is regarded as a mouthpiece for the CCP in its efforts to communicate with the wider world (Chen 2012). It issues three print editions (Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and International) and runs various online platforms. According to its website, it has a combined print, online and mobile readership of more than 350 million.⁷
- **Global Times** is another English-language newspaper published under the auspices of the *People's Daily*. Founded in 2009, initially as a foreign-affairs supplement to the *People's Daily* (Nyíri 2017), it claims to distinguish itself from the Chinese journalistic tradition, which “avoids touching upon conflict and confrontation”, yet at the same time seeks to distance itself from “the designed provocation that is common in Western media's China reportage”.⁸ The *Global Times* is known internationally for its outspoken and often strident, nationalist tone.

⁶ See http://www.china.org.cn/2009-09/28/content_18620394.htm.

⁷ See https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/e/static_e/about.

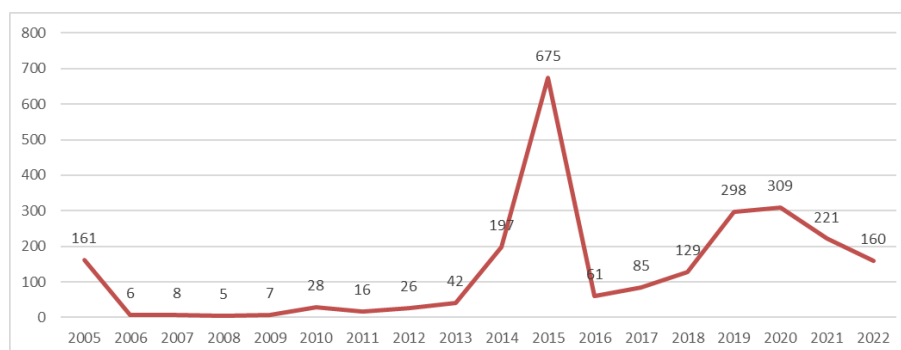
⁸ See <https://www.globaltimes.cn/about-us/index.html>.

- **Xinhua** (“New China”) is China’s official news agency, operating directly under the State Council. It collects and compiles news items which it distributes to the media and broadcasters, but it also publishes news in multiple languages through its own portals. According to Xinhuanet, the main online portal, it releases some 15,000 media publications per day in Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, German, Portuguese and Mongolian Cyrillic.⁹

In the People’s Republic of China, World War II is officially known as “The Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War” (中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯). In Chinese historiography, the war lasted from the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July 1937 – or according to more recent interpretations, from Japan’s invasion of Manchuria on 18 September 1931 – to 2 September 1945, when Imperial Japan signed the instrument of surrender. In English-language news items, the formal term is often abbreviated to “China’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression”. Alternatively, the conflict is referred to as the “(Second) Sino-Japanese War”, “anti-Japanese resistance”, or “World War II”, depending on the context. Based on the existing variations and peculiarities in English, we operationalised a list of twelve search terms (see [Annex 1](#)). These search terms were used to collect the data (see [Annex 2](#)).

English-language text corpus

The above steps resulted in a main text corpus containing 2,455 English-language news articles from the abovementioned outlets. A graph showing the distribution of news articles in this corpus over the period reviewed is included below:



⁹ See <https://english.news.cn/20230130/3f2ba4b7cd214a209dda790ddbdc620/c.html>.

This graph shows that the distribution of news articles over the years is uneven. We make three observations that deserve consideration when interpreting the findings presented in this report (see also [Annex 9](#)):

1. **Cyclicity.** The graph clearly reflects the cyclical nature of war remembrance practices in China. The number of retrieved articles shows apparent spikes in the major World War II anniversary years of 2005 (2010), 2015 and 2020. Special 5-year anniversaries of the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which marked the outbreak of all-out war between China and Japan (e.g., the 85th anniversary of the incident in 2022), have no apparent impact on the quantity of publications.
2. **Rising trend.** The quantity of retrieved articles is structurally higher for more recent years. This may reflect the heightened topicality of World War II in China since 2015, when the CCP leadership launched a new campaign to propagandise the “historical significance” of the Chinese people’s war, China’s “important place” in the global fight against fascism, and the CCP’s “central role” in securing victory (Chang 2021), but there may be additional factors that explain this (see next point).
3. **Data limitations.** There are at least two data-related factors that may distort and minimise earlier trends. First, one of the outlets studied (Xinhua) appears to have removed articles that are more than six years old from the web. Although we were able to retrieve some of these using external databases, this earlier segment may still be incomplete, resulting in an inflated relative size of the more recent subset (March 2017–March 2023). Second, the commercial database used in this study (Factiva) does not contain a complete collection of published articles.

4.2 Corpus-level findings: conceptualising Chinese narratives

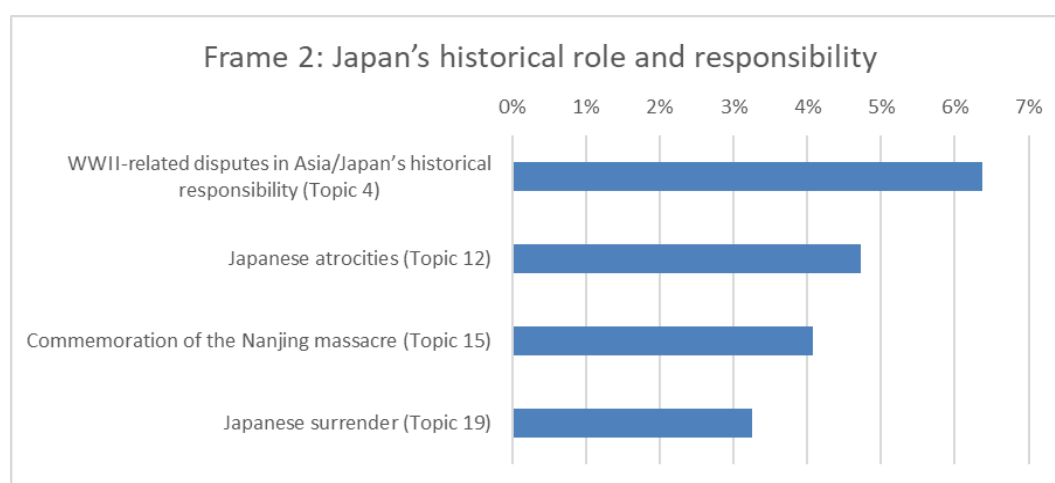
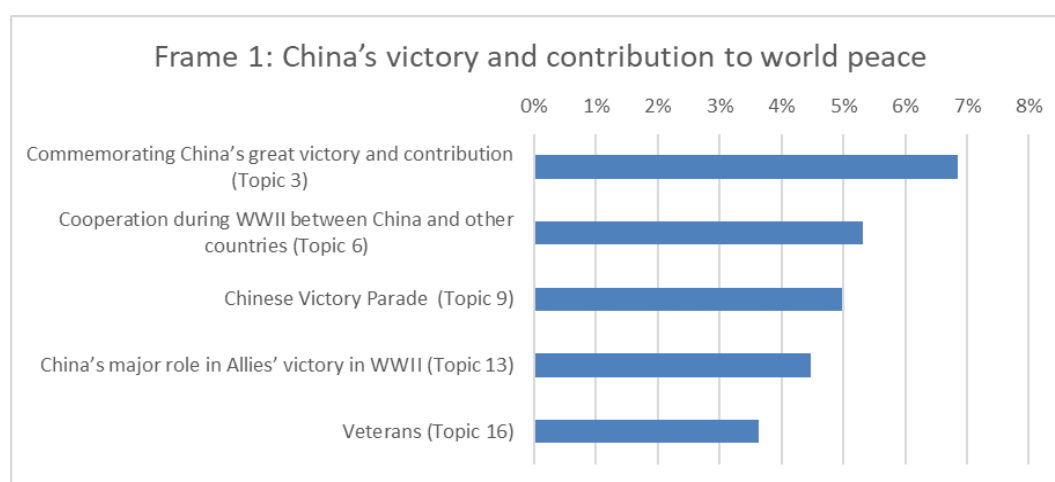
Topics and frames

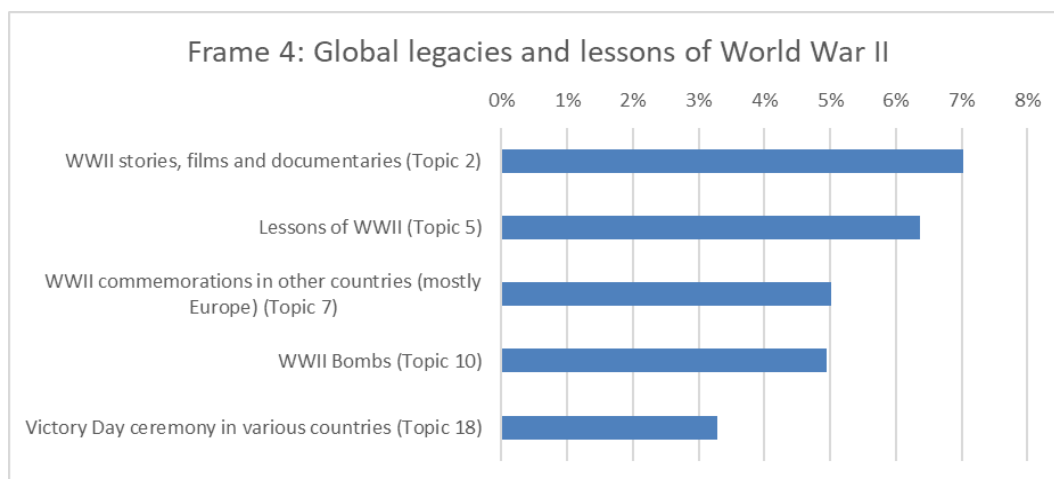
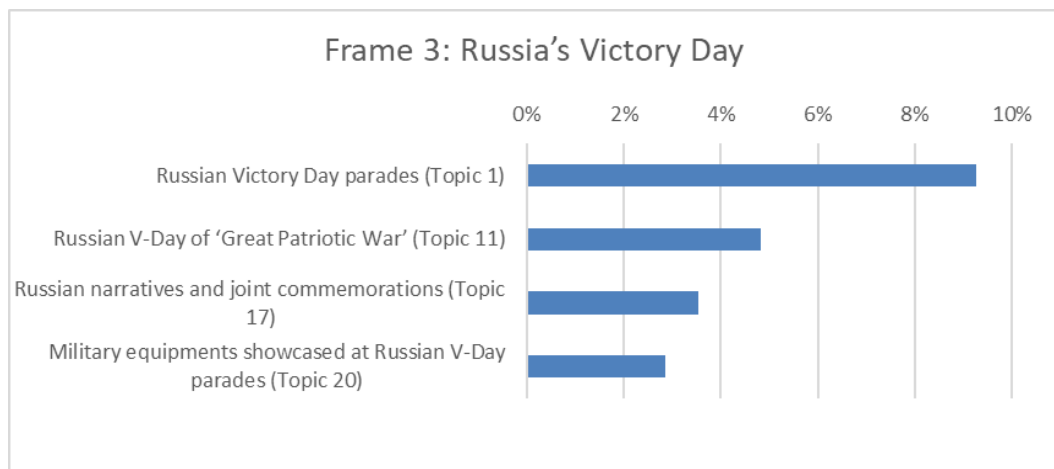
The STM analysis of the (English-language) Chinese corpus resulted in a list of 20 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic. A full list of the 20 topics (labels) and relative topic proportions is included in [Annex 5](#).

For the purposes of analysis and discussion, we clustered these topics and classified them under four basic (conceptually sometimes overlapping) thematic frames. This classification follows Sino-centric conceptualizations of the Chinese war experience that are also reflected,

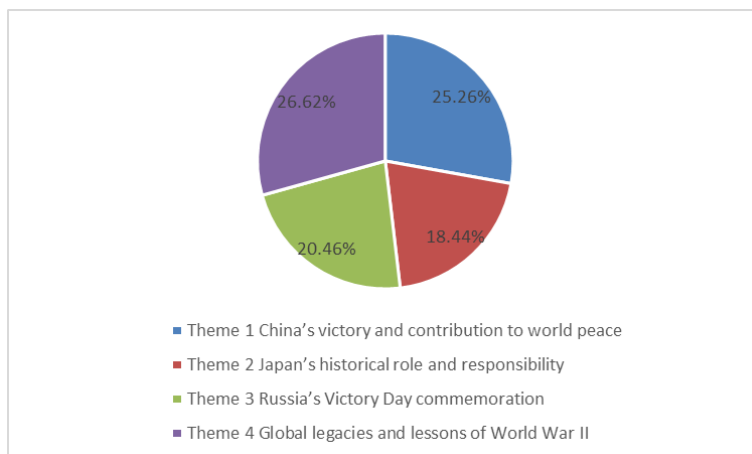
for example, in Chinese textbooks and museums (Chang 2021, 2022b). Conceptually speaking, the primary focus of Chinese narratives is on the “Self” and its morally just actions: **China’s victory and contribution to world peace** ([Frame 1](#)). This is then followed by discussion of the principal hostile “Other” and its unjust actions: **Japan’s historical role and responsibility** ([Frame 2](#)). Next comes China’s main *friendly* “Other” and partner in today’s international politics and war commemoration practices: **Russia’s Victory Day commemoration** ([Frame 3](#)). Concluding this conceptualization are the implications of the war for the wider world: **Global legacies and lessons of World War II** ([Frame 4](#)).

Below we include a graph for each of the four frames depicting the proportion (relative to the entire English-language corpus) of each topic classified under that frame. For details on absolute and relative prevalence of these topics and their frames, see [Annex 8](#).





It should be noted that classifications like these are based on interpretations that may not always be consistent with the automated topic modelling. For example, it is possible that articles belonging to [Topic 2](#) (WWII stories, films and documentaries), which we classified under [Frame 4](#) (Global legacies and lessons of World War II) based on their content and topic label, are also – or sometimes substantially even more closely – related to our [Frame 1](#) (China's victory and contribution to world peace) or [Frame 2](#) (Japan's historical role and responsibility), and vice versa. These uncertainties partially follow from the interpretation and labelling of the topics, which involve human selection and thematic classification, and are impossible to eliminate in any STM analysis (see [Annex 9](#)). Despite these limitations, we believe it is helpful to provide a broad picture of the main discursive themes on the corpus level. The below chart shows the four frames and their respective proportions. In [section 4.3](#) we take a closer look at individual topics within each of these frames.



Trends over time

The illustrations presented above provide wholesale representations of the Chinese news articles on the aggregate corpus level. This means that changes over time are not discernible. Before delving more deeply into selected topics and topic clusters in the next section, it may be instructive to note some high-level trends in the evolution of Chinese news articles on World War II during the period reviewed (i.e., from 2005 to 2022). For illustrative purposes, we include below three word clouds that provide snapshots of the top 50 words with the highest relative frequency for the years 2005, 2015 and 2020 (from left to right).



Several general trends can be identified from comparing these word clouds and the underlying data (see [Annex 6](#)). This leads to three observations.

1. **From Chinese victimhood to victory.** The word clouds show a notable rise in the frequency of the word “victory” in Chinese articles at the expense of “peace” and keywords signifying Chinese victimhood, such as “Nanjing” (as in Nanjing

Massacre). This accords with recently identified trends in Chinese war narratives, particularly Xi Jinping's more triumphalist recent reading of the history of World War II, which emphasises "great victory" and "national greatness" in a global context (Chang 2021).

2. **Less focus on Japan, more on the rest of the world.** Whilst early Chinese articles focused predominantly on China's experience of resisting Japanese aggression, recent Chinese news articles place more emphasis on the global war and less on Japan. Again, this is in line with the recently observed trend of the globalisation of China's "memory diplomacy", which has seen Japan's image as evil "Other" reduced and subsumed into a broader set of external forces threatening China's "rejuvenation" (Chang 2022a).
3. **Russia's emergence.** Perhaps the most striking change is the sudden appearance of "Russia" as a top keyword in recent years. Whilst absent from the top 50 keywords in 2005, it ranked 32nd in 2005 but 8th in 2020. The prevalence of related keywords, such as "Soviet", "Putin" and "Moscow", has likewise increased. This change seems reflective of Beijing and Moscow's recent efforts to overcome the historical trust deficit between their peoples and build a memory partnership (Chang 2022c).

In the next section, we examine specific topics within the four broad frames and also take a closer look at the evolving trends and changes over time.

4.3 Topic-level findings: examining Chinese narratives

Frame 1: China's victory and contribution to world peace

[Frame 1](#) combines five topics concerning the history and memory of China's war effort and contribution (Topics 3, 6, 9, 13 and 16) under the heading of China's victory and contribution to world peace. While the Chinese "Self" has consistently been at the heart of World War II remembrance in China, there has been variation over time as to who constitutes the Self, what broader context it operated in, and how the war affected it. In the Marxist-Leninist political discourse of the Mao era, the spotlight was on China's revolutionary masses, who achieved victory under the CCP's guidance in a transnational struggle against a reactionary clique of Japanese imperialists abetted by Chinese feudal counter-revolutionaries. After Mao, a nationalist turn under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin gave rise to a nationalist "new remembering" of World War II, in which the Chinese nation featured as the victim of atrocities

and traumas inflicted upon it by an aggressive neighbouring state (Qian and Liu 2019). Under Xi Jinping, the focus has once again shifted back to victory, but this time the “great triumph” is attributed to the entirety of the Chinese people who, united across party lines, were able to secure just victory and global peace.

Substantively the most instructive topic in this frame in terms of historical interpretations is [Topic 13](#) (China’s major role in the Allies’ victory in WWII; 4.47%). Articles belonging to this topic advance narratives on the causes of war and of ultimate victory, the “great contribution” of the Chinese people to the global war effort, and the “mainstay” role of the CCP in leading the people. They do so by citing Chinese and Western historians and their calls for greater recognition of the critical contribution to the Allied victory made by the Chinese people, which includes Kuomintang (KMT) war heroes and compatriots in Taiwan (see also Chang 2021, 2022b). In this reading, the Chinese people not only tied down a million Japanese troops, thus preventing them from attacking other Allied territories, but also provided critical intelligence and assistance to the Allies. A 2005 article quotes then Premier Wen Jiabao’s assessment that of all the Allies in World War II, “the Chinese people suffered the most, made the biggest sacrifices and fought for the longest time”, a claim that Xi Jinping recycled in his 2015 speech (China.org 2005c; *China Daily* 2015c). Below are some examples:

“Chinese historians called for more awareness of China’s ‘indispensable contribution’ to the Allied victory in World War II while world leaders gathered in Europe for solemn ceremonies marking the 60th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s defeat...

‘China’s resistance effectively stopped a Japanese invasion into the far east of the Soviet Union, which was facing an extremely arrogant Nazi Germany in its west. The far east region became the most important strategic home front for equipment and food, and more 500,000 troops were transferred from the region to the west,’ [historian] Peng said.

According to [Professor] Li, it was Chinese resistance that slowed down and greatly lessened Japanese aggression into southeastern Asia, saving valuable time for Anti-Fascist forces in Europe. ‘Without Chinese resistance, it would have been almost impossible to implement the ‘Europe first’ strategy,’ said Li” (China.org 2005b).

“China was the major World War II battlefield in the East and the Chinese people’s indelible contributions to the victory of the war for their unswerving resistance against Japanese Fascists” (*People’s Daily*/Xinhua 2014).

“China’s sacrifices and war efforts to date have been largely overlooked from a traditional Europe-centric historical perspective, experts said. Meanwhile, an increasing number of historians and scholars are noting the historical contributions of the Chinese and calling for a re-evaluation of China’s position and role in WWII. China was the first country to

fight the Axis invasion, and the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression is one of the greatest stories of WWII, which has not been fully acknowledged by the international community, Rana Mitter, a history professor and director of the Center for Chinese Studies at Oxford University, told the *People's Daily*. [...]

Yuri Tavrovsky, a famous Russian publicist and professor at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, told the *People's Daily* that China's efforts saved the Soviet Union's Red Army from simultaneously fighting on two fronts.

Former US President Franklin D. Roosevelt once commented that, without China, or if China had been defeated, many more Japanese divisions would have been deployed to other areas and they would have been able to occupy Australia and India, and then push to the Middle East.

Former Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin said, 'Only when the hands and legs of the Japanese invaders were tied up could we avoid fighting on two fronts when the Germans invaded.' [...] Koketsu Atsushi, a famous historian and vice president of Yamaguchi University in Japan, told the *People's Daily* that Japan deployed more troops to fight China than against the US. Japan fought China three times longer than it did the US" (*Global Times* 2015e).

History should not only be reassessed, according to these reports, but must also be safeguarded and protected. News items from 2005 and 2015 emphasise that World War II history may not be distorted, denied or whitewashed, with the former emphasising the history of the Japanese invasion and the latter that of China's great victory. Starting from 2014, references to the Soviet Union's wartime contributions and present-day war memory in Russia start to appear, adding revealing context. Some examples follow:

"To protect their narrow interests, the U.K., France and the U.S. adopted a hostile attitude towards the Soviet Union while indulging the Fascism being followed in Germany and Japan. In Europe, the 'Munich Conspiracy' between U.K., France and Germany led to the outbreak of WWII. In Asia, the U.S. connived at Japan's aggression in northeast China until the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Recently, the U.S. again encourages Japan's attempts to contain China. [...]

To fight against Fascism together, China, the U.S., U.K. and the Soviet Union collaborated to destroy the aggressors, Germany, Italy and Japan. In China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Kuomintang (KMT) also set up a united front against Japanese aggression. However, in order to maintain its hegemony across the world today, the U.S. seeks to contain Russia and China. Its 'Cold War mentality' not only sharpens the contradiction between the U.S. and Russia, but intensifies competition with China" (China.org 2015).

"Unfortunately, some Western politicians and media outlets have been skeptical of the commemoration [through a military parade]. In particular, the leaders of some countries

that were part of the Allied Forces in WWII have appeared indecisive over whether or not to attend the commemorative events. Their response can be attributed to their worries over the potential impact of China's development on the political and economic spectrum of the world. These worries also stem from Russia's alleged role in the Ukraine crisis. Some Western politicians and observers assume China and Russia are forging an anti-West front even though the two countries don't have any alliance" (*China Daily* 2015a).



The above graph shows a major spike in 2015 in the proportion (relative to the entire corpus) of key topics categorised under this frame. This is when the central leadership of the CCP decided that more had to be done to acknowledge the “great contribution” made by the Chinese people towards victory in World War II and the “great significance” of the war. As detailed elsewhere, this decision sparked a makeover of Chinese school textbooks and museum exhibitions dealing with World War II (Chang 2021). It also heralded a large-scale national commemoration on 3 September 2015 of the 70th anniversary of the “Victory Day of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression”, a holiday established just one year earlier. The event saw Xi Jinping addressing the nation in a televised speech from the rostrum of the Tiananmen gate in the presence of world leaders and other dignitaries. [Topic 3](#) (Commemorating China’s great victory and contribution; 6.86%) deals with this high-level event. Some reports also mention joint commemorations of “the victory of the world anti-fascist war and the WWII” with befriended states, state leaders and organisations such as the SCO, which includes Russia (*Global Times* 2015g).

The year 2015 marked the first (and thus far only) time in the history of the PRC that the victory in World War II was commemorated with a national military parade. [Topic 9](#) (Chinese Victory Parade; 4.98%) is the main topic dealing with this event and preparations for it. Topic 3 is closely connected to this as well, as more than half of the items belonging to this topic

appeared in the summer of 2015 and the majority of these refer to the military parade. A considerable number of articles belonging to [Topic 9](#) (22 of 121) contain references to Russia, to acknowledge Vladimir Putin's attendance of the celebrations in Beijing, the participation of Russian troops in the Chinese military parade, or the participation of Chinese troops in the Russian parade earlier that year. Most news reports on the parade are bland and devoid of substantive commentary, but there are instances of explicit framing, as the example below illustrates:

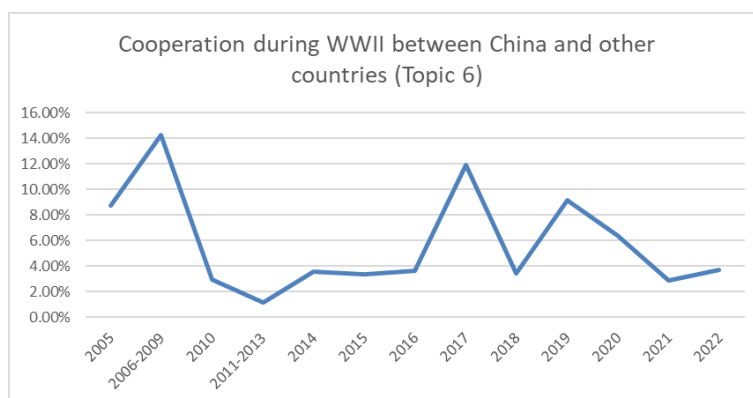
"China and Russia, two major battlefields in WWII, made historical contributions to the eventual defeat of fascist forces. China's participation in the parade, a landmark event in China-Russia military exchanges, shows the strength of bilateral ties and their resolve to safeguard world peace" (*People's Daily/Xinhua* 2015).

The heavy focus in Chinese news reports on the 2015 military parade as the centrepiece of national World War II commemoration under Xi may explain why the trend has not been sustained afterwards, despite the CCP's earlier decision to rekindle the memory of World War II. For since 2015, no military parades have been held to commemorate China's victory in the war. It seems that the Covid-19 pandemic, and its ramifications for public life in China, was an important cause of this. In line with social distancing precautions, the commemoration in 2020 of the 75th anniversary of victory only saw a relatively small group of senior officials, representatives of the armed forces, and veterans and their descendants participate in a commemorative event at the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in Beijing (Xinhua 2020d). National remembrance activities in the subsequent (non-major) anniversary years of 2021–23 were even more subdued. Nevertheless, the Chinese people's victory was still more topical during these years than in the years prior to 2015.

The recent repurposing and stylization of war memory in China has gone hand in hand with a decreasing emphasis on veterans ([Topic 16](#): Veterans; 3.64%), a group that is gradually disappearing from the memoryscape in China just as elsewhere. Items published in the earlier years of the period studied here still include several reports on veteran gatherings and their wartime experiences. In one example, dating from 2005, we learn about an 88-year-old Chinese veteran shaking hands with a Russian soldier who participated in the war to "liberate" Northeast China at a party organised by the Russian Embassy in Beijing (China.org 2005d). In an apparent sign of friendliness to Moscow, there is no mention of the brutalities inflicted on

the local Chinese populace by the Soviet troops during their occupation of and subsequent withdrawal from Northeast China. In 2015 there was a minor uptick in reports referencing veterans. Apart from Chinese veterans (both CCP and KMT), who were granted a state subsidy in recognition of their wartime contribution, this includes mentions of veterans in Taiwan and in other countries. After 2019, and including the major anniversary year of 2020, there are very few mentions of veterans.

More broadly, following the surge of China-US tensions and the war in Ukraine, Beijing appears to have shifted the focus of its remembrance activities away from past conflict to present-day peacetime security efforts. In 2022, Martyrs' Day took centre stage in China's national remembrances, allowing Beijing to dissociate these from Putin's aggression in Europe and turn its attention to the Chinese people and their contributions to peace, stability and welfare. During the 2022 commemoration of Martyrs' Day, which falls on 30 September on the eve of China's National Day, Xi Jinping emphasised that the Chinese people need heroes and martyrs also when their country is at peace, as they are "the coordinates that guide the nation" (Chang 2023b). A similar focus on maintaining peace amid rising global tensions characterised the 2023 commemoration of Martyrs' Day. It remains to be seen to what extent the "greatness" of China's efforts and triumph in World War II will return to the fore in future anniversaries.



In the 2000s, historians noted that official Chinese discourse on World War II had begun to "globalise" (Mitter 2010). One implication was that the discursive space to commemorate China's former allies in World War II, including Western capitalist countries, was growing. In his 2005 anniversary speech, China's then leader Hu Jintao generously credited the war's final victory to the "united struggle of all compatriots of the Chinese nation, as well as the solidarity

of the Chinese people and their anti-Fascist allies worldwide” (Chang 2023a). And while official historical narratives have become more Sino-centric under Xi Jinping, there is still ample place in China’s discourse on World War II for remembering those “foreign governments and friends who supported and assisted the Chinese people in resisting aggression” (*China Daily* 2015b). Accounting for an overall proportion of 6.86%, historical cooperation between China and other countries in the fight against the Axis powers ([Topic 6](#)) thus remains an important topic, showing additional peaks in the years 2017 and 2019 (see [Annex 8](#)).

The articles belonging to [Topic 6](#) focus on (commemoration of) foreign military leaders and aviators who served in China at various stages of World War II, both as (nominal) “volunteers” when their home countries were still neutral in the Sino-Japanese conflict and as Allied representatives after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. It is striking that the vast majority of these articles focus on Sino-US wartime cooperation. About half of the articles belonging to [Topic 6](#) recount the stories of (descendants of) the American Volunteer Group, widely known as the “Flying Tigers”, who joined the Chinese air force between April 1941 and July 1942 to oppose the Japanese invasion. About a dozen articles contain references to US Army General Joseph Stilwell, who served in China’s wartime capital Chongqing from 1942 to 1944 as commander of the US forces in China, Burma and India and as Chiang Kai-shek’s chief of staff. Except for a video item published in 2021 (appearing in four related items in [Topic 6](#)), there is no mention of the 2,000 Soviet aviators who came to China’s aid during the critical and most difficult early stages of the war (Xinhua 2021b).

There are clear indications that the invocation by the Chinese state of past friendships, including the Sino-Russian and particularly the Sino-US wartime alliances, is driven by contemporary politics. A good example is the letter that the Chinese ambassador to Washington published jointly with his Russian counterpart at the occasion of the 75th anniversary of V-J Day in 2020, in which they congratulated the US, their one-time ally, and recalled the heroism of America’s “greatest generation”. Building on this shared past, the letter called for a continuation of the “spirit” of unity of World War II and urged the US to “join hands” in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and in confronting other shared challenges such as climate change, terrorism and economic recession (*China Daily* 2020c). More recently, Xi Jinping personally wrote letters to the descendants of American war heroes who once served in China in what state media portrayed as epitomes of the “enduring China-U.S.

friendship” (Xinhua 2023g, 2023j). Below is an example taken from the text corpus with a similar political message, conveyed this time by China’s American “friends”:

“Descendants of the Flying Tigers recalled the cooperation of China and the United States during World War II and urged the two nations to work together for the benefit of humanity. In letters shared recently with China’s Embassy in the US, families of the Flying Tiger veterans who passed away in the last two years, along with former US military leaders, called for enhanced efforts by China and the US to transcend their differences and work together, according to a statement by the embassy released on Friday” (*China Daily* 2022).

While ebbs and flows in the contemporary China-US relationship may contribute to the volatility observed in the above graph, one must be careful with making causal inferences from the pictured trendline. As set out in [section 1.2](#) of this report, many factors prevent coherent patterns from emerging from the data that lend themselves to a conclusive interpretation of short-term trends. In addition to data issues and fluctuations caused by the recurrence of various types of anniversaries, there are a myriad of factors that may contribute to random movements of this trendline, such as visits, reunions, and the demise of foreign veterans; decoration of Chinese war heroes abroad; donation and restoration of historical artefacts; creation of memorials and historical exhibitions; publication of new books and so on. Below are excerpts from such items dated 16 May 2014 and 31 July 2019, respectively:

“The Flying Tigers, a volunteer group of American pilots who helped China fight Japan in WWII, is one of the most familiar and respected names among the Chinese, so it came as no surprise that the visiting Chinese General Fang Fenghui, chief of the General Staff of the People’s Liberation Army, wanted to meet them and their families. The meeting took place on Thursday morning at the Willard Hotel in downtown Washington and included not just 90-year-old Flying Tigers veteran Jay Vinyard, but also Nell Calloway, granddaughter of Claire Lee Chennault, commander of the Flying Tigers. [...] ‘The Chinese people will never forget those who made all the outstanding contributions during the war, who fought fascism, who sacrificed their lives and were never able to come back home,’ Fang said” (*China Daily* 2014a).

“Items of Flying Tigers are on display in the World War II Gallery of the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, the United States, on July 24, 2019. The Flying Tigers, a U.S. air squadron composed of pilots from the United States Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marine Corps, helped the Chinese fight Japanese invaders in World War II. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force displays more than 360 aircrafts and thousands of historical items that bring history to life. In its World War II Gallery, many exhibits reveal a memorable part of China-U.S. cooperation when the two countries joined hands in fighting fascism and safeguarding world peace” (China.org 2019).

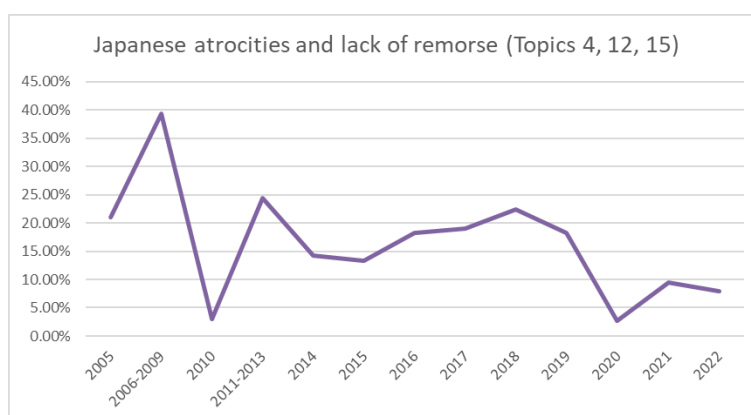
The articles in this topic show a certain similarity with those in [Topic 2](#), which we included in [Frame 4](#) (Global legacies and lessons of World War II). Two broad distinctions can be observed between the two. First, the articles in [Topic 6](#) tend to focus more on the Chinese war theatre than those included in [Topic 2](#), which have a somewhat wider scope and therefore were classified under Frame 4. Second, the items in the current topic pertain more to formal aspects of historiography and remembrance, as they deal with official visits, joint commemorations, award ceremonies, memorial services and so on, whereas in [Topic 2](#) the substantive stories, including fictional accounts provided in novels, plays and films, take centre stage. Nevertheless, the distinction remains somewhat arbitrary from a thematic point of view, and the discussion here should be read in conjunction with that under [Frame 4](#).

Frame 2: Japan's historical role and responsibility

Perhaps surprisingly, Japan did not feature as a major culprit in the Mao-era discourse on World War II. In the then dominant class-struggle discursive frame, the Chinese war experience was reduced to a “side conflict” of the revolution and often merely portrayed as a “way-station on the path to CCP dominance in 1949” (Mitter 2010). According to some historians, this caused a “benevolent amnesia” vis-à-vis Japan’s wartime conduct in China and East Asia (Reilly 2011; for a nuanced view, see also Yang 2016). Illustrating this strategic “benevolence”, it is said that when Japanese prime minister Tanaka during a 1972 visit to Beijing began to apologise for Japan’s invasion, Mao Zedong riposted that “if Japan hadn’t invaded China, the Chinese Communist Party would not have been victorious, moreover we would never be meeting today” (Barmé 2005). Rather than seeking to condemn Japan, Mao was looking to improve relations with Tokyo in the face of a common Soviet threat.

In the aftermath of Mao’s disastrous political campaigns and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Beijing changed track in the 1980s and suddenly cured itself of this initial benevolence vis-a-vis Japan. The new paradigm of World War II memory, emerging from the late 1980s, resulted in a nationalist reframing in which Japanese aggression and Chinese victimisation became the central tropes. Drawing on a narrative of national humiliation and trauma, China’s new remembering inspired a “numbers game” aimed at quantifying Japanese atrocities and an equally fervent practice of “apology diplomacy” aimed at extracting concessions from Tokyo (Chang 2021a, 2021b).

As described above, however, official war memory under Xi Jinping has shifted to focus once again on the Chinese people's resistance and heroism, and not on their victimhood. This has gone hand in hand with a partial shift away from attention to Japanese atrocities, despite the establishment in 2014 of a National Memorial Day for the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre (13 December). Following the 2015 CCP politburo meeting that sanctioned the latest paradigm change, Japan's former role as the "evil Other" was minimised in official speeches, museum exhibitions and school textbooks, even though Japan's past crimes and present remilitarisation continue to be the target of both official criticism and populist vitriol. And while anti-Japanese sentiment in China has been on the rise again in recent years, official grievances have taken on a more global character and are now primarily aimed against Tokyo's perceived role as Washington's regional "vassal" in its ongoing efforts to thwart China's rise (Chang 2021, 2023b).



The above graph broadly reflects the decreasing relative prevalence of Japanese atrocities in Chinese state media discourse on World War II (see also [Annex 8](#)). The line not only signals an overall downward trend but also shows apparent lows in major anniversary years (2010, 2015 and 2020), when other major themes related to the war's anniversary – China's victory commemorations, Russian parades, and global lessons – competed for attention and may have taken precedence. However, this cannot explain the major dive in 2020, when Covid-19 prevented large-scale commemorations in China and Russia and there was little to report on. One might speculate that a temporary thawing of China-Japan relations, prompted by the donation of millions of face masks and relief supplies to China from Japan, may have played a role (Xinhua 2020a; *Global Times* 2020a). In a similar vein, it seems plausible that the anti-Japanese demonstrations of 2005, tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2011–12 (*China*

Daily 2012) and Tokyo's outspoken concerns over Taiwan in 2021 (Smith 2021) contributed to surges in these years.

Aside from this numerical decline, there is also a marked change in the substantive content over time. In [Topic 4](#) (WWI-related disputes in Asia/Japan's historical responsibility; 6.37%), for example, a shift can be observed around 2015 away from foregrounding Japan's culpability in the context of Sino-Japanese relations to discussing Japan's regional and global responsibility more broadly. The absolute peak in 2015 is largely a result of reporting on then Japanese Prime Minister Abe's remembrance speech, in which he claimed that Japan's future generations should not be "predestined" to apologise. Mitsubishi's apology to forced labourers from China and elsewhere also contributed to the surge in that year. In 2019, however, the majority of media reports dealt with disputes between Japan and other countries, including South Korea (e.g., over wartime sex slavery) and Russia (e.g., the dispute over the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories). In 2022, not one article in this topic was about Japan's historical responsibility to China. The only more or less constant, recurring "Chinese" complaint in Topic 4 is about successive Japanese leaders' visits and offerings to the controversial Yasukuni shrine.

Similar substantive changes can be observed in [Topic 12](#) (Japanese atrocities; 4.7). Earlier examples in this topic focused strongly on dissatisfaction with Japan's "wrong attitudes and actions" in the past and resurgence of "right-wing" tendencies in the present (China.org 2005a). Starting from 2014 and 2015, however, the scope gradually broadened to also include more self-centred and empowering news, such as reports on the release of archival documents and films on China's defining battles and victories against the Japanese (2015). While this does not in any way mean that Japan's wartime atrocities and Chinese victimhood are glossed over, narratives of injustice and victimisation are increasingly being counterpoised by reports highlighting the Chinese people's agency, resilience and ultimate victory. As the focus in China's official discourse shifted to the Chinese victory, Japan's surrender also became a more prevalent topic ([Topic 19](#)). Below is an excerpt of an item in *Global Times* dated 26 August 2014, which illustrates how the balance began to shift:

"The second episode in a war documentary video series being released by China's State Archives Administration (SAA) has recalled the Battle of Songhu, one of the bloodiest battles during China's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression... An incident in which a Japanese navy officer was shot dead near Hongqiao Airport by members of the Chinese Peace Preservation Corps led to the Battle of Songhu beginning on Aug. 13, 1937.

The brutality of the battle was described as "unprecedented" as Chinese troops held the fort until November, when they pulled out to prevent further casualties. Shanghai fell on Nov. 11.

The first major engagement between China and Japan, the battle lasted three months and saw huge casualties on both sides" (*Global Times* 2014a).

Commemoration of the Nanjing Massacre ([Topic 15](#)) nevertheless saw an increase of media coverage in recent years, with absolute and relative peaks occurring in 2018 and 2019, when international "peace assemblies" were held in the city. An example from a photo item published on 15 August 2018 illustrates how this quintessential event of China's war remembrance has also become more "globalised" in recent years:

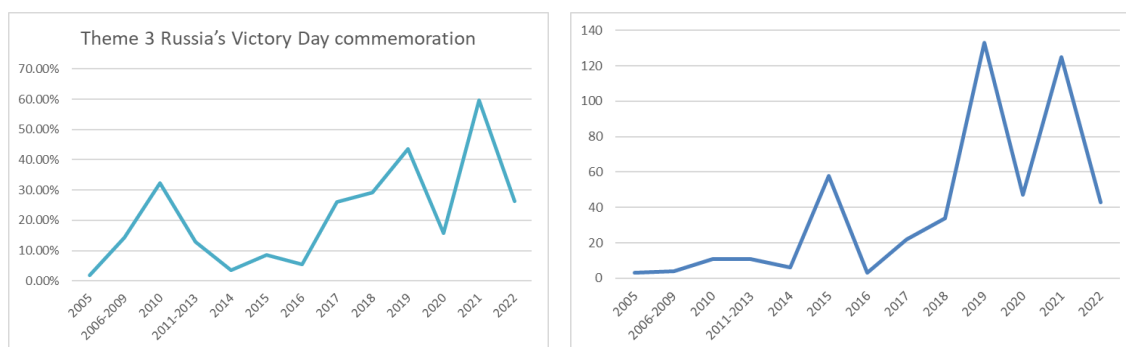
"Members of a visiting Japanese delegation lay flowers at The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in east China's Jiangsu Province, Aug. 15, 2018. A peace assembly was held Wednesday in Nanjing to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of Japan's unconditional surrender in World War II. Representatives from countries such as China, Japan, the United States, and Thailand attended the event held in The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, mourning the 300,000 people who were killed in one of the most barbaric episodes of World War II" (Xinhua 2018).

Frame 3: Russia's Victory Day

One of the most striking recent developments in China's state media discourse on World War II is the appearance of "Russia" as a top keyword. With a topic proportion of 9.26%, "Russian Victory Day parades" was in fact the most prevalent topic in the entire English-language text corpus. As the graphs of [Topic 1](#) illustrate, Russia's emergence in Chinese media discourse on the war began in 2015, when the two countries launched a range of activities to "jointly uphold the outcome of the victory of World War II" (MFA PRC 2015). In May of that year, Xi Jinping attended Russia's Victory Day commemorations and joined Putin (and Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev) in paying tribute at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (*China Daily* 2015c). In September, Putin reciprocated when Beijing for the first time commemorated the victory of World War II with a military parade. The two states also exchanged guards of honour that year to participate in each other's national military parades, marking the first time Chinese soldiers had participated in the Russian Victory Day parade, and vice versa.

It is worth recalling that this was not the first time that Chinese state leaders had participated in Russian victory commemorations. Following Jiang Zemin's earlier example, Xi's

predecessor Hu Jintao also attended Russia’s Victory Day anniversary celebrations, first in May 2005 (together with other world leaders including US President George W. Bush, French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi) and again in May 2010. However, the corpus contains only a few articles reporting on these visits. As explained in [section 1.2](#) above, this may in part reflect a data problem for these years, for we manually identified several news items reporting on the event that were not retrieved during the automated web-scraping process (e.g., *China Daily* 2005; *China Daily* 2010). Omissions from the text corpus might also account for the peak in 2010 in the relative prevalence graph below.



While Russia’s Victory Day commemorations became a trending topic only in 2015, the highest absolute and relative prevalence to date occurred in 2019 and 2021. In 2019, China and Russia celebrated the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and upgraded their bilateral relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”. During Xi’s state visit to Moscow that year, the Chinese leader called Putin his “best friend”, while the latter hailed the “unprecedented level” of their ties (*China Daily* 2019). Commentaries in Western media spoke of the emergence of a new Beijing–Moscow “axis”, informed by shared suspicion of Western interference and grievances with the United States (FR 2019; Trofimov 2019). In 2021, the two partners celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, which was renewed for five more years. During a phone call several weeks later, Putin recalled their countries’ sacrifices for and contributions to the victory of World War II and called for joint efforts to “safeguard the victory of World War II” and “defend historical truth” (MFA PRC 2021).

The graphs show a regression in 2020. This is remarkable, as the two sides had previously expressed their intention to engage in high-level joint activities to celebrate the 75th anniversary of victory of World War II that year (MFA PRC 2019). A likely explanation for this temporary lapse is the Covid-19 pandemic, which not only led to a subdued national war remembrance in China and postponement of Russia's Victory Day parade but may also have led to some bilateral tensions over Moscow's swift border closure (Wong and Ho 2022). Additionally, an important potential factor explaining the scarce coverage of Russia's victory parade in China's increasingly leader-centred media coverage would be that a relatively unknown Chinese official attended the event in place of Xi himself (Xinhua 2020c). In September, the two sides issued a statement in which they pledged they would "jointly counter all attempts to falsify history, glorify the Nazis, militarists and their accomplices, and tarnish the victors" and "not allow anyone to revise the results of World War II" (MFA RF 2020). It was issued not on the level of state leaders but by their foreign ministers, and the text corpus does not contain any news items reporting the event.

A closer inspection of the content indicates that substantive engagement with Russia's war history or shared Sino-Russian history in these news items is minimal. Virtually all articles belonging to [Topic 1](#) (Russian Victory Day parades; 9.26%) and [Topic 11](#) (Russian V-Day of "Great Patriotic War"; 4.82%) are photo reports. These items typically consist of multiple web pages each containing a single picture with a brief caption. As separate web pages are treated as separate articles in the corpus, excessive photo coverage of Victory Day parades and similar events has a significant upward effect on topic proportion. Articles belonging to [Topic 20](#) (Military equipment showcased at Russian V-Day parades; 2.85%) likewise include numerous photo reports alongside short articles conveying basic information about weaponry and hardware showcased during the parade. The following are typical examples of items belonging to these three topics:

"Russian servicewomen march on the Red Square during a rehearsal for the Victory Day parade in Moscow, Russia, May 7, 2019. The 74th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II will be marked here on May 9" (Xinhua 2019a).

"Soldiers march on the Red Square during a rehearsal for the Victory Day parade in Moscow, Russia, May 7, 2019. The 74th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II will be marked here on May 9" (Xinhua 2019a).

"Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu watched a Victory Day air parade rehearsal near the Red Square, the TASS news agency reported Monday. According to the report, 75 air

planes and helicopters took part in the rehearsal, including MiG-31K fighters capable of carrying hypersonic Kinzhal missiles, fifth-generation Su-57 fighters, A-50 long-range reconnaissance aircraft, Il-76 transport aircraft, Tu-95MS and Tu-160 strategic bombers, as well as Mi-8 and Mi-28N helicopters” (*Global Times* 2020b).



There is one topic under this frame that engages substantively with narratives and shared Sino-Russian memory ([Topic 17](#): Russian narratives and joint commemorations; 3.5%). This topic is still strongly associated with major war anniversaries: most of the articles belonging to this topic were published around 10 May and 3 September, with apparent peaks in absolute prevalence in 2015 and 2020. Accordingly, these articles mostly talk about Russia’s top leaders and their remarks on the “Great Patriotic War”. In terms of relative prevalence, this topic was also significant in key anniversary years, particularly 2010 and 2020, but less so in 2015, when China’s victory and victory parade were the centrepiece of news coverage. Even so, there are a couple of articles in 2015 that report on the decision of the US president and other Western leaders to skip Moscow’s Victory Parade in view of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and actions in Ukraine (*Global Times* 2015b). The graphs also show a relative spike in 2017, when eight articles (of a total of 85 that year) reported on Russia’s Victory Day parade, including five near-identical pieces containing quotes from an address held by Putin. Below is an excerpt taken from one of these pieces:

“[...] Putin congratulated all on the Victory Day, saying that the victory will forever remain in the history of humankind as ‘a supreme triumph of life and reason over death and barbarity,’ to which Russian people made a huge contribution. ‘We will never forget that it was our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers who won back Europe's freedom and the long-awaited peace.’ Putin said while paying tribute to the soldiers who fought and died for their country. The president underlined that Russia will strengthen the traditions of patriotism and loyalty to the fatherland, and that Russian servicemen, ready

for any sacrifice for their homeland and people, 'will forever guard Russia as the soldiers of Victory did.' 'The lessons of the war teach us to be vigilant, and Russian Armed Forces are ready to counter any potential aggression,' Putin said. Warning that the world is still being plagued by neo-nazism, terrorism, extremism and other threats, Putin called on the strengthening of combat potential and concerted efforts from the international community to meet common challenges. 'We are open to such cooperation. Russia will always side with the forces of peace, with those who stick to equitable partnership,' he added" (Xinhua 2017).

The following is an excerpt of a similar item with quotations of Putin's speech two years later:

"The president stressed that Russia resolutely defends the true heroes of the Great Patriotic War, which remains a 'sacred duty' to the country, and allows no distortions about the event or betrayals to their ancestors. In the meantime, Russia will continue enhancing its defense capabilities and working with other countries to fight terrorism, neo-Nazism and extremism, he said. 'The lessons of the past war are still relevant. We have done and will do everything necessary to ensure the high combat capability of our Armed Forces and the defense potential of the most modern level [...] We call on all countries to realize our shared responsibility for creating an effective and equal-for-all security system,' Putin said (Xinhua 2019b).

Several articles belonging to [Topic 17](#) also report on the participation of Chinese leaders in Russian victory celebrations. Less than a handful of items in 2005 and 2010 deal with Hu Jintao's attendance of commemorative events in Moscow. A number of photo items, again comprising multiple web pages, show Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan inspecting the grand military parade. There is a separate item reporting Putin's statement that "China was the main battlefield in Asian countries' resistance against militarism in World War II, sacrificing millions of lives" (*Global Times* 2015f). Quoting Putin and Xi directly, these joint war commemorations are presented as "an important chance to jointly safeguard the outcome of the victory of WWII and post-WWII international order" (*Global Times* 2014b). But the reporting remains superficial and largely symbolic, with little to no substantive content about actual wartime cooperation between China and Russia. The closest these reports get to exploring this shared history are the brief anecdotal snippets included in a 2021 news report on an "Immortal Regiment" march held in Beijing to celebrate Victory in Europe Day (see also [section 3.3](#), Frame 1, Topic 7). Although the article is a singular exception, it is worth citing the relevant passages of this piece here in full:

"In Beijing, the 'Immortal Regiment' event attracted great attention from Russians and local Chinese because it is a sign of appreciation for their ancestors who gave their lives to

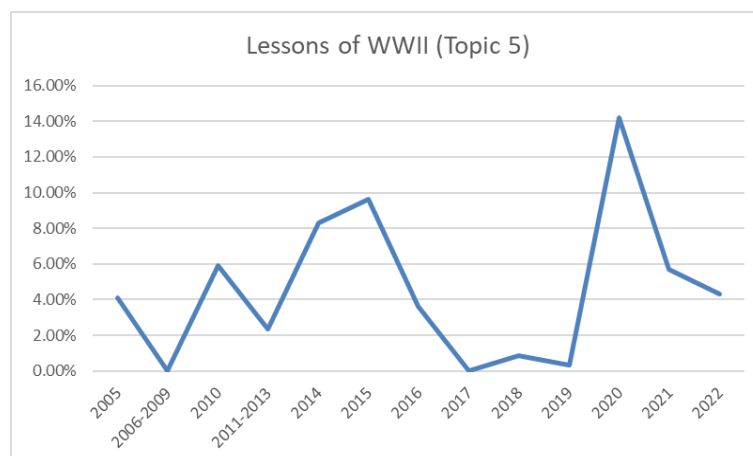
achieve victory over fascism and militarism, and it is also a symbol of the unwavering friendship between Russia and China, Dmitrii Lukiantsev, minister counselor of the Russian Embassy in China, told the *Global Times* at the ceremony on Sunday. 'We [China and Russia] are brothers, the fact that the Chinese soldiers fought alongside Soviet soldiers in the Great Patriotic War, the war against the Japanese occupation in China shows that we have common interests, common feelings, common goals. We are together,' he said.

Liu Yunhong, daughter of the first commander of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force Liu Yalou, told the *Global Times* that 'We should not forget the days when we were bullied by imperialists, we need to remember how hard peace is to come by.' From 1939 to 1941, Liu senior was sent to study in Frunze Military Academy in Moscow, and was commissioned as a major in the Soviet Red Army. He fought many hard battles including the Battle of Stalingrad.

'We hope that this firm, blood-bought friendship between Russia and China will be passed on forever,' Ren Gongwei, whose grandfather Ren Fuchen was a commander of a Chinese regiment of the Soviet Red Army during the Russian Civil War, told the *Global Times*. This is the third time Ren Gongwei has taken part in the march. This year he joined with his fellow members of the 'Soviet Eagles' tracing group, which was dedicated to finding the burial sites of Soviet Air Force volunteers who supported the War against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) in China. 'There is a monument to my grandfather in the Ural region of Russia. And we now hope that Soviet soldiers will be widely remembered more in China as well,' Ren said (*Global Times* 2021a).

Frame 4: Global legacies and lessons of World War II

[Topic 2](#) (WWII stories, films and documentaries; 7.02%) includes news items recounting World War II stories as depicted in Chinese and foreign films, plays, novels, cartoons, TV documentaries, and occasional archives and exhibitions. These include universal stories of sacrifice, patriotism, heroism, justice, cooperation and humanity, told from the perspectives of veterans, army nurses, diplomats, prisoners of war, sex slaves, refugees, orphans and so on. Although a considerable part of these stories focus on China's war experience, most have an international dimension, recounting transnational friendship and cooperation, whilst others are unrelated to China but focus on the European theatre instead. A significant proportion (around 20%) recount stories of Sino-US wartime cooperation, epitomised for example by the legendary Flying Tigers (see also [Frame 1](#), [Topic 6](#)). There are also many stories (8%) about Jewish refugees in wartime China. Only four stories in this topic (<3%) deal with Russia's war experience, and they are unrelated to China.



[Topic 5](#) (Lessons of WWII; 6.36%) lumps together news articles that reflect Beijing’s official view of the lessons and implications of World War II for China, the region and the world at large. This is among the most instructive topics in the corpus in terms of this project’s aims, as it is where substantive convergence with Russian narratives may be expected. Contrary to [Topic 2](#) discussed above, which featured many unofficial accounts and private stories but none about Sino-Russian relations, the official narratives reproduced in [Topic 5](#) contain numerous references to Sino-Russian cooperation. In fact, around 25% of the articles in this topic – the majority of which were published around major war anniversaries – deal with Russian war history or memory. The following is a brief outline of the main “lessons” of World War II on the regional and global levels as reflected in this topic:

- **China.** The decisive factors for the victory of the Anti-Japanese War were the great “national spirit” of the Chinese people and the mainstay role of the CCP in unifying and mobilising the nation. The Chinese people must carry on this national spirit during the many great battles ahead to protect its sovereignty, safeguard peace and uphold the postwar international order.
- **Japan.** Japan must deeply reflect on its history of aggression, draw lessons from the past, respect the security concerns of its Asian neighbours and remain committed to peaceful development. It must show a stronger sense of responsibility for the history, the people and the stability and development of the region. Tokyo should refrain from using the Ukraine war and playing up the China “threat” as pretexts for expanding its military forces, capabilities and alliances.
- **United States.** The US and China built a profound friendship during World War II as members of an alliance that laid the foundations of the UN and the post-war order.

However, that very order is now being undermined by forces in the US (not representing the common will of the American people) that pursue unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonic practices. Washington should honour the spirit and history of World War II, which teaches us that sound ties between China and the US not only benefit their peoples but also contribute to world peace and prosperity.

- **International community.** The world must not forget the costs and sacrifices the entire human race made in World War II for the peace and stability now enjoyed by all. To safeguard global peace, the international community must therefore uphold the outcomes of World War II, reaffirm its commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, defend multilateralism, and create equal opportunities of development for emerging economies and developing countries.
- **China–Russia.** The close cooperation between China and Russia during World War II laid a solid foundation for the China–Russia friendship and postwar cooperation. As the main battlegrounds of Asia and Europe, respectively, during World War II, China and Russia made major historical contributions to the defeat of fascist forces and the ushering in of a new era of world peace. The two partners should continue to make joint efforts with the international community to preserve the post-war world order and safeguard the outcomes of World War II – justice, peace, stability and prosperity of the world. China and Russia have also joined hands to properly commemorate World War II and oppose attempts by forces in the West (including Japan) to distort or negate the war’s history.

The remaining three topics classified in Frame 4 add little of substance to the “lessons” and related narratives discussed above. [Topic 7](#) (WWII commemorations in other countries; 5.02%) consists mainly of (photo) reports documenting activities held worldwide to mark the end of World War II, including official remembrance services and wreath laying ceremonies, parades and processions, medal investitures and so on. [Topic 18](#) (Victory Day ceremony in various countries; 3.28%) contains items of a similar nature, though more emphasis is placed on military parades and commemoration or re-enactments of historic battles. Lastly, [Topic 10](#) (WWII Bombs; 4.94%) deals with (present-day issues concerning) various material and immaterial legacies of World War II warfare and brutality, including bombs, arms and UXO; chemical weapons and laboratories; warships and shipwrecks; remains of soldiers; and military brothels and sex slaves. Reporting on these topics tends to take place around anniversary dates or following relevant discoveries and events.

Only one article in this group ([Topic 7](#)) is worth citing in some detail, as it extensively quotes official Russian statements aimed at condemning what Moscow perceives as historical revisionism by politicians in European countries that suffered from Nazi occupation during World War II. While the article refrains from explicitly taking a position on the matter, the reporting is one-sided and strays far from any journalistic principle of covering both sides of the argument. The article is quoted below in full:

“Russian leaders condemn attempts to revise World War II history

Russia’s top leaders said on Monday that attempts to distort the history of the World War II could open the gate for revival of Nazism.

‘We must clearly understand that any attempts to rewrite history, and to revise the contribution of our country to the Great Victory (of the World War II), effectively mean justification of Nazism crimes and would open gates for its deadly ideology,’ Kremlin press service quoted President Vladimir Putin as saying.

‘We must defend the truth about the events of the Second World War [...] as forgetting the lessons of our common past could lead to the repetition of such terrible tragedies (as the Holocaust),’ Putin said.

He stressed that it was the Red Army of the Soviet Union that have saved the Jewish as well as other people in the world from Nazi’s ‘merciless annihilation.’

Also on Monday, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that historical revisions have been exercised by politicians in the countries that once suffered from Nazi occupation. ‘Lately, the memories of the World War II have been distorted for the political speculative goals. There are even cynical attempts to whitewash war criminals and fascist henchmen,’ Medvedev said. He said that those attempts provoked new conflicts and led to new tragedies. ‘Revival of radical nationalism means oblivion of the lessons of the World War II,’ Medvedev said in a statement.

Both Putin and Medvedev Monday attended a memorial event here to mark the 70th anniversary of liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Soviet Army.

Earlier this month, the Kremlin said Putin was not going to attend the Auschwitz liberation memorial events planned in Poland, as he has not received an official invitation to the Tuesday gathering marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Observers took this as the latest reflection of the exacerbation of Russia’s relationships with Western countries as their ties have been dragged to the worst since the Cold War due to the Ukraine crisis” (*Global Times* 2015a).

4.4 Comparing Chinese-language narratives

To assess whether there are major divergences between Chinese domestic and international media discourses on World War II, we examined a corpus comprising 3,279 Chinese-language articles published on that topic during the same period. This corpus was compiled by performing online searches using the seven Chinese search terms specified in [Annex 1](#) of this report and collecting relevant articles from the Chinese-language editions of the *People's Daily* (人民日报) and *Global Times* (环球网).

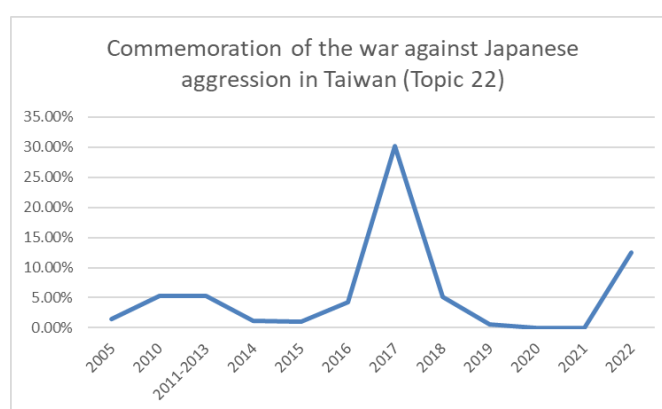
Corpus-level comparison

The STM analysis of the Chinese-language corpus resulted in a list of 24 topics, which we labelled following a review of the most representative examples for each topic. A full list of the 24 topics (labels) and relative topic proportions is included in [Annex 5](#).

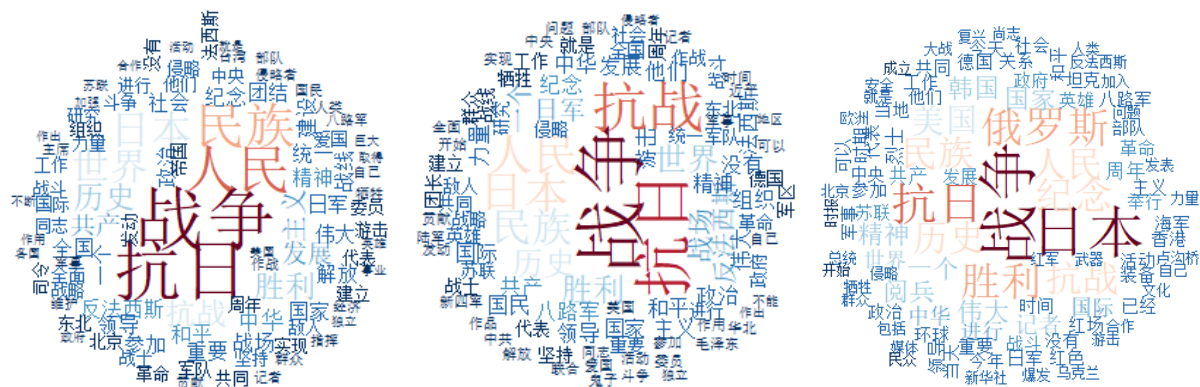
We found these 24 topics in the Chinese-language corpus to be broadly similar to the 20 topics in the English-language corpus and representative of the same four basic discursive frames specified above. There are, however, some apparent differences in **topicality and focus**. The most important of these include:

- **Domestic warfare.** The Chinese-language corpus places more emphasis on aspects of domestic resistance by the Chinese people and their “spirit of resistance” (抗战精神). The great majority of topics relate to China’s war history and memory. There are separate topics on the Chinese people’s great *Kangzhan* spirit (Topic 4; 5.59%) and on China’s wartime battles and martyrs (Topic 6; 4.88%).
- **Popularisation of history.** In line with the previous observation, the Chinese corpus pays more attention to historical sources and the channels through which historical knowledge is disseminated and popularised among domestic audiences. There are separate topics on museums and monuments (Topic 3; 6.03%), TV series on the war (Topic 10; 4.28%) and historical research on World War II (Topic 16; 3.59%).
- **The CCP’s role.** The Chinese corpus places more emphasis on the leadership role of the CCP during World War II than the English corpus. There are separate topics on the CCP’s military activities (Topic 12; 4.16%) and the CCP’s role (Topic 13; 3.92%), detailing the actions and policies of the CCP and their leaders.

- **Taiwan.** There is a separate topic on the commemoration of World War II in Taiwan (Topic 21; 3.15%). This topic had a high relative proportion in 2017, when Tsai Ing-wen's newly installed DPP administration cancelled the 80th anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937, which marked the start of all-out war between China and Japan. The cancellation of this traditional observance was part of a broader wave of "de-Sinicization" moves under Tsai, which came much to the dismay of both the Kuomintang in Taiwan and the CCP on the mainland (see, e.g., Huanqiuwang 2017).



These differences are unsurprising. They corroborate existing scholarly explanations denoting the multilayered and multifocal nature of official World War II discourse in China, which simultaneously targets global, regional and domestic audiences. In Beijing's view, the latter includes Chinese people overseas and notably those in Taiwan, which it seeks to absorb in a pan-Chinese narrative of national unity and determination (Chang 2021, 2022b). A good example is the War of Resistance Museum in Beijing, China's de facto national memorial of World War II, which apart from a permanent exhibition on China's historical war effort runs separate exhibitions on the CCP's wartime party-building efforts (伟大工程——抗战时期中国共产党的建设) and on anti-Japanese resistance by "Taiwan compatriots" (台湾同胞抗日史实展). As such, the additional topics and layers in the Chinese corpus do not indicate very substantive divergences from the English-language corpus. They may nonetheless have certain implications, which we address below.



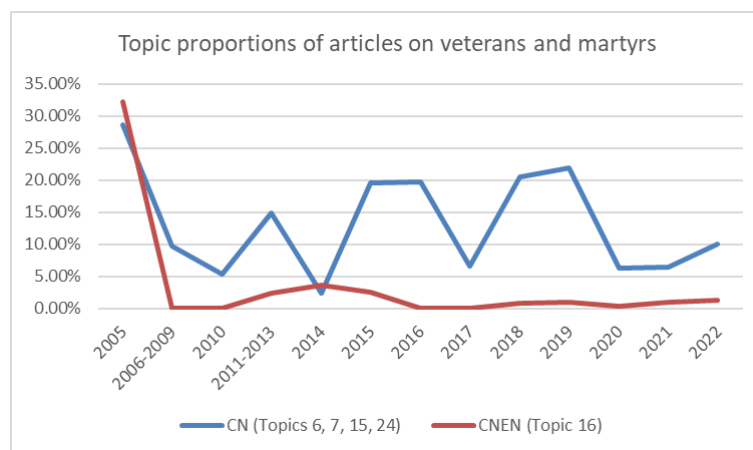
The three word clouds above provide snapshots of the 100 keywords with the highest relative frequency for the corpus years 2005, 2015 and 2021 (from left to right). In terms of **trends** over time, the pattern broadly resembles that of the English-language sources. Similar to the English-language text corpus, the term “Russia” has become more prominent over time, particularly since 2015. With an average topic proportion of 6.45%, Russia’s Victory Day parade constitutes the second-largest topic in the Chinese-language corpus (Topic 2), preceded only by Chinese commemorations and their leaders (Topic 1). However, two subtle differences in trends between the two corpora are worth noting here:

1. **Japan as Other.** Unlike the English-level corpus, the frequency of references to “Japan” in the Chinese corpus does not show a notable decrease over time. This may point at a continued salience of Japan as the inalienable “Other” in domestic discourses in China, where decades of state nationalism and an ongoing fixation on struggle and martyrdom have fostered a citizenship that vividly “remembers” Japan’s aggression (and where, more recently, anti-Japanese sentiment has been rising again).
2. **Victory vs victimhood.** In the Chinese-language corpus, “victory” (胜利) became notably more frequent in 2021, whereas in the English-language corpus this trend started earlier, resulting in a major peak in 2015. As with the previous observation, this may point at a more complex mix of, and a more even balance between, victimhood and victor strands in China’s domestic discourse than in its increasingly self-assertive and triumphalist international discourse.

Topic-level comparison

To identify differences between the English-language text corpus and the Chinese-language text corpus we compared (clusters of) topics from the two sets. In this section we outline the results of these broad comparisons.

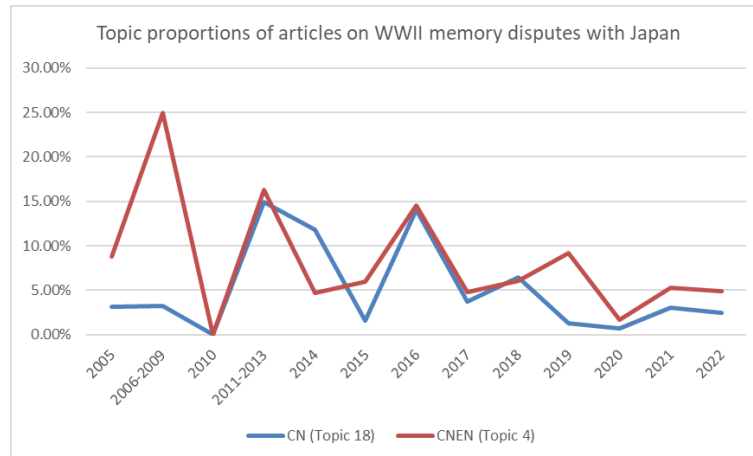
A topic that exemplifies the stronger focus on domestic experiences and stories in the Chinese-language corpus in the context of [Frame 1](#) (China's victory and contribution to world peace) is that of war veterans and martyrs. The below graph illustrates that even though the trend appears to be irregular and contingent, Chinese-language sources on the whole pay markedly more attention to the Chinese people's wartime experiences, sacrifices and contributions to victory than their English-language counterparts.



Cooperation with other countries does feature incidentally in the Chinese-language corpus (e.g., the US Flying Tigers), but not extensively. Instead, as already noted, there is an added emphasis in the Chinese corpus on the Chinese people's great "spirit of resistance".

In relation to [Frame 2](#) (Japan's historical role and responsibility), we already mentioned that the use of the term "Japan" has not seen a notable decline over time on the corpus level in Chinese-language media sources similar to that observed in the English-language corpus. However, there are some subtle shifts on the topic level that add nuance to this observation and provide tentative support for the inference that, overall, the trend of negative "Othering" of Japan may be declining. One such indication is that the relative topic proportion of World War II-related *disputes* with Japan has also decreased in the Chinese-language corpus, at least since 2013, as the graph below shows. The comparatively high number of references to "Japan"

in the context of war stories and victory accounts in Chinese articles may somewhat obfuscate this downward trend on the corpus level.

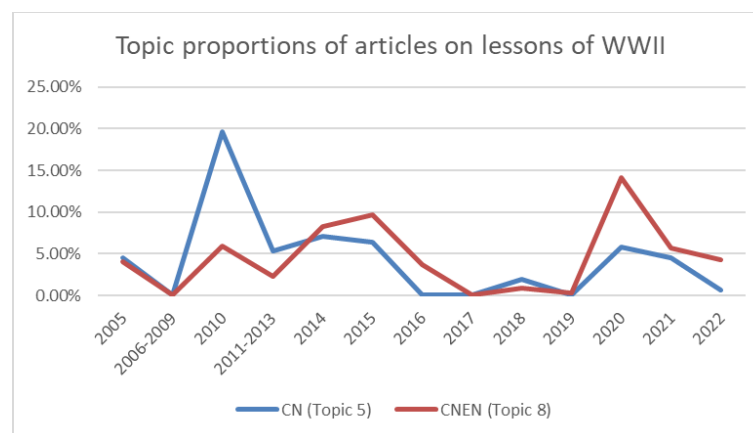


As pointed out above, the salience of [Frame 3](#) (Russia's Victory Day) has notably grown in recent years in both the English-language and Chinese-language text corpora. However, as the below graph indicates, this development has been more pronounced in the English-language corpus than in the Chinese-language one, except for the year 2020, when the English-language coverage paid relatively less attention to Russia and more to the lessons of World War II (which are substantially aligned with Moscow's "lessons") and victory commemorations in other countries (Topics 5, 7 and 18).



As discussed above, the topics in [Frame 4](#) (Global legacies and lessons of World War II), setting out Beijing's view on the contemporary lessons and legacies of World War II, are among the most instructive in this research. It is in this frame that considerable convergence

with Russian narratives has occurred. At the same time, as we analysed above, different “lessons” are drawn on different levels, and apart from lessons for the region and global order, Beijing also wants domestic audiences to draw critical lessons from World War II, particularly in terms of safeguarding national unity and coherence. These themes were especially salient in 2015 and 2020, which were key anniversary years with a strong domestic significance (2015: military parade plus nationally televised speech; 2020: fighting the Covid-19 pandemic). Except for these years, the below graph suggests, the topic of the war’s “lessons” tended to be more salient in the English-language discourse than in the domestic one.



4.5 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that Chinese official media discourse on World War II is in a state of flux. We observed shifts and trend breaks in all four frames, while their future trajectory seems uncertain at this point. As a relative latecomer to the group of states in which dominant political elites use the memory of World War II as a central underpinning of national identity, state policy and – in this particular case – party legitimacy (Chang 2022a), the discursive content and use of the “memory” of that conflict, particularly in the international context, apparently has not (yet) crystallised.

Substantive moral positions are most deeply embedded and most strongly expressed in [Frame 1](#) (China’s victory and contribution to world peace) and [Frame 2](#) (Japan’s historical role and responsibility), which both historically and discursively remain closest to China’s historical experience. These are followed by [Frame 4](#) (Global legacies and lessons of World War II), in which these messages and lessons are transposed to the international level. Conversely, morality is at its weakest, or at any rate least explicit, in [Frame 3](#) (Russia’s Victory Day). The

spectacular rise of references to Russia in the English-language and Chinese-language corpora is nonetheless remarkable and deserves attention.

What is perhaps most striking is that Chinese media articles largely refrain from recounting instances of wartime cooperation or other episodes of shared history between China and Russia (the Soviet Union), with only a handful of exceptions in both of the Chinese corpora. Moreover, engagement with Russian narratives, to the extent that it occurs, tends to take the form of merely quoting Russian officials, without in-depth reflection on or explicit endorsement of relevant positions and postures. This point underscores that any convergence is shallow and limited only to the official, government-to-government level of the bilateral relationship.

We observed a somewhat reverse tendency with respect to the Sino-US relationship, where present-day formal ties are strained yet stories of common bravery and friendship abound. This reflects the dual nature of the US in China's discourse, as both a former friend that should revert to the goodwill spirit of this one-time friendship and increasingly also a current adversary whose revisionist aims and hegemonic practices must be opposed. This observation corroborates existing work that has elucidated the dualistic nature of China's discourse on the Western "Other" (Lams et al. 2023).

In terms of the contemporary "lessons" of World War II and related notions and ideals of world order, it is worth noting that Chinese narratives tend to emphasise the need to honour the "outcomes" and "achievements" of World War II rather than historical "truth" per se. This may reflect Beijing's focus on the "hard" geopolitical dimensions of the war's "unfinished business", as reflected for example in its sovereignty and territorial claims (Taiwan, East China Sea, South China Sea) and its opposition to Western attempts to reform the UN and dilute post-war non-intervention norms (Chang 2021).

This is not to suggest that safeguarding "historical truth" is irrelevant in official Chinese discourse. As is often the case with authoritarian regimes and nationalist elites, the CCP embraces a positivist view of history in which historical reality can be known through self-evident, "objective" science. Understandings of history that diverge from the party-state's official interpretations are hence considered not just unwelcome but "incorrect". In the domestic realm, advocates of alternative memory risk persecution as promoters of "historical nihilism". In the international context, actors seeking to "distort" or "whitewash" the history

of World War II must likewise be corrected or opposed. While warnings to this effect in Chinese discourses initially were aimed mostly at Japan's right-wing factions, they have recently begun to also target broader Western audiences.

A final point worth highlighting here is the existence of differences of focus and emphasis between China's domestic and international media discourses on World War II. Simply put, Beijing's domestic discourse remains more focused on Japan and pays less attention to Russia and the world at large than its external narratives on World War II. It is not immediately clear whether the more globalised and geopolitically-framed narratives directed towards international audiences are intended simply to support a nationalist agenda at home and hence primarily cater to domestic audiences, as suggested in some literature (Huijgh 2012; Edney 2012; Lams 2018). In any case, it seems that tensions between the two sets of narratives (even though they are far from incongruous) reveal the lack of substantive depth of the increasingly Russia-aligned international narrative and, by extension, may signify the weak ideational underpinnings of the Russo-Chinese friendship.

5. Comparison and discussion

5.1 Corpus-level comparison

A corpus-level comparison of the Russian and Chinese discourses on World War II indicates that the following topics are of shared concern:

- Commemorating victory
- Military parades
- War stories
- Veterans
- Bombs
- Joint commemorations (China–Russia)

However, when contrasting topics and topic prevalence, some important differences can immediately be observed:

- **“Self” vs world.** The Russian discourse is concerned almost exclusively with commemorations in Russia (or contestations of Russian memory elsewhere), whereas the Chinese discourse is also concerned with war commemoration elsewhere (even if unrelated to China).
- **Historical “Other”.** The Russian corpora do not contain a separate topic on Russia’s primary wartime adversary (Nazi Germany), whereas the Chinese corpora contain several topics on China’s main wartime adversary (Japan) and its wartime conduct. While there are (increasingly) frequent references to “Nazi” in the Russian discourse across various topics, they are not limited to the historical context.
- **Contestation vs cooperation.** To the extent that the Russian discourse addresses international aspects, it focuses on memory disputes around the world (Russian “truth” vs “falsification” by unfriendly states), whereas the Chinese discourse places more emphasis on (historical) cooperation and alliances. Whilst the Russian corpora includes various topics on international memory disputes, the Chinese corpora does not include such topics (other than disputes with Japan).
- **Military display.** With two topics focused on aspects of military display at Russian military parades, the (English-language) Russian corpus pays more attention to

military might. The Chinese corpus does not include any topics on Chinese military display, but has one on military display in *Russian* military parades.

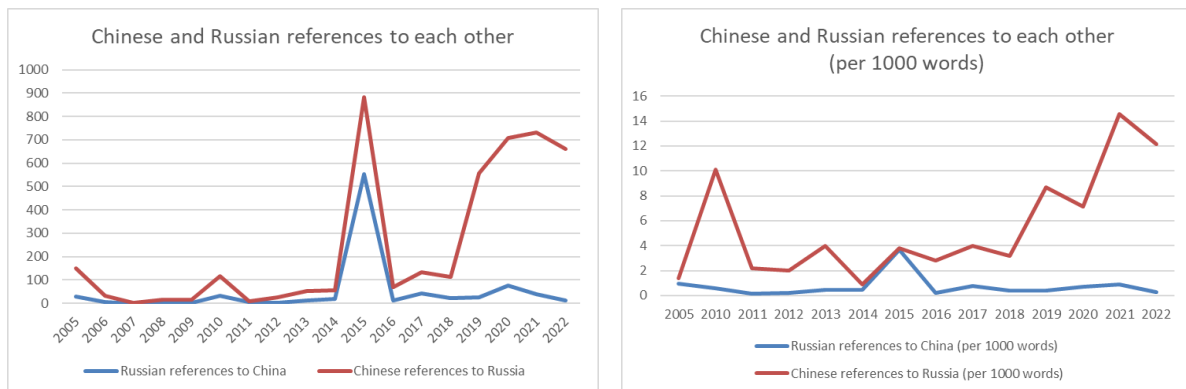
- **China–Russia.** The Russian discourse pays far less attention to China than vice versa. The (English-language) Russian corpus contains only one topic on East Asia (2.7%) and none on China, whereas the Chinese corpus contains four topics on Russian World War II commemorations and narratives (20.5%). Similar or even starker differences are reflected in the topics of their domestic discourses.

These contrasts between the Russian and Chinese discourses give grounds for a different classification of topics and hence explain and justify the use of distinct conceptual or discursive frames for each set. Broadly speaking, the four Russian frames are structured around the Russian “Self” along **ethical-thematic lines** (with the exception of Frame 4, which serves as an add-on in the English-language corpus and is virtually absent in the Russian-language discourse), whereas the four Chinese frames are structured around the Chinese Self along **spatial-thematic lines**. The different conceptualisation of war memory seem to reflect differences in contemporary state identity, world outlooks and ambitions.

A final difference worth noting has to do with the reporting and narrative style in the two sets of discourse. On the whole, the Russian media discourse tends to be richer and more elaborate in terms of providing relevant historical and political context, including grassroots voices and opinions (i.e., permitting persons other than central leaders to exert agency), highlighting differences of opinion, and including explicit editorial commentary. In contrast, the Chinese discourse is more essentialized, selective and absolutist. This classical “textbook”-style approach is reflected in the high-level, isolated and sometimes even abstract narratives it advances, but also in the prevalence of photo reports that merely present images, accompanied only by brief, supposedly “factual” captions.

5.2 Narrative convergence

Cross-references



There is a clearly visible asymmetry between the role that China and Russia play in each other's state media discourse on World War II. As shown in the graphs above, references to Russia in Chinese articles on World War II have consistently been more prevalent than references to China in Russian media output. This is consistent with the findings of previous chapters: the Chinese media outlets analysed in this study have been covering Russia's V-Day celebrations (Frame 1) since the beginning of our time frame, with a significant increase after 2015. In contrast, Russian media outlets' coverage of World War II commemoration and disputes in East Asia (Frame 4) only account for a very small proportion (2.73%) of Russian narratives, and are much less extensive than the Chinese coverage of Russian V-Day celebrations (20.46%). These findings are also broadly consistent with those from a recent study of Chinese and Russian media representations of NATO (Lams et al. 2013).

The data indicate that the first peak of Chinese references to Russia appeared in 2010. Hu Jintao's trip to Moscow alone cannot explain this, as he had attended Russia's Victory Day celebrations in 2005 as well. The data from 2010 suggest that this year marked the (tentative) beginning of Beijing's efforts to construct a joint Chinese-Russian World War II commemoration narrative. This can be illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview by Xinhua News Agency with the deputy director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences:

“‘Hu’s trip to Russia and appearance in the Victory Day celebrations for the Great Patriotic War, would be a step of political significance that China’s leadership takes to promote Sino-Russian cooperation on historical issues and their strategic partnership,’ said Sergei

Luzyanin, deputy director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He said Hu's attendance meant China not only valued the present but also valued history and cherished the hard-won victory of World War II and, most importantly, it attached great importance to the fact that the former Soviet Union and China were allies during the war" (Xinhua 2010).

While coverage by Russian media outlets on Hu's attendance of the 2010 V-Day parade in Moscow was limited, Beijing's initial steps towards building a "memory alliance" with Russia were nonetheless to some degree reciprocated by Russian media outlets. A TASS article in that year, for example, quoted Hu saying that "China and the Soviet Union fought shoulder to shoulder and established relations of friendship. We must join hands with all peoples of the globe to achieve harmony in the world" (TASS 2010a). On the whole, however, China was not presented as a major memory ally of Russia, as state media outlets paid much more attention to joint commemoration with post-Soviet states. This asymmetry in cross-references continued during the major anniversary years of 2010 and 2015. While Chinese media routinely covered Russia's annual V-Day celebrations in these years, Russian media outlets only sporadically mentioned China.

As set out in earlier sections of this report, the year 2015 was a milestone in terms of Russo-Chinese joint remembrances. This is reflected quantitatively in our data: in terms of both absolute and relative frequency, Russian and Chinese references to each other peaked in 2015. In the Russian corpus, references to China were particularly frequent in topics 1 and 4. Topic 1 (Foreign leaders at V-Day parade) had not been a salient topic in the Russian discourse on World War II before 2014, but as noted above, it quickly became one after Russia's annexation of Crimea when Western leaders began to shun the V-Day celebrations in Moscow. In terms of Topic 4 (Russia and its allies defending "historical truth"), the data show a discursive shift in 2015 with the sudden emergence of China as a major ally in opposing growing efforts across Europe to "rewrite" and "falsify" World War II history. A TASS article quoted China's then Vice Foreign Minister during a joint press conference of China's foreign ministry and the Russian embassy in Beijing as follows:

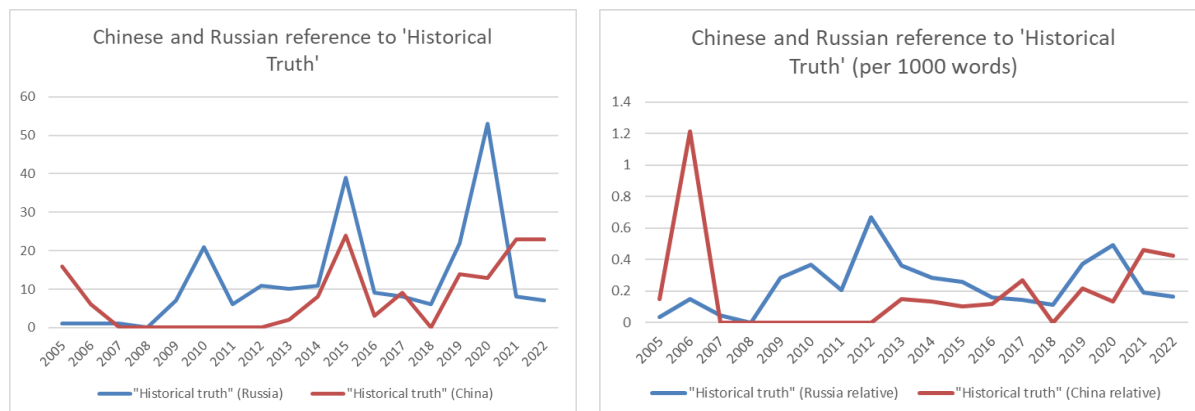
"Russia and China, which have made the greatest sacrifices for the victory over fascism in World War II, are exerting cooperative efforts to protect its results [...] We need to avoid repetition of the past tragedy and collectively protect the results of the Victory in World War II in the name of a wonderful future for all humanity" (TASS 2015c).

Another significant development in Russian state media discourse is that in 2015 it began to advance some of Beijing's narratives of World War II with limited direct relevance to Russia itself. In the English-language corpus, the topic proportion of Topic 16 (WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia) peaked in 2015. Some articles categorised under this topic appear to echo the Chinese narrative on Japan's lack of remorse for its wartime atrocities. For example, in April 2015, RT published an article titled "Enough with WWII Apologies: Japan PM Sees No Need to Reinforce Remorse" (RT 2015). Several Russian articles also replicated Beijing's claim about China's critical role in the Allied victory. For example, on the eve of China's 2015 Victory Day, *Sputnik* published an article titled "China's Major Role in WWII Victory 'Greatest Untold Story'" (Sputnik 2015a).

As for the Chinese text corpus, while references to Russia reached a record high in 2015 in terms of absolute frequency, their relative frequency in that year did not exceed that of other major anniversary years. In 2015, when Beijing for the first time marked the World War II victory anniversary with a military parade, Chinese media outlets naturally focused predominantly on China's own victory. The proportions of Topic 3 (The Chinese people's great victory), Topic 9 (Chinese Victory Parade), and Topic 13 (China's major role in Allies' victory in WWII) were at their highest within this study's timeframe in 2015. While Chinese media outlets reported extensively on Russia's V-Day parade in 2015, Russia was mentioned only twice in Topic 5 (Lessons of WWII). However, as set out above, there are several news articles across various topics in the English-language corpus that replicate Russian narratives regarding the importance of protecting "historical truth".

After the peak in mutual references in the context of World War II commemoration in 2015, Chinese references to Russia fell back to lower levels, only to start growing again from 2019 onwards, whereas Russian references to China have dwindled. In the context of sustained high levels of Chinese references to Russia, it must be underscored that this increase is largely accounted for by coverage (including photo coverage) of Russian V-Day parades.

Historical truth



Both the Russian and Chinese discourses on World War II have attached increasing importance to the duty of protecting what they see as the “historical truth” of World War II against interpretations advanced by other states that challenge their understanding of what this truth entails. As can be observed from the above graphs, Russian media outlets have engaged with the concept of “historical truth” more extensively and frequently than Chinese outlets during the period reviewed in this study. Moreover, although Beijing and Moscow share a professed aim of “protecting historical truth”, their understandings of what constitutes this “truth” are not identical and, in China’s case, have changed over time.

Moscow’s definition of “historical truth” has remained constant. It covers two main aspects. First and foremost, it holds that the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation as its main successor state, defeated Nazism and played the most crucial role in the Allied victory of World War II (TASS 2010b). Second, the Soviet victory is a “sacred memory” that is shared among and should be cherished by all post-Soviet states (TASS 2012a). The graphs above show regular peaks during major anniversary years as well as a steady rise in the absolute frequency of the term during the period under review.

This is notably different in the Chinese corpus. For 2005–2006, Chinese references to “truth” and “defending truth” were event-specific, referring almost exclusively to the Nanjing Massacre and the denial of the event by Japanese right-wing politicians. From 2007 to 2013, references to “historical truth” were virtually absent. When references to “truth” began to reappear in Chinese media discourse in 2014–2015, its meaning had broadened. While “truth” continued to refer to Japanese atrocities committed during World War II (see, e.g., *China Daily* 2014b), the label “historical truth” now also began to encompass China’s important role and

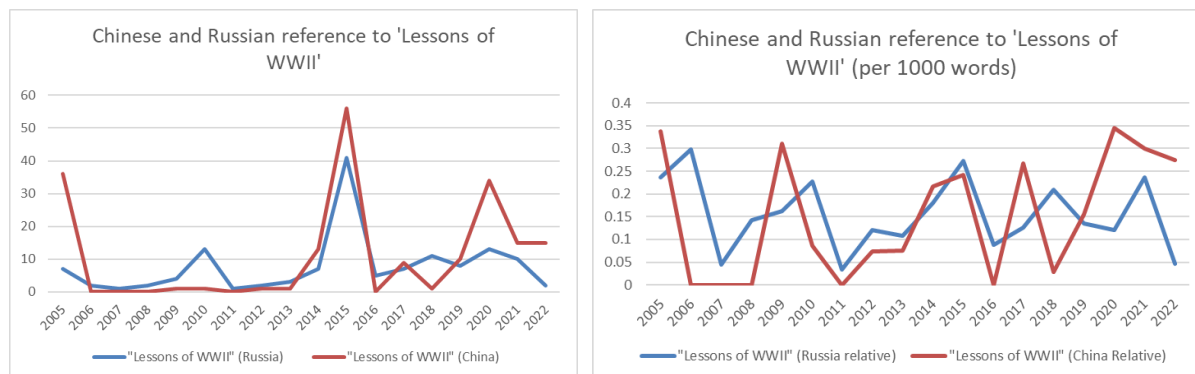
critical contribution to the Allied victory in World War II. This reflects the previously observed trend of the globalisation of China's World War II memory and "memory diplomacy" (Chang 2022a). For example, Xinhua reported an interview with Robert Frank, then General Secretary of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), in which he said that more Western historians now consider 1937 as the beginning of World War II and that his book aimed to reveal the "truth" to more people in Europe" (Xinhua 2015).

In some instances, the Chinese discourse has used "historical truth" to highlight both China and the Soviet Union's crucial role in the Allied victory. For example, a 2015 *Global Times* article quoted a World War II veteran from Kazakhstan saying that "Some (countries) refuse to admit genocide while some distort truth to justify the Nazis and the Japanese militarists, diminishing contributions of the Soviet army and the Chinese people to the ultimate victory" (*Global Times* 2015h). Whereas in 2015 this occurred only in a small number of instances, the trend became more pronounced from 2020 onwards. For example, a Xinhua article from 2021 quoted Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi as follows:

"China and Russia should jointly defend the truth of history, human dignity and WWII achievements [...] As the major victorious nations of World War II, China and Russia should join hands to defend the truth of history, oppose acts to whitewash or glorify militarism, check attempts to falsify history, and never tolerate overturning the verdict on the history of aggression" (Xinhua 2021a).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 heralded yet another shift in the Chinese media discourse on the "historical truth" of World War II. While the frequency of references to "historical truth" remained at similar levels as before, Russia was no longer mentioned in the substantive context. Instead, Chinese outlets have reverted to the earlier narrative of "historical truth" oriented towards Japanese atrocities during World War II. This corroborates recent findings that Beijing seems to be (partially) dissociating its strategic memory culture from Putin's aggression in Europe and related World War II discourse, and shifting attention to the Chinese people and their contributions to peace and stability (Chang 2023b).

Lessons of World War II



The so-called “lessons of WWII” constitute another important shared narrative between Russia and China. From the graphs included above, no unequivocal upward or downward macro-trends can be observed for the last two decades either in Russian or Chinese news articles. The more important question, then, is what “the lessons of World War II” are according to Russian and Chinese narratives, respectively.

In the Russian state media discourse, the “lessons of World War II” are deeply and almost inseparably related to Moscow’s predominant narrative of “defending historical truth”. To give an example, in 2012 TASS quoted Putin saying during a meeting with his Israeli counterpart that “our common task is to oppose attempts to falsify the truth about the war and its lessons” (TASS 2012b).

As set out under [Frame 4](#) in [section 4.3](#) above, Beijing’s framing of the “lessons” of World War II is multilayered and multifocal, differentiating between different audiences and goals on the domestic, regional and global levels. For China’s domestic audiences (which include the overseas diaspora), the “lessons” of World War II are meant to foster national unity and coherence. This became more pronounced in 2015, when in a politburo meeting Xi Jinping demanded a deeper understanding of the “historical significance” of China’s war effort and the “great contribution” of the Chinese people. During the Victory Day commemoration in September 2020, Beijing placed the “lessons of WWII” in the context of battling the Covid-19 pandemic, using these to emphasise the need for international collaboration and criticise the stigmatisation of China in the West (*China Daily* 2020b).

In relation to Japan, the “lessons of World War II” are twofold. First, the historical lessons dictate that Japan must acknowledge, reflect on and apologise for its wrongdoings during the war. Second, it follows that pacifism should be the guiding principle for Japan’s contemporary foreign policy. Starting from the 2000s, a debate emerged in Japan about the status of its defence forces and the future of the “no-war” clause (Article 9) of Japan’s postwar constitution. Although the constitution is a product of Japan’s defeat in World War II, the domestic debate in Japan about those issues is not typically framed around wartime legacies. However, official Chinese media tend to report on the matter through the lens of Japan’s wartime conduct and denounce attempts by (right-wing) Japanese politicians to change Japan’s constitution or upgrade the country’s defence forces as aggressive historical revisionism. For example, a 2014 article from *Global Times* titled “China’s Grand anti-Japanese War Commemoration Alarms World of Right-tilting Tokyo” reads as follows:

“The Japanese government, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the helm, drastically changed its defence stance by reinterpreting a war-renouncing constitution to allow the Self-Defense Forces to exercise right to collective self-defence, sowing the seeds of instability in the Asia-Pacific region. It should alarm the world that rightist sentiments had thrived in Japan right before WWII [...] It is foolish to make the same mistake twice. It is advisable for the current Japanese leaders to truly reflect upon the lessons of history so as to avert a risky future” (*Global Times* 2014b).

As to the global lessons of World War, the main takeaway is that to safeguard global peace, the international community must uphold the outcomes of World War II, reaffirm its commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, defend multilateralism, and create equal opportunities of development for emerging economies and developing countries. As we set out in the next section, this is where Russian and Chinese narratives significantly converge.

Outcomes of WWII, world order and the UN



Of all the shared narratives this study has identified, the theme of the outcomes of World War II and their implications for world order is the area in which a convergence between the Russian and Chinese discourses is most pronounced and consistent. As demonstrated in the graphs above, the prevalence of this narrative has greatly increased after 2015 for Russia and since 2020 for China. This is not surprising, as post-Soviet Russia and China are known to share common strategic views of world order and multipolarity, which are premised on shared opposition to perceived US unilateralism and hegemony (Ghiassy et al. 2023). At least rhetorically, both Russia and China promote the sustenance and protection of the “UN-centred, multilateral world order” that arose from the ashes of World War II. The following excerpt from a 2020 Xinhua illustrates this ideal:

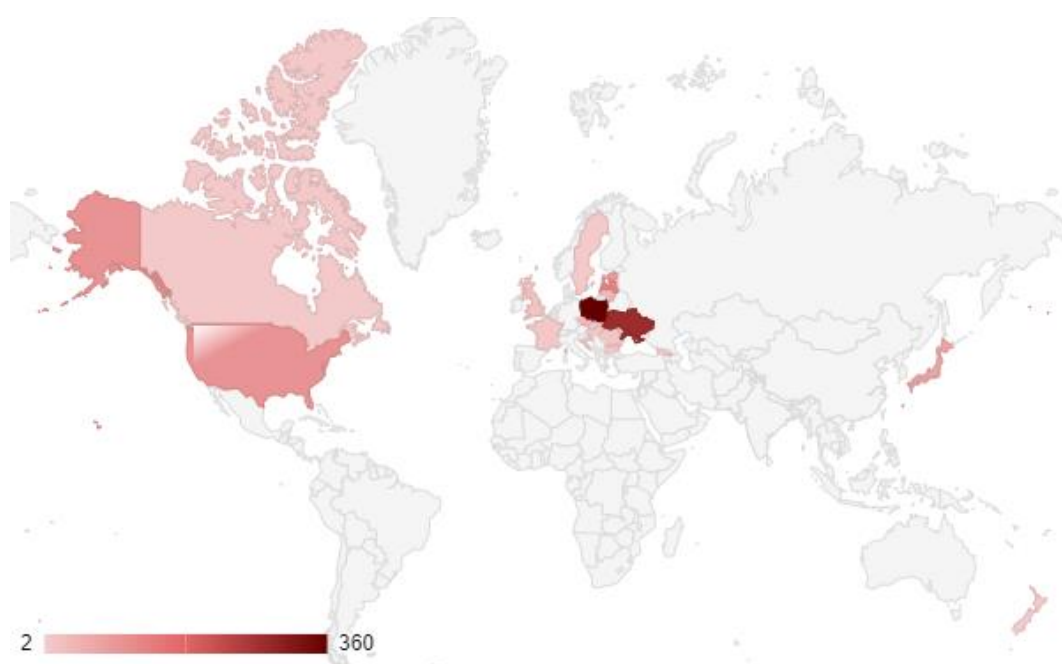
“A Chinese envoy on Friday called for multilateralism on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Multilateralism is a collective choice made by humanity at the cost of a world war. Thanks to multilateralism, mankind has enjoyed 75 years of peace and development. No country can make itself great in isolation [...] The United Nations is a product of World War II. We need to uphold the UN-centered international system, maintain international order based on international law, and safeguard the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” (Xinhua 2020b).

5.3 Memory contestation and alliances

Both Russia and China engage actively in international memory contestation. The analyses in [section 3.3](#) and [section 4.3](#) have already shown that, despite some commonly held goals, these memory disputes have different foci and are differently framed within their broader

discourses on World War II. In this section we take a closer look at the coverage in Russian and Chinese media discourse of World War II-related memory disputes.

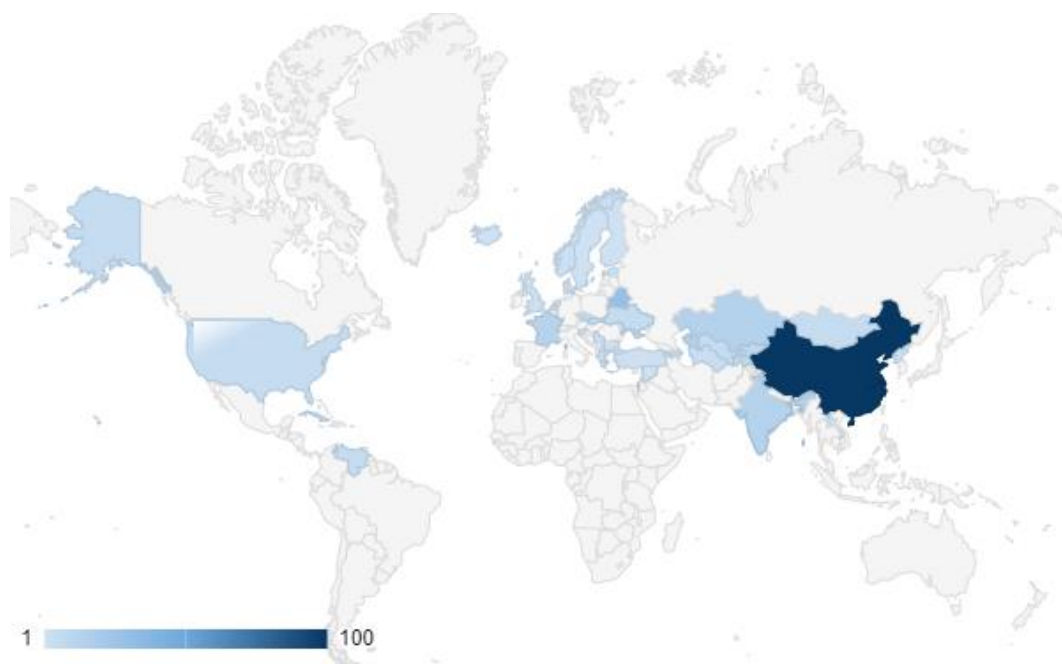
Based on a close reading of articles belonging to topics 6, 12, 13 and 15 of the English-language Russian corpus, we present a map that shows the countries that are most frequently mentioned in Russian state media articles in the context of World War II-related disputes between Russia and other countries. These include states from the former Eastern bloc (926), the United States (101), Japan (69), and a small number of Western European countries (29).



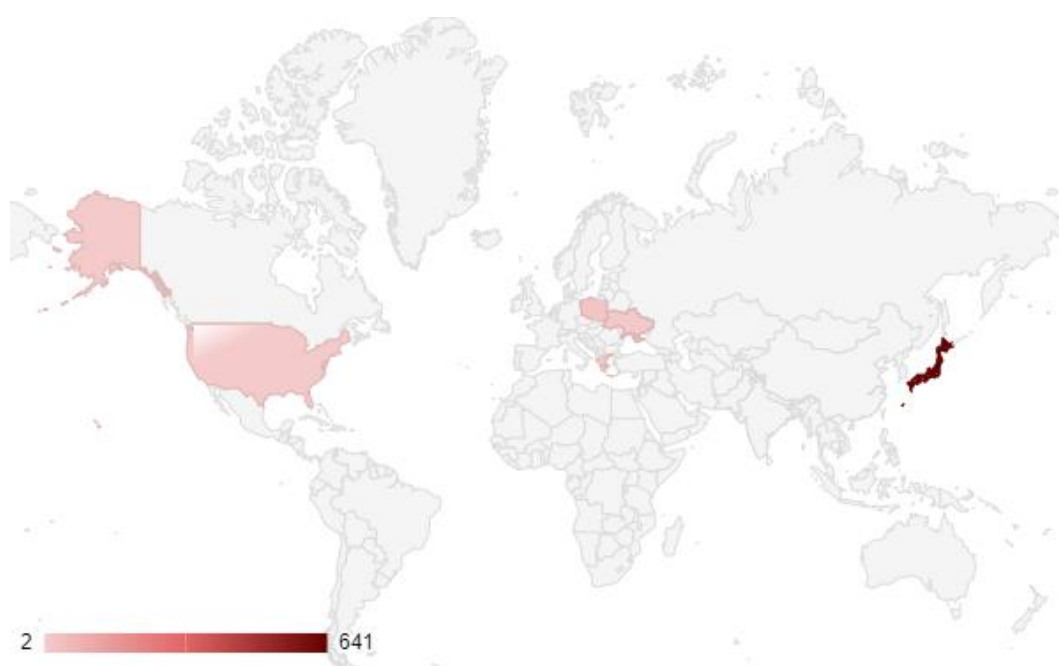
As the map shows, Russian discourse on World War II-related disputes focuses heavily on states within the former Eastern bloc, especially post-Soviet states. It is well known that the current Russian government makes wide use of the symbolic capital derived from Russia's proclaimed identity as the victor of the Great Patriotic War in its relations with the former Soviet countries, by labelling any moves to depart from the Soviet narrative of the war (or by extension from the Russian sphere of influence) as "fascist" (Fedor et al. 2017). As described above, these disputes involve (the removal or demolition of) Soviet World War II memorial sites (e.g., with Estonia in 2006–2008), memory laws (e.g., when Ukraine moved World War II commemoration from 9 May to 8 May in 2017), and sometimes even activities by non-state-affiliated individuals or groups.

In contrast, Russia's World War II-related disputes with Western countries are often not about how World War II is commemorated in those countries today but instead about the historical roles played by the Soviet Union and those countries during World War II, and are aimed at advancing Russian state-endorsed views. For example, articles from Russian outlets from different periods of our timeframe have accused the US of downplaying or even erasing the Soviet Union's role in World War II. More recently, Russian media have criticised the Munich Agreement concluded by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the United Kingdom and France for having thwarted efforts to create an anti-Nazi coalition. This criticism was in part a response to deprecatory assessments of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact that emerged in Europe and that were later codified by the European Parliament (EP 2019; EUvsDisInfo 2020).

Japan is the sixth-most mentioned country by Russian articles which discuss World War II-related disputes. References to Japan mostly have to do with the Russo-Japanese territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, which Moscow insists are an integral part of Russian state territory as a “result” of World War II. In contrast, historical controversies between China and Japan, such as those over wartime atrocities and sexual slavery, are hardly mentioned by Russian media outlets. On the whole, Russian media do not seem to be replicating Chinese narratives.



The map above shows the countries that feature as Moscow's memory partners in its international discourse on World War II. It shows China as Russia's staunchest memory ally. However, it should be pointed out that China (parenthetically, also India) emerged as Russia's memory partner only after 2015, thereby overtaking the CIS countries and other friendly post-Soviet states, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, which up to then had served as Moscow's main memory allies.

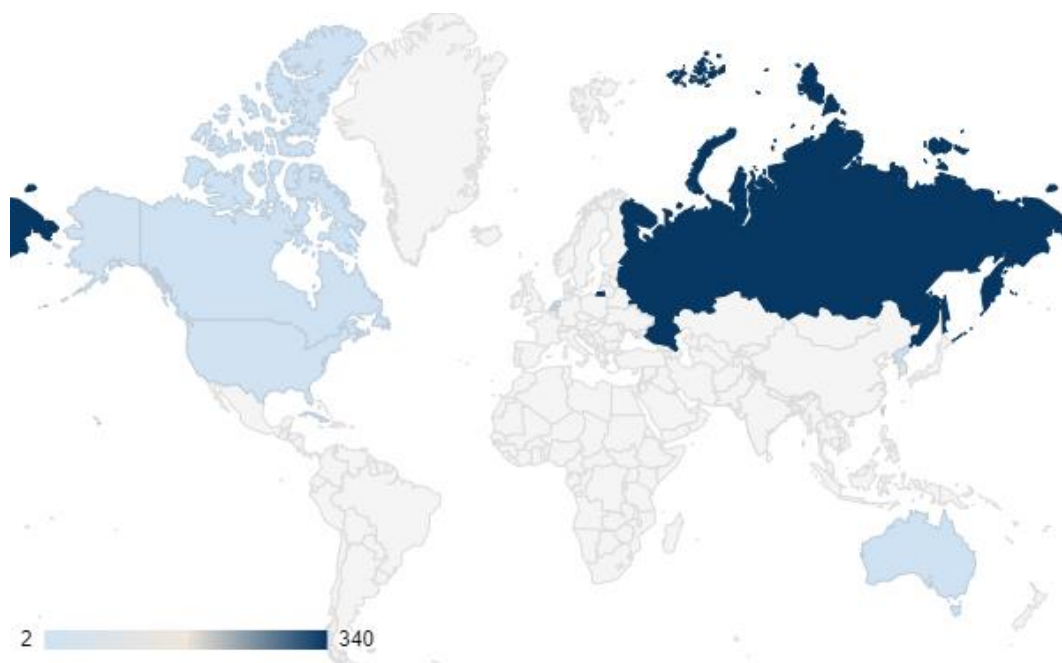


As the above map shows, China's state media discourse on World War II-related disputes is much narrower and more exclusively focused on a single country. With 641 references under topic 4, Japan clearly receives the most attention in Beijing's discourse on memory disputes.

Nevertheless, there are also some references to other memory controversies in the Chinese discourse, such as those with the United States. Often, these articles cite or reproduce Russian narratives. For example, *China Daily* in 2020 published an article titled "Russia Irked by US Distortion of WWII", in which it cited Russia's foreign ministry to accuse Washington of "historical revisionism" (*China Daily* 2020a).

In addition, there are a few Chinese news articles that report on World War II-related disputes in Europe that are unrelated to China. Again, these tend to replicate coverage by Russian media outlets. In 2015, *Global Times* published an extensive opinion piece on "historical

revisionism” in Ukraine, written by the Vice-Rector of Research of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry (*Global Times* 2015c). Chinese outlets also covered World War II-related disputes between European countries, namely Poland and Greece demanding reparations from Germany (*Global Times* 2015b; Xinhua 2022).



The above map shows the frequency of countries referred to by Chinese media outlets as (potential or envisaged) memory partners. With 340 mentions under topic 4, Russia clearly emerges as Beijing’s top ally, though this is largely a result of developments since 2015. References to Russia as Beijing’s memory ally are often also the most explicit, as they occur in the context of reporting on joint commemorations or interviews with Russian politicians.

South Korea takes second place on this list, accounting for 108 references. In most instances, South Korea is presented as a memory ally in relation to its ongoing memory disputes with Japan over forced labour and sexual slavery during World War II. Despite substantive alignment with Beijing’s position on Japan’s “historical responsibility”, there are no reports on joint war commemoration between South Korea and China. Also, the coverage on disputes between South Korea and Japan appears to be ad hoc and reactive rather than strategically proactive or a matter of routine: a surge of references occurred in 2019, when tensions between South Korea and Japan over compensation of wartime forced labourers caused a diplomatic row.

Other “co-victims” of Japanese atrocities that feature in the discourse as China’s (potential) memory allies, although less frequently, include the Netherlands, Canada and Australia. For example, an article from 2005 claims that “During World War II, the Japanese military also forced women from Korea, the Philippines, the Netherlands and other countries into sexual slavery” (China.org 2005e). The US has also been mentioned 13 times by Chinese outlets as a potential memory ally, albeit in a much more aspirational setting. As analysed in [section 3.3](#), Chinese discourse evokes Sino-US cooperation in World War II to suggest that the US should adopt a less confrontational and a more cooperative approach towards China. A *China Daily* article from 2020 reads as follows:

“Top Chinese envoy in Washington says two nations helped beat Imperial Japan China and the United States, partners who fought together for peace and justice during World War II, should recapture that spirit of cooperation to battle the COVID-19 pandemic and other common foes, Beijing’s top envoy in Washington said on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. The anniversary, observed on Sept 2 in the US, is commemorated in China on Sept 3 to mark victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. Putting aside the current tensions between Washington and Beijing, Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai took the opportunity to revisit the shared history of the two countries during the war, when China and the US fought ‘shoulder to shoulder’ for peace and justice in the Pacific Theater” (*China Daily* 2020d).

5.4 Recent developments and conclusion

For reasons set out in [section 1.2](#), this report has focused on media publications dating from 2005 up to (and including) 2022. In view of the heightened geopolitical tensions (Russia at war in Europe and deepening frictions between China and the West) and the dynamic nature of World War II commemoration, especially in China, it seems instructive to conclude this chapter with a review of recent developments with respect to World War II memory in Russia and China.

On 9 May 2023, Russia commemorated the 78th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s defeat of Nazi Germany. Various Western media, including the independent newspaper *Moscow Times*, reported that the celebrations were “drastically scaled back” over security concerns in connection with recent drone attacks and a possible imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive (*Moscow Times* 2023; *Reuters* 2023). While not openly admitting this, the Russian state-controlled media did not deny these claims and did hint at enhanced security risks (TASS

2023b; TASS 2023c). A comparison with state media reports in 2022 indicates that the number of troops and hardware items displayed during the 2023 parade was indeed reduced, while the air parade was skipped entirely (TASS 2022b). At the same time, in 2023 but not in 2022, Russian state media highlighted that several heads of CIS states attended the parade, including the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and Armenia's Prime Minister (TASS 2023c).

The Chinese media reported extensively on Russia's 2023 Victory Day, despite the fact that apparently no Chinese leader attended. Aside from several articles and photo items on the Moscow parade and rehearsals for the parade, the Chinese state media also published reports on Victory Day parades and celebrations in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city, and in Vladivostok near the China-Russia border (Xinhua 2023a-e). The Chinese reports did not make any mention of downscaling, simply stating that a "grand military parade" was held in Moscow (Xinhua 2023c). The lead article cited extensively from Putin's speech, much more so than the TASS reports, which remained relatively low-key in terms of relating narratives. Below is an excerpt of the main Xinhua article:

"In an address to troops and guests ahead of the annual event, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, 'for us in Russia, the memory of the defenders of the motherland is sacred. We keep it in our hearts.'

He paid tribute to the allied armies who bravely fought Nazism and honored the feat of Chinese soldiers in the battle against Japanese militarism. [...]

'For Russia, there are no unfriendly, hostile peoples either in the West or in the East. Like the vast majority of people on the planet, we want to see a future of peace, freedom and stability,' Putin stressed.

He denounced some Western elites for 'provoking bloody conflicts and upheavals, sowing hatred' in order to 'continue to dictate, to impose their will, rights, rules on others.'

Russia is capable of ensuring its security as 'a real war has once again been unleashed against our motherland,' Putin said" (Xinhua 2023c).

The *Global Times* published similar items, but contrary to Xinhua also paid attention to the "Europe Day" celebrations that simultaneously took place in Ukraine and in which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen participated. Citing Chinese analysts, the piece argued that the United States was exacerbating the situation in Ukraine by "pouring weapons into the battlefields". It also cited analysts' viewpoints on ongoing discursive battles between Russia and the West:

“There is a trend in the West that attempts to besiege and suppress Russia by denying the Soviet Union’s sacrifice in history. The current conflict over the Victory Day and the Europe Day between Russia and the West is a fight for the discourse power and moral high ground. It is also an epitome for the huge divergences of related parties on the Ukraine crisis, Yang Jin, an associate research fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies told the *Global Times*” (*Global Times* 2023a).

The point was developed in an opinion piece for the *Global Times* written by Xu Yan, a retired army major and current professor at the Defense University of the People’s Liberation Army:

“Such a historical view of WWII held by the US-led West reflects its consistently prominent ‘Western-centrism’ and the persistence of its Cold War mentality. People who face up to history and try to maintain the fruits of victory in the Anti-Fascist War should certainly oppose such an attitude. [...]

The West’s conceited double standards have led it to constantly change its attitude toward Russia’s Victory Day. At the end of the war against Nazi Germany, the US and Britain exalted themselves and belittled the Soviet Union’s role in the war. The West has always been ‘selectively blind’ in its approach to WWII history: It ignores the UK and France’s appeasement policy toward Germany and the Munich Agreement, only focusing on some dark sides of the Soviet Union in the war and exaggerating them. [...]

How people look back at history always serves reality. The current international order is still partly shaped by the results of WWII. Since people who defend justice often emphasize the need to preserve the victorious outcomes of the Anti-Fascist War, they have to oppose the glorification and revival of Nazism and militarism resolutely.

In recent years, the US has not only misinterpreted WWII history, but also increasingly downplayed the commemoration of the Anti-Fascist War to strengthen the hegemonic order under its leadership. Therefore, by celebrating the victory of the Anti-Fascist War and remembering history, we can effectively promote international justice and equity to defend the peace and stability of the world” (*Global Times* 2023b).

These examples show that Chinese state media in 2023 have continued, if not stepped up their extensive coverage of Victory Day celebrations in Russia. They also continue to align with and reinforce Moscow’s official discourse on World War II, whilst framing it in a way that emphasises justice, fairness and peace instead of conflict.

In stark contrast with Russia’s victory celebrations, China’s 2023 war commemorations have received relatively little coverage in the Chinese state media. This reflects the low-key nature of the 2023 celebrations of the “Victory Day of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression”. Just as in September 2022 (but in contrast with September 2021), there were no reports on remarks of Chinese top leaders or joint commemorations with Russia

(*Global Times* 2021b). Although a seminar to commemorate the 78th anniversary of victory was held in Beijing, with CCP propaganda chief and politburo member Li Shulei attending, the event was not covered by Xinhua (CGTN 2023b). As was the case in 2022, the Chinese state media focused their reporting on war remembrance by “the Chinese people” and international wartime “friends”, as well as on an official commemoration ceremony in Hong Kong (CGTN 2023a; Xinhua 2023f, 2023h, 2023i). The *Global Times* chose to recycle old quotes by Xi Jinping on the “spirit of resisting aggression” (*Global Times* 2023c)

It is difficult to say if the toned-down nature of recent World War II commemorations in China has been informed primarily by a desire among the CCP leadership to distance itself from a Russia at war, or whether other factors may have also played a role. Such other factors, Japanese media have suggested, may include rising anti-Japanese sentiment in China and concerns within the CCP leadership over possible violent protests in China against the release of wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean (*Japan Times* 2023). In light of the muted war commemoration in China itself, the extensive reporting on Russia’s V-Day celebrations in Chinese state media is even more noteworthy. It is unclear to what extent they reflect an attempt by Beijing to seize events in Russia to make a point of its own or whether it was helping Moscow to deliver its message to their international audiences. Insofar as the latter was the case, the Russian state-controlled media did not reciprocate. TASS did not publish anything on China’s Victory Day commemoration, but only reported on Russia’s Victory over Japan Day and related calls by Russia’s Security Council that Japan abandon its new militarization plans (TASS 2023d, 2023e).

Overall, the findings in this chapter indicate a stark asymmetry in Moscow and Beijing’s efforts to align World War II memory. Any observed convergence is largely one-sided and reflective of shifts in the Chinese discourse, which tends to be more volatile than the Russian one. While the Chinese corpora have shown a striking rise in the prevalence of “Russia” as a topic and keyword, Russian articles have rarely referenced China in the context of World War II, and this has not changed in the recent period. In many ways, Beijing has been a far more active partner in this memory alliance, whether through propagandization of Russian Victory Day celebrations or replication of narratives. Observers in the West have suggested that Russia recently has become the “junior” partner in the evolving China–Russia relationship (e.g., Bloomberg 2014; *Politico* 2023). Insofar as this is the case, this has evidently not been true for their memory alliance, where Beijing has long viewed Moscow not just as its chief memory

partner but apparently also as a model for emulation in its own historical statecraft. It is only following Russia's invasion of Ukraine that there have been clear signs of reticence in Beijing's discursive alignment with Moscow.

6. Conclusion

A principal goal of this research has been to determine whether state-endorsed Russian and Chinese media discourses on World War II have converged in recent years in step with the growing strategic alignment between the two neighbouring powers in the face of perceived containment by the United States and Western antagonism.

6.1 Key findings

Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of (samples of) 14,122 news articles published by Russian and Chinese state-controlled media outlets from 2005 to 2022, we find that a substantive convergence of narratives of World War II has occurred predominantly around two major common themes:

- **World order.** There is strong convergence in narratives on the outcomes of World War II and their implications for world order. Particularly since 2015, Russia and China have routinely used the memory of World War II to profess their continued commitment and advocate worldwide recommitment to the principles of the “UN-centred, multilateral world order” and pragmatic cooperation between the major powers – the former allies and victors in World War II. Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, this appeal has been concretised and also rephrased in negative terms to urge resistance to tendencies of unilateralism, isolationism and decoupling. Increasingly, Russia and China are presenting themselves on the global scene as status-quo powers and the US and the West as revisionists.
- **Historical truth/lessons.** This convergence of visions of global order has been accompanied by a growing consensus on the importance of remembering World War II and heeding its lessons. Both the Russian and Chinese discourses on World War II have attached increasing importance to preserving the “historical truth” of World War II and protecting it against (what they frame as) opportunist distortions advanced by antagonist forces, particularly in their respective neighbourhoods (Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states for Russia; Japan for China) but also by the EU and the US. Again, it is the West (in step with Central Eastern European and some post-Soviet states) that are presented as revisionist. To some degree, the two discourses replicate and reinforce each other’s narratives to support this.

This substantive convergence of narratives has occurred within a broader, shared dynamic of increasing monopolisation and mobilisation of World War II memory for political ends:

- **Joint commemoration.** Russia and China have promoted and organised joint World War II commemorations on various levels. A first sign of this trend appeared in 2010, but it really took off in 2015, when state leaders visited each other during their national victory celebrations and delegations of their armed forces participated in each other's national Victory Day parades. To facilitate coordination, the two sides have introduced new commemorative holidays, renamed existing holidays and aligned the dates of these official holidays.
- **Memory laws.** Both governments have sought to securely anchor their historical statecraft domestically through "memory laws" that criminalise "incorrect" public memory. In Russia, laws have been introduced since 2014 that specifically protect the memory of World War II and the role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazism. In China, generic legislation and measures aimed at protecting the memory of heroes and martyrs (not limited to World War II) have been introduced since 2018. These have also been used to penalise and eliminate "incorrect" memory of World War II and state-endorsed war "heroes".

At the same time, however, Moscow and Beijing's efforts to align their official memories of World War II are subject to significant limitations. This study has identified the following key limitations to the abovementioned trend of converging narratives:

- **Asymmetry.** A stark asymmetry was observed in their efforts to align World War II memory. While we found a striking rise in the prevalence of "Russia" as a topic and keyword in Chinese media discourse on World War II, Russian articles rarely reference China. The observed convergence is thus largely one-sided and reflective of shifts in the Chinese discourse, which tends to be more abstract and more volatile than the Russian one. Moreover, there have been signs of regression in Beijing's discursive alignment with Moscow following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- **Thin convergence.** Actual convergence is limited to high-level strategic narratives and reflects neither a concurrence of historical interpretations nor an apparent attempt to explore these. Particularly in the Russian corpus, and to a lesser extent also in the Chinese one, stories of wartime cooperation and camaraderie focus far more on the US than on the other. To the extent that wartime Soviet-Chinese

cooperation features in their discourse, Moscow and Beijing favour different periods and events, reflecting diverging views on who deserves credit for defeating Japan.

- **Weak domestic basis.** Any convergence of international narratives is not grounded in their respective domestic discourses. In both cases, but particularly the Russian one, we found striking differences between English-language and native-language media articles. The Russian-language corpus contains very few references to China. Beijing's domestic media output is more focused on Japan and pays less attention to Russia than its international output. There have been virtually no attempts on either side to cultivate or popularise a shared "memory" of the war.

These limitations to the observed convergence are significant. They reflect fundamental differences in the discursive frames that constitute official and public memory of the war in the two countries. Contemporary Russian discourse on World War II appears to be structured around the Russian "Self" principally along ethical-thematic lines with strong universalising, ideological undertones that are more prone to principled external opposition (or support). Contemporary Chinese discourse on World War II, on the other hand, appears to be structured around the Chinese "Self" principally along spatial-thematic lines with a more diversified focus on various ad hoc, pragmatic goals both in the region and elsewhere that may incite opposition (or support) in specific issue areas. Perhaps reflecting differences in their relative position and strength in the current world order, Moscow appears to be clinging to the past more desperately and reactively than Beijing, which seems more intent on completing a practical, pro-active and forward-looking agenda.

In addition to these fundamental differences, it seems plausible that a remaining substratum of mutual distrust, informed by historical enmity and regional rivalry, continues to constrain their professed "no-limits" friendship. In Russia, a deep-seated belief in the intrinsic superiority of European culture, Christianity and "Russianness", coupled with unease over possible Chinese designs in Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern territories, have caused elites and the general public alike to have long looked "up" to the West and "down" upon the East. In China, decades of state nationalism have fostered a patriotic citizenship that still vividly "remembers" Russia's imperialist incursions into their homeland and where, more recently, public support for Putin's policies has been faltering as his aggression grows. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Beijing appears to have diversified its memory strategy

by shifting focus away from World War II to contemporary peace-building efforts and the present-day heroes and martyrs of “peace-time China”.

6.2 Implications

The main implications of these findings are twofold. On one level, our research provides important evidence for the conclusion that the strategic friendship between Moscow and Beijing lacks an ideational basis grounded in shared historical narratives. Despite a professed friendship that is rhetorically framed as boundless and timeless and that in theory could (selectively) draw from a rich shared past of cooperation and solidarity, Russian and Chinese state-controlled media have produced very distinct “memories” of this critical episode in their recent histories. As core planks in their respective nation-building narratives, their historical interpretations of World War II are even conflicting on key points. This lack of substantive convergence shines a spotlight on the inherent limitations to the nature and depth of their strategic partnership. Under changed external conditions, there is no reason why today’s memory partners could not be tomorrow’s adversaries.

On another level, the observed convergence, even if shallow and one-sided, nonetheless gives cause for concern. As recent developments show, memory contestation may lead to justifications of acts of aggression and shooting wars. The formation of memory alliances reflects a desire to enhance one’s sense of security. But the flipside of the coin is that this may leave adversaries feeling less secure and compelled to respond in kind. This could trigger further entrenchment and escalation of conflicts, while driving memory partners more closely into each other’s arms. To prevent an expansion of ongoing conflicts and eruption of new conflicts, it is crucial to de-escalate existing memory disputes. It is a positive sign, and perhaps evidence of prudent policy, that Beijing appears to have shown more reticence recently in seeking joint war commemorations with Moscow. But the circumstances seem far from stable, and Beijing’s “memory” of World War II is fickle. Forestalling a new round of memory-alliance building will thus require pro-active and prudent policy.

Minimising and de-escalating memory conflicts is a shared responsibility that rests upon actors on both sides of the geopolitical divide. This point is entirely overlooked in current public debates in the West. Rather than responding in kind to Moscow and Beijing’s increasingly authoritarian memory governance practices, European states and institutions should think twice before mirroring these with their own attempts to dictate, codify, “fact-

check” and thereby ultimately securitise historical interpretations (EU 2019; EUvsDisInfo 2020). Against this background, the emergence of new memory laws across Europe and resolutions of the European Parliament regarding the causes of World War II are concerning developments that deserve to be critically reassessed and reconsidered. A more appropriate response would be to shine a spotlight on the controlled and coercive nature of memory (re)production in these states, whilst at the same time stepping up efforts to ensure a safe and open environment at home for public and academic debate on controversial topics. In resisting authoritarianism Europe should refrain from incorporating it.

A final point that must be emphasised is that additional research is needed to obtain a better understanding of the developments explored here and their long-term implications. Studying state-controlled media is important but insufficient. Whilst state-endorsed news reports can be considered strategic in the sense that they entail deliberate selection and framing, they are still largely reactive in terms of the topics covered and timing of publication, given their focus on current affairs. For a better understanding of structural trends and the hand of the state in shaping domestic historical discourses it is necessary to include representations in other media, such as standardised textbooks, museums (particularly in places nearby the Russo-Chinese border), and films and multimedia. It is also necessary to include other historical episodes beyond the closely guarded and highly politicised topic of World War II. Historical narratives offer invaluable “shortcuts” to an understanding of ideology, strategic intent and information campaigns that no white papers or policy strategy can provide; in a world of “alternative facts” and growing information warfare, we cannot afford to ignore them. There has perhaps not been a better time to debunk that old Soviet motto that “the future is certain but only the past is unpredictable”.

Annexes

Annex 1 Search terms

Russian text corpora

RU-EN text corpus

Great Patriotic War

V-day

Victory Day

War anniversary

War commemoration

War victory

World War II

WWII

Soviet-Japanese War

RU text corpus

великая отечественная война

великой отечественной войне

великой отечественной войной

великой отечественной войны

великую отечественную войну

ВМВ

ВОВ

вторая мировая война

второй мировой войне

второй мировой войной

второй мировой войны

вторую мировую войну

День победы

дне победы

днём победы

дню победы

дня победы

Советско-японская война

Советско-японской войны

Советско-японской войной

Советско-японской войны

Советско-японскую войну

Chinese text corpora

CN-EN text corpus

Anti-Fascist

Anti-Japanese

Great Patriotic War

Japanese aggression

Japan's surrender

Sino-Japanese war

V-Day

War anniversary

War commemoration

War victory

World War II

WWII

CN text corpus

二战

卫国战争

反法西斯

抗日

日本投降

第二次世界大战

胜利日

Annex 2 Data extraction

In this project, we collected data from two types of sources: web sources and databases.

For web sources, we performed web-scraping with the R programming language, using the package Rvest. First, we used Google search operators to locate all URL links to news items according to the following specifications: (1) the webpage is under the web domain of a media outlet included in this study (see [section 3.1](#) and [section 4.1](#)); (2) the title of the item includes one (or more) of the specified search terms (see [Annex 1](#)). The resulting weblinks were saved in a table. Web-scraping scripts were then written for collecting html nodes for (1) title, (2) date, (3) text and (4) URL from the saved links. Where the structure or design of web pages or sections (e.g., society, international, sport etc.) of a media outlet differed over time, we designed separate R-scripts for scraping. After running the web-scraping scripts in RStudio software, the variable 'date' was standardised to the format of "yyyy-mm-dd" to ensure interoperability of the dates from different data files. Finally, duplicates (repeated URL links) in the final data files were removed. News articles that are identical but were published multiple times (with different URLs) were kept in our database.

While we aimed to limit the use of third-party databases, we retrieved data from databases under the following circumstances: (1) where a significant part of the textual data was known to be structurally unavailable (e.g., Xinhua deletes news articles from its web pages which are more than six years old); (2) where the structure or design of the web pages of a specific outlets was so diverse and inconsistent over the period of this study (covering two decades) that using web-scraping for data collection was impracticable. Based on these considerations, we retrieved data from the [Factiva](#) and [Ringdata 锐研数据](#) databases. We used parsing techniques based on regular expressions to process the raw data retrieved from Factiva in order to extract relevant fields of information: (1) body text, (2) title, (3) media outlet and (4) date. Data purchased from Ringdata were retrieved in tabularised form and suitable for immediate use in our analysis.

Annex 3 STM design

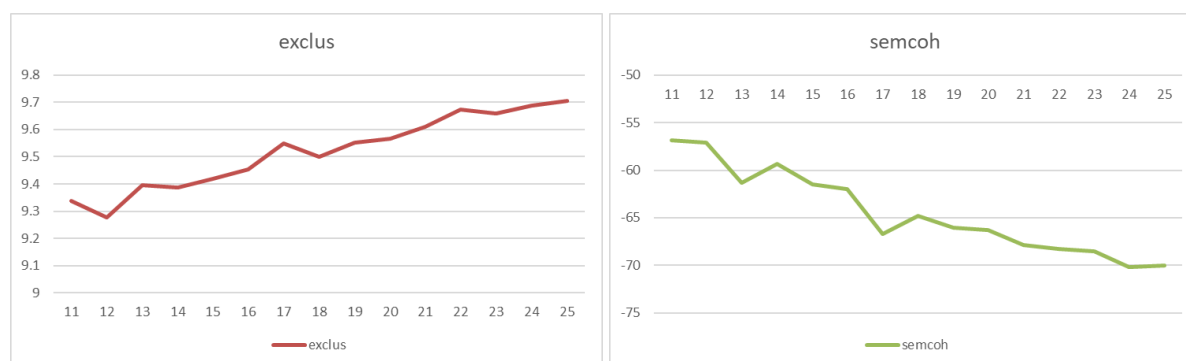
General considerations

Structural topic modelling (STM) is a technology that enables the machine-assisted reading of text data. It uses algorithms to identify clusters of co-occurring words in a corpus, allowing researchers to discover topics and estimate their relationship to document metadata, such as (in this case) data of publication and type of publishing outlet (Roberts et al. 2019). Although STM is considered to be an unsupervised natural language processing (NLP) method, researchers need to define the number of topics of the modelling. As Weston et al. (2023) have pointed out, there is no single correct number of topics for any text corpus but rather a number or range of options from which the researchers must choose (by trial) based on the nature and scope of the data and the research objectives.

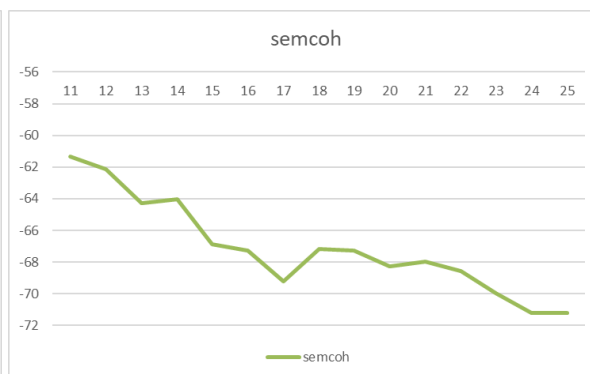
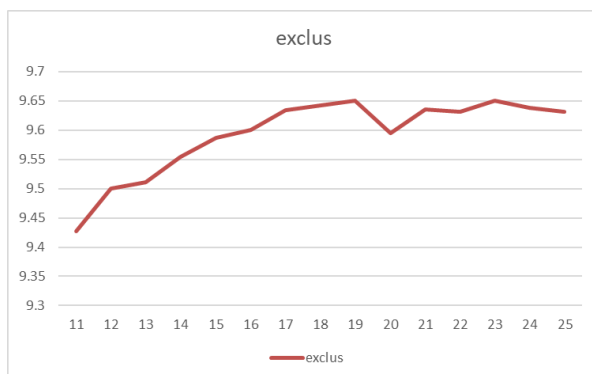
We set the number of topics for all four of our text corpora based on statistics of all models within a range (of number of topics) of 11–25, using the function `searchK()` of the R-package [stm](#). In our pilot study, we performed a similar exercise based on a range of 3–10, which rendered topics that we found too broad in the light of the research aims of this project. We mainly considered two statistics when determining the number of topics: exclusivity and semantic coherence. Exclusivity represents the degree to which words are exclusive to a single topic rather than associated with multiple topics. Semantic coherence is a measure of logical consistency in terms of how commonly the most probable words in a topic co-occur (Weston et al. 2023). Below we provide the detailed statistics for our text corpora.

Exclusivity and semantic coherence

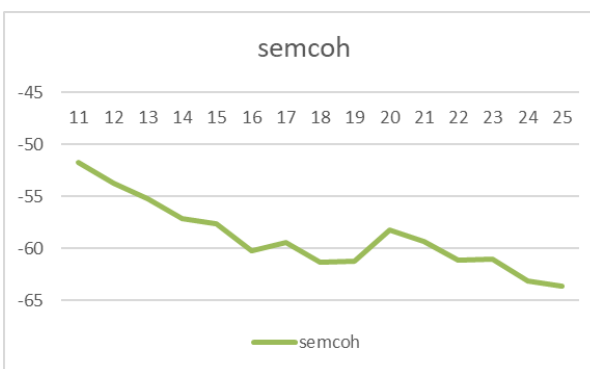
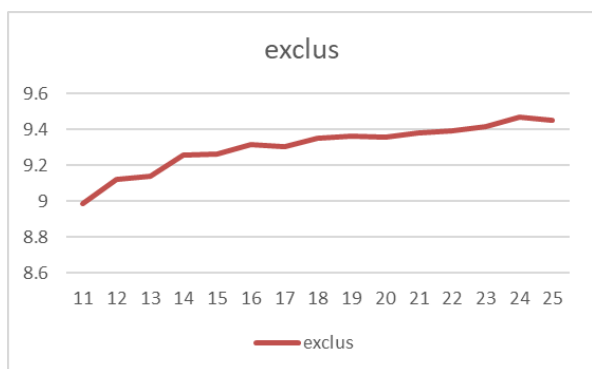
RU-EN text corpus



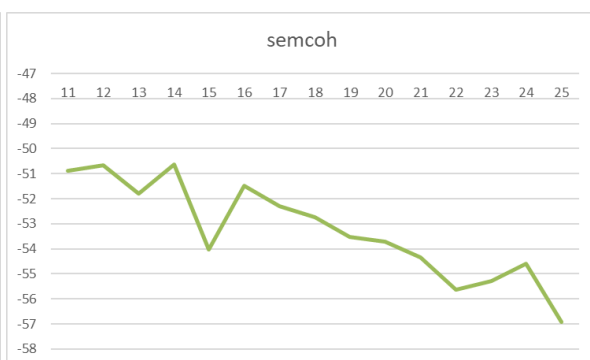
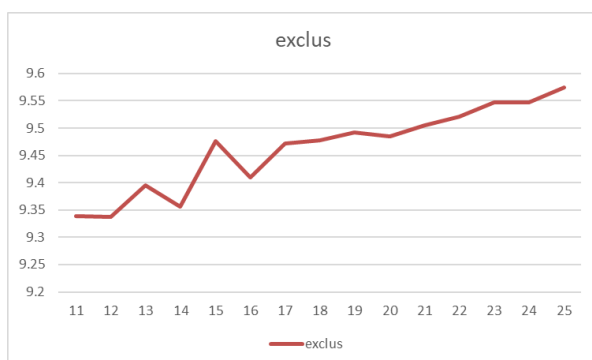
RU text corpus



CN-EN text corpus



CN text corpus



Annex 4 Russian topics

English-language corpus (RU-EN)

#	STM#	Topic	Proportion	Frame
1	5	Foreign leaders at V-Day parade	11.60%	1
2	4	WWII bombs and other remains	7.85%	2
3	15	Veterans, heroes and sacred legacies	7.62%	2
4	12	Russia and its allies defending “historical truth”	7.50%	3
5	7	Nationwide war remembrance	7.49%	1
6	13	The West’s “historical revisionism”	6.95%	3
7	10	V-Day celebrations and immortal regiments	6.70%	1
8	14	Advanced weaponry showcased during V-Day parades	6.35%	1
9	9	WWII stories and battles	6.05%	2
10	1	WWII archives, exhibitions and museums	5.44%	2
11	11	WWII-related disputes between (other) countries	5.17%	3
12	8	Memory laws, legal cases, war crimes	4.99%	3
13	6	Soviet WWII memorial sites and monuments	4.71%	3
14	3	Military equipment showcased during V-Day parades	4.57%	1
15	2	Formal demands, diplomatic representations, dialogue	4.29%	3
16	16	WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia	2.73%	4

Russian-language corpus (RU)

#	STM#	Topic	Proportion	Frame
1	18	Russian politicians in V-Day celebrations	7.82%	1
2	16	Great Patriotic War in films, paintings and literature	6.72%	2
3	3	WWII bombs and explosives	6.57%	2
4	7	Commemoration of the Great Patriotic War	6.57%	1
5	12	Russian medals and awards for veterans	6.29%	1
6	13	Great Patriotic War commemoration abroad and by Russian diaspora	6.25%	1
7	11	Russia (and allies) defending historical truth	6.17%	3
8	10	Interment of WWII soldiers and veterans	5.80%	2
9	8	Police work during V-Day celebrations	5.13%	1
10	4	Celebratory activities for V-Day	5.02%	1
11	17	Commemoration and veterans in other countries	4.85%	1
12	2	Benefits for Russian WWII veterans	4.70%	2
13	14	Documents, archives and memorials of the Great Patriotic War	4.68%	2
14	9	Policies and legislation concerning benefits for veterans	4.50%	2
15	6	Memory laws, legal cases and formal demands	4.45%	3
16	15	V-Day parades and immortal regiments	4.34%	1
17	19	Naval parade for V-Day	3.55%	1
18	1	Soviet losses during WWII	3.32%	2
19	5	"Historical revisionism" in Ukraine	3.29%	3

Annex 5 Chinese topics

English-language corpus (CN-EN)

#	STM#	Topic	Proportion	Frame
1	4	Russian Victory Day parades	9.26%	3
2	15	WWII stories, films and documentaries	7.02%	4
3	6	Commemorating China's great victory and contribution	6.86%	1
4	17	WWII-related disputes in Asia/Japan's historical responsibility	6.37%	2
5	12	Lessons of WWII	6.36%	4
6	5	Cooperation during WWII between China and other countries	5.31%	1
7	14	WWII commemorations in other countries (mostly Europe)	5.02%	4
8	1	Irrelevant items (WWII as time reference)	4.98%	
9	20	Chinese Victory Parade	4.98%	1
10	11	WWII bombs	4.94%	4
11	16	Russian V-Day of "Great Patriotic War"	4.82%	3
12	10	Japanese atrocities	4.73%	2
13	8	China's major role in Allies' victory in WWII	4.47%	1
14	7	Irrelevant items (other wars)	4.24%	
15	3	Commemoration of the Nanjing massacre	4.08%	2
16	19	Veterans	3.64%	1
17	18	Russian narratives and joint commemorations	3.53%	3
18	2	Victory Day ceremony in various countries	3.28%	4
19	13	Japan's surrender	3.26%	2
20	9	Military equipment showcased during Russian V-Day parades	2.85%	3

Chinese-language corpus (CN)

#	STM#	Topic	Proportion	Frame
1	4	Chinese leaders commemorating the war against Japanese aggression	6.91%	1
2	15	Russian V-Day parade	6.45%	3
3	12	Exhibitions, museums and monuments	6.03%	1
4	14	Chinese people's great Kangzhan spirit	5.59%	1
5	3	Stories of Chinese individuals	5.50%	1
6	16	Chinese martyrs at home and abroad	5.36%	1
7	9	Battles and martyrs in the war against Japanese aggression	4.88%	1
8	2	Lessons of WWII	4.52%	4
9	7	WWII bombs	4.48%	4
10	20	Kangri TV series	4.28%	1
11	8	WWII-related disputes around the world	4.18%	4
12	19	CCP military activities during the war against Japanese aggression	4.16%	1
13	6	CCP's role in the war against Japanese aggression	3.92%	1
14	21	Irrelevant articles (WWII as time reference)	3.90%	
15	1	Chinese and foreign veterans	3.86%	1
16	13	Research on the history of the war against Japanese aggression	3.59%	1
17	18	Defending the "truth" and "outcomes" of WWII	3.55%	4
18	10	(Lack of) Japanese remorse for war	3.47%	2
19	17	China's major role in Allies' victory in WWII	3.27%	1
20	24	Various items about WWII weapons and military equipment	3.24%	1
21	22	Commemorating the war against Japanese aggression in Taiwan	3.15%	1
22	5	Chinese people's great victory	2.03%	1
23	11	Irrelevant articles (WWII as comparison point)	2.01%	
24	23	Chinese (CCP) martyrs in the war against Japanese aggression	1.68%	1

Annex 6 Lists of words with highest frequencies

Russian text corpora

RU-EN text corpus – 2005

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	war	302	113
2	russian	198	86
3	veteran	185	55
4	world	169	91
5	moscow	153	68
6	victori	146	81
7	presid	132	53
8	soviet	115	56
9	may	112	63
10	peopl	104	51
11	anniversari	99	73
12	russia	97	56
12	ii	97	59
14	60th	91	71
15	region	79	41
16	meet	76	41
17	putin	74	26
18	memori	72	32
19	countri	70	43
20	also	68	36
21	citi	65	29
21	state	65	35
23	year	64	47
24	day	58	41
25	minist	58	25

RU-EN text corpus - 2015

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	war	1189	369
2	victori	984	354
3	moscow	827	319
4	russian	786	307
5	world	717	309
6	soviet	675	245
7	russia	612	273
8	presid	545	220
9	may	534	288
10	celebr	532	231
11	peopl	514	213
12	day	505	266
13	countri	466	223
14	parad	463	148
15	anniversari	451	272
16	wwii	413	247
17	nazi	412	232
18	germani	408	207
19	70th	388	261
20	militari	385	161
21	leader	365	156
22	china	352	95
23	state	346	202
24	foreign	328	156
25	ii	324	177

RU-EN text corpus – 2022

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	militari	266	89
2	victori	231	99
3	war	229	103
4	russian	218	85
5	parad	202	56
6	day	188	89
7	russia	182	78
8	may	148	80
9	nazi	121	66
10	world	121	60
11	soviet	113	61
12	ukrain	110	47
13	system	110	34
14	vehicl	109	32
15	part	108	54
16	moscow	107	50
17	offic	107	48
18	also	105	60
19	peopl	105	48
20	countri	104	51
21	germani	102	50
22	9	96	63
23	press	90	32
24	red	82	35
25	ministri	82	40

RU text corpus – 2005

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	войн(а)	war	1966	728
2	побед(а)	victory	1218	548
3	велик(ий)	great	967	503
4	ветеран	veteran	810	354
5	сегодн(я)	today	802	591
6	отечествен(ый)	domestic	795	456
7	москв(а)	moscow	662	381
8	росс(ия)	russia	613	347
9	втор(ой)	second	592	366
10	президент	president	544	250
11	миров(ой)	world	543	346
12	советск(ий)	soviet	538	286
13	60-лет(ний)	60-year	463	349
14	стран(а)	country	449	299
15	корр	correspondent	447	345
16	врем(я)	time	392	276
17	тыс(ыча)	thousand	391	184
18	российск(ий)	russian	389	252
19	город	city	361	229
20	воен(ый)	military	359	220
21	рф	russian federation	334	227
22	год	year	331	238
22	отмет(ить)	celebrate	331	248
24	участ(овать)	participate	323	242
25	лет	years	316	225

RU text corpus – 2015

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	войн(а)	war	761	147
2	побед(а)	victory	715	133
3	велик(ий)	great	348	120
4	отечествен(ый)	patriotic	312	114
5	москв(а)	moscow	274	84
5	воен(ый)	military	274	78
7	миров(ой)	world	229	80
8	ден(ь)	day	227	78
9	втор(ой)	second	226	81
10	парад	parade	214	52
11	росс(ия)	russia	211	94
12	советск(ий)	soviet	207	77
13	стран(а)	country	194	86
14	врем(я)	time	181	87
15	участ(овать)	participate	180	71
16	ветеран	veteran	163	54
17	город	city	162	61
18	все	everything	159	75
19	тыс(ыча)	thousand	156	50
20	70-лет(ний)	70-year	152	89
21	ссср	ussr	138	53
22	президент	president	137	61
22	российск(ий)	russian	137	62
24	год	year	135	72
25	сам(ый)	most	127	60

RU text corpus – 2022

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	войн(а)	war	964	319
2	побед(а)	victory	703	240
3	велик(ий)	great	635	266
4	отечествен(ый)	patriotic	601	260
5	воен(ый)	military	348	162
6	росс(ия)	russia	315	169
7	советск(ий)	soviet	309	137
8	москв(а)	moscow	280	144
9	город	city	278	140
10	тыс(ыча)	thousand	276	122
11	област(ь)	region	243	100
12	врем(я)	time	241	154
13	ден(ь)	day	232	122
14	год	year	224	130
15	акц(ия)	action	213	85
16	мероприят(ие)	event	206	116
17	миров(ой)	world	199	97
18	втор(ой)	second	198	103
19	стран(а)	country	197	116
20	участ(овать)	participate	194	123
21	рф	russian federation	186	120
21	участник	participant	186	105
21	пресс-служб(а)	press service	186	122
24	российск(ий)	russian	182	94
25	истор(ия)	history	175	90

Chinese text corpora

CN-EN text corpus - 2005

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	japanes	1139	133
2	peopl	796	136
3	japan	540	86
4	world	464	116
5	peac	458	63
6	veteran	416	70
7	victori	398	85
8	mark	322	77
9	us	315	73
10	wwii	309	59
11	anniversari	307	102
12	histori	305	82
13	aggress	299	95
14	resist	293	86
15	also	289	81
16	year	283	76
17	nation	276	70
18	commemor	264	74
19	memori	261	64
20	beij	247	67
21	hu	244	32
22	60th	242	90
23	countri	222	63
24	visit	201	57
25	news	199	105

CN-EN text corpus - 2015

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	japanes	1708	499
2	world	1426	513
3	peopl	1317	456
4	parad	1315	323
5	militari	1157	400
6	japan	983	234
7	victori	972	407
8	anniversari	810	445
9	countri	762	269
10	aggress	704	344
11	70th	703	418
12	resist	660	345
13	also	608	291
14	armi	570	233
15	year	561	264
16	commemor	559	283
17	forc	554	267
18	nation	550	251
19	peac	546	209
19	wwii	546	225
21	ii	526	309
22	soldier	518	220
23	beij	513	257
24	mark	508	319
25	xinhua	483	217

CN-EN text corpus - 2021

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	war	587	157
2	russia	396	101
3	victori	364	110
4	parad	291	86
5	may	283	100
6	world	268	107
7	japanes	265	55
8	countri	260	75
9	militari	257	112
10	day	242	101
11	peopl	220	71
12	unit	206	35
13	anniversari	194	120
14	japan	188	36
15	soviet	174	77
16	great	171	88
17	xinhua	161	118
18	moscow	157	76
19	76th	153	85
20	state	152	41
21	patriot	151	80
22	ii	143	91
23	photo	134	75
24	us	128	21
25	hold	123	61

CN text corpus – 2005

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	战争	war	4925	451
2	抗日	anti-japanese	4555	472
3	人民	people	3572	433
4	民族	nationality	3274	311
5	日本	japan	2435	327
6	世界	world	2194	270
7	抗战	anti-japanese war	2023	346
8	胜利	victory	1897	389
9	历史	history	1767	289
10	共产	communist	1451	292
11	发展	develop	1368	209
12	中华	china	1303	266
13	主义	doctrine	1246	248
14	反法西斯	anti-fascist	1198	235
15	和平	peace	1037	229
16	精神	spirit	1001	230
17	伟大	great	934	201
18	日军	japanese army	915	229
19	纪念	commemorate	875	297
20	社会	society	834	168
21	统一	unite	815	157
22	一个	one	805	271
23	建设	construction	795	156
24	领导	leader	793	248
25	重要	important	777	244

CN text corpus – 2015

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	战争	war	8206	713
2	抗日	anti-japanese	6618	659
3	抗战	anti-japanese war	6067	603
4	人民	people	4548	625
5	日本	japan	4291	466
6	民族	nationality	3671	470
7	历史	history	3383	618
8	世界	world	3239	500
9	胜利	victory	2983	629
10	日军	japanese army	2299	361
11	战场	battlefield	2180	398
12	反法西斯	anti-fascist	1940	431
13	一个	one	1901	460
14	共产	communist	1798	343
15	八路军	eighth route army	1751	256
16	纪念	commemorate	1747	480
17	精神	spirit	1628	345
18	国家	nation	1615	427
19	和平	peace	1490	390
20	他们	them	1385	368
21	发展	develop	1363	361
22	中华	china	1362	351
23	国际	internationality	1324	308
24	国民	nationalist (kmt)	1269	220
25	领导	leader	1233	340

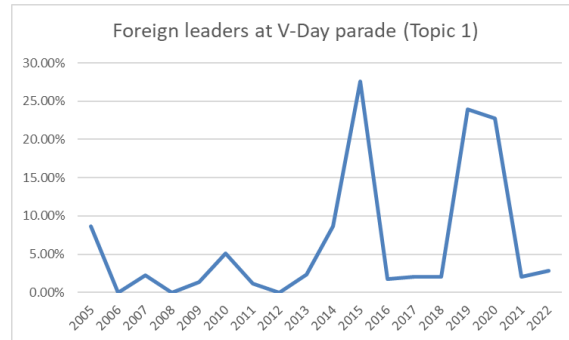
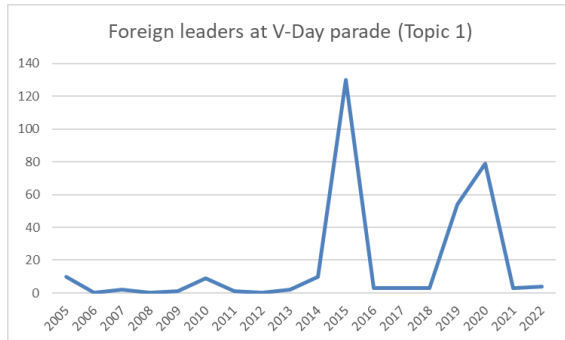
CN text corpus – 2021

Rank	Keyword	Translation	Frequency	Doc. freq.
1	战争	war	512	127
2	日本	japan	481	74
3	抗日	anti-japanese	380	74
4	俄罗斯	russia	324	87
5	胜利	victory	319	94
6	纪念	commemorate	297	95
7	历史	history	296	91
8	人民	people	293	73
9	民族	nationality	276	48
10	抗战	anti-japanese war	269	56
11	美国	usa	240	31
12	国家	nation	202	90
13	一个	one	200	60
14	伟大	great	199	53
14	韩国	south korea	199	20
16	精神	spirit	189	54
17	阅兵	parade	187	38
18	记者	reporter	174	102
19	世界	world	156	56
20	进行	conduct	151	79
21	国际	internationality	150	47
22	中华	china	147	34
23	周年	anniversary	134	82
24	共产	communist	129	42
25	英雄	hero	117	45

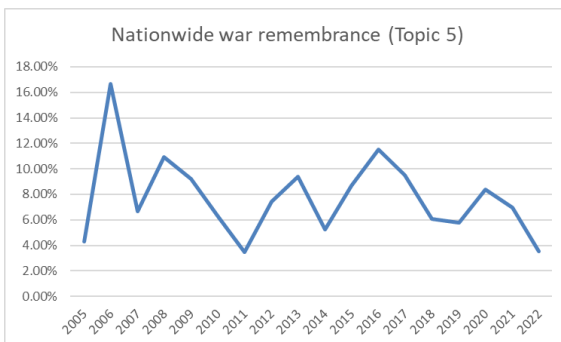
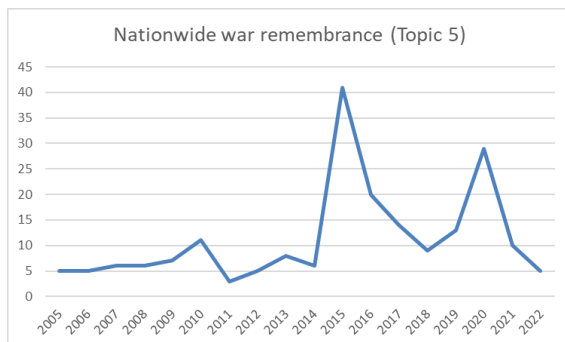
Annex 7 Topic trends in Russian text corpus (English)

Frame 1: Commemorating the Great Patriotic War (36.71%)

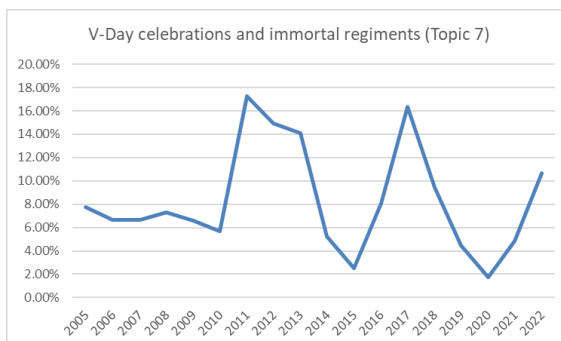
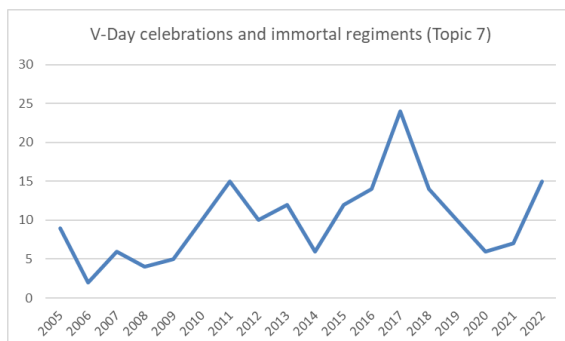
Topic 1: Foreign leaders at V-Day parade (11.60%)



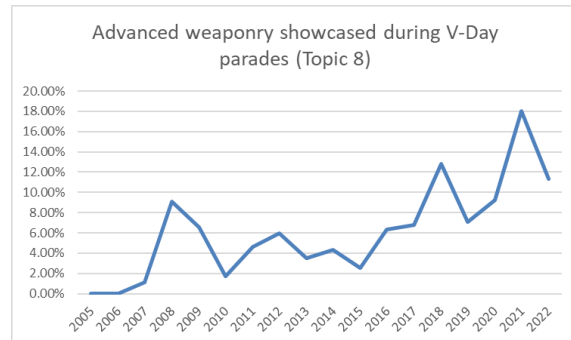
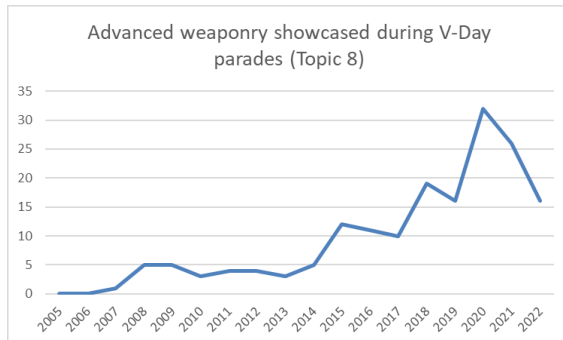
Topic 5: Nationwide war remembrance (7.49%)



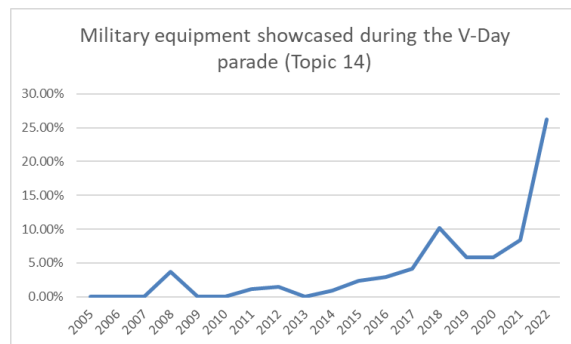
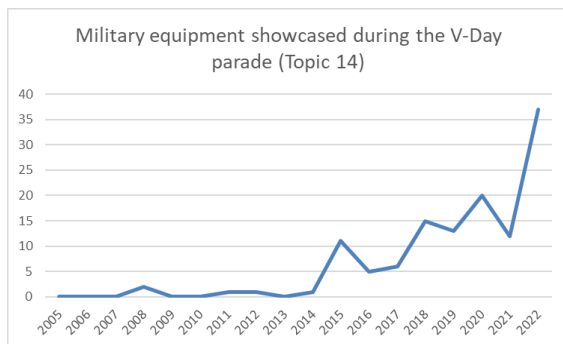
Topic 7: V-Day celebrations and immortal regiments (6.70%)



Topic 8: Advanced weaponry showcased during V-Day parades (6.35%)

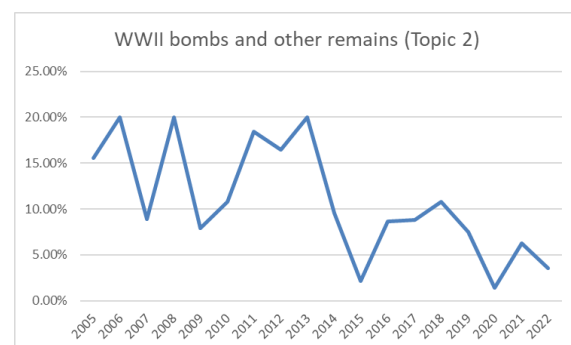
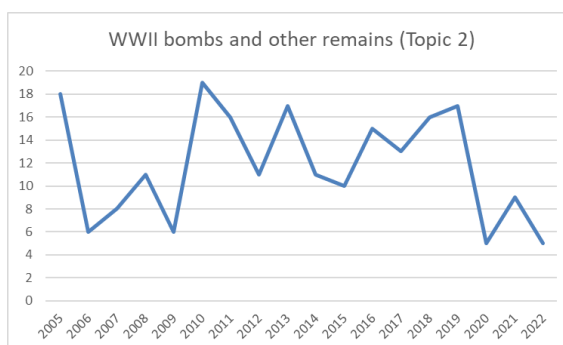


Topic 14: Military equipment showcased during V-Day parades (4.57%)

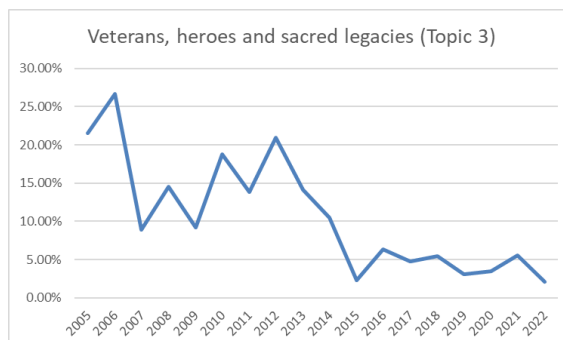
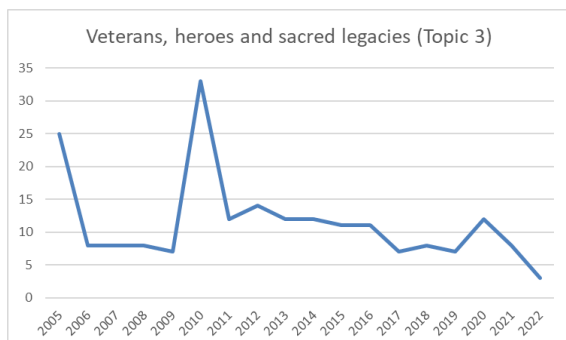


Frame 2: Documenting and preserving “historical truth” (26.96%)

Topic 2: WWII bombs and other remains (7.85%)



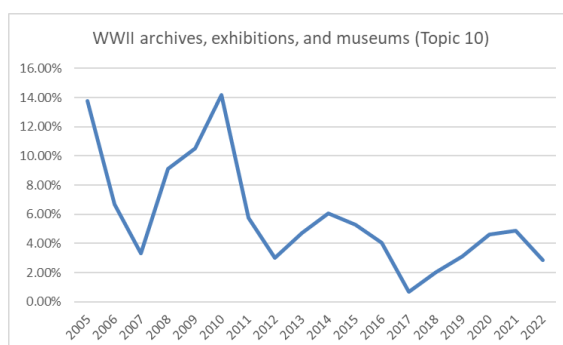
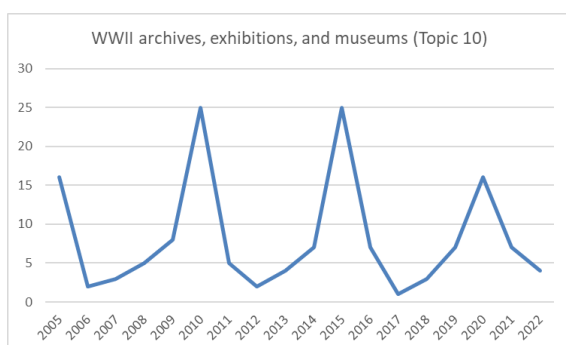
Topic 3: Veterans, heroes and sacred legacies (7.62%)



Topic 9: WWII stories and battles (6.05%)

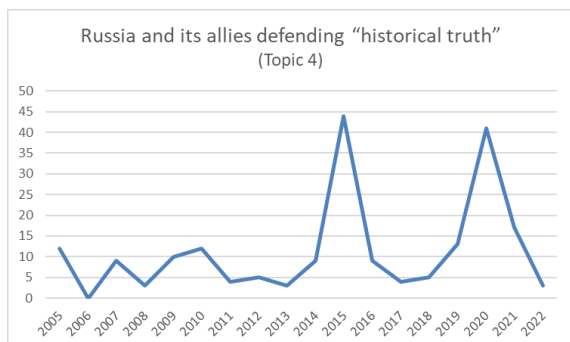


Topic 10: WWII archives, exhibitions, and museums (5.44%)

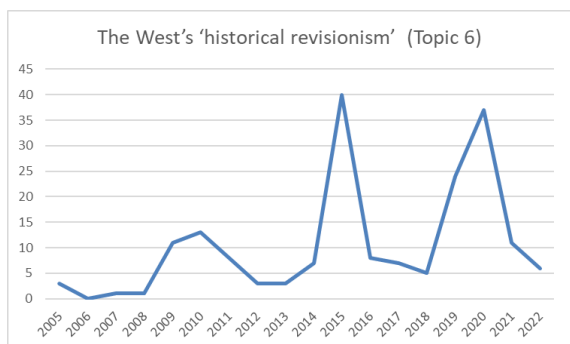


Frame 3: Memory contestation and historical revisionism by the West (33.61%)

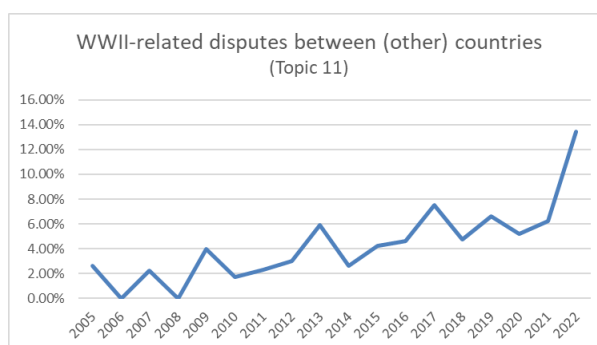
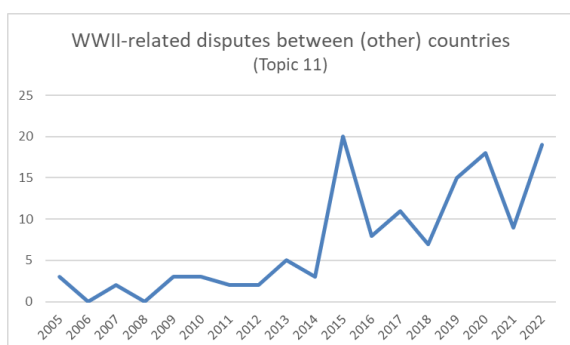
Topic 4: Russia and its allies defending “historical truth” (7.50%)



Topic 6: The West’s “historical revisionism” (6.95%)



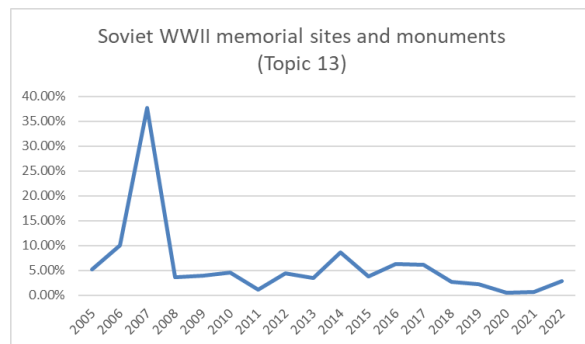
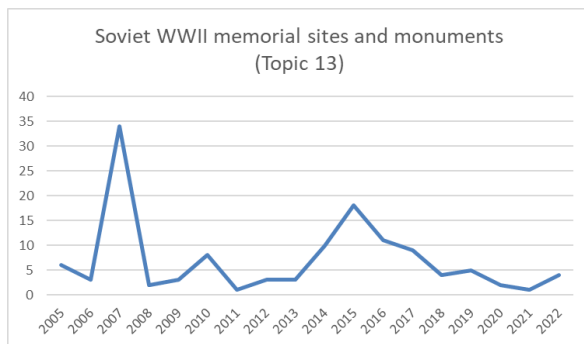
Topic 11: WWII-related disputes between (other) countries (5.17%)



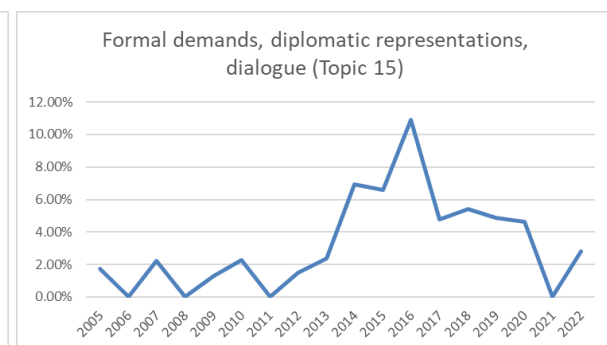
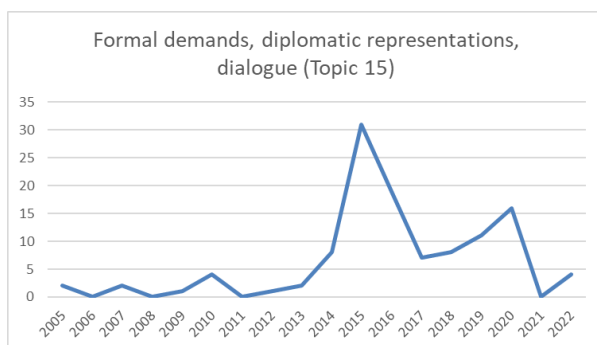
Topic 12: Memory laws, legal cases, war crimes (4.99%)



Topic 13: Soviet WWII memorial sites and monuments (4.71%)

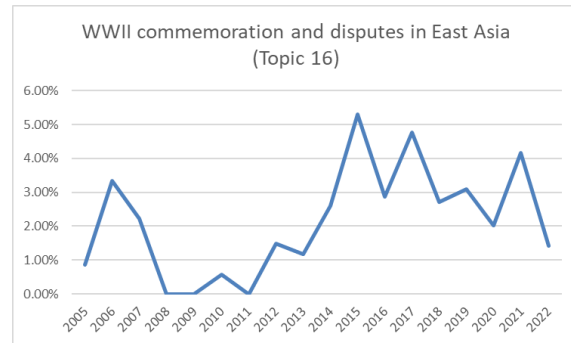
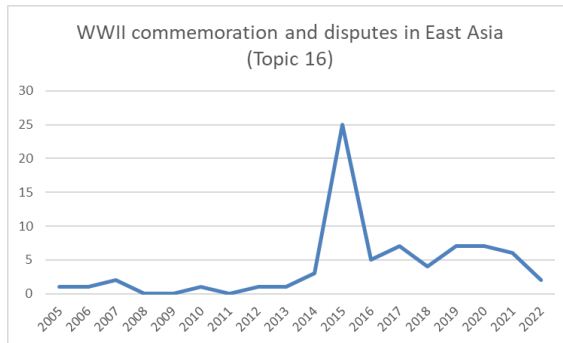


Topic 15: Formal demands, diplomatic representations, dialogue (4.29%)



Frame 4: WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia (2.73%)

Topic 16: WWII commemoration and disputes in East Asia (2.73%)



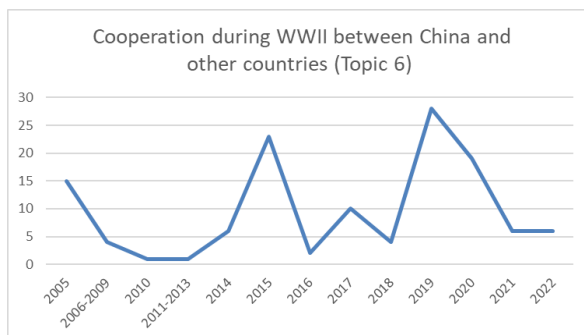
Annex 8 Topic trends in Chinese text corpus (English)

Frame 1: China's victory and contribution to world peace (25.26%)

Topic 3: Commemorating China's great victory and contribution (6.86%)



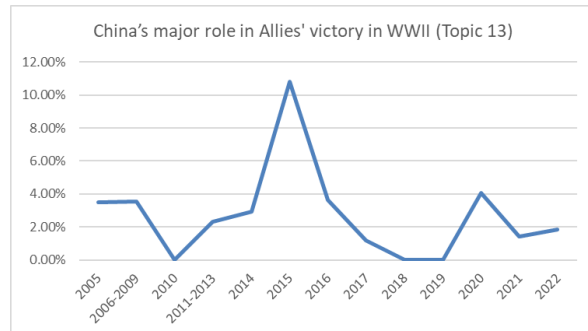
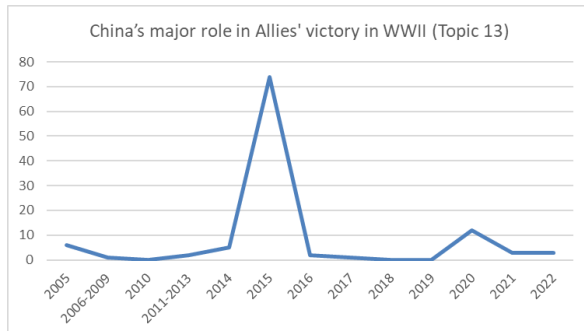
Topic 6: Cooperation during WWII between China and other countries (5.31%)



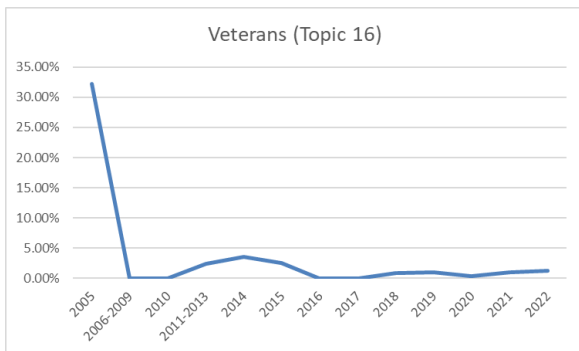
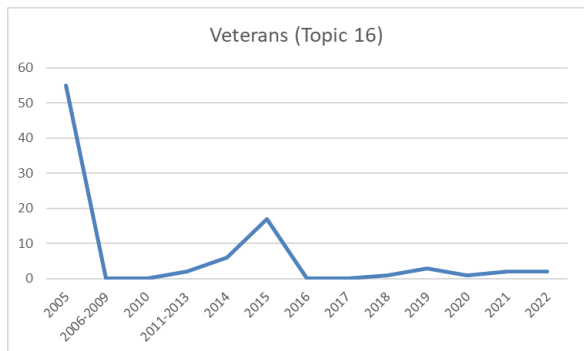
Topic 9: Chinese Victory Parade (4.98%)



Topic 13: China's major role in Allies' victory in WWII (4.47%)

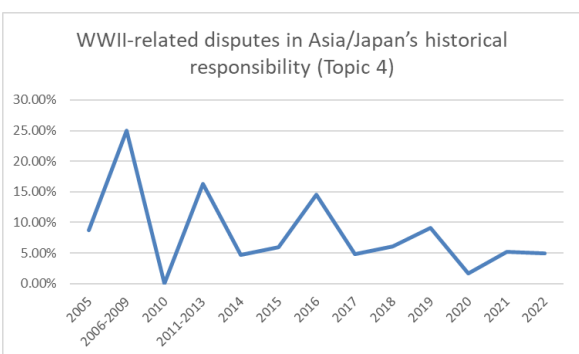
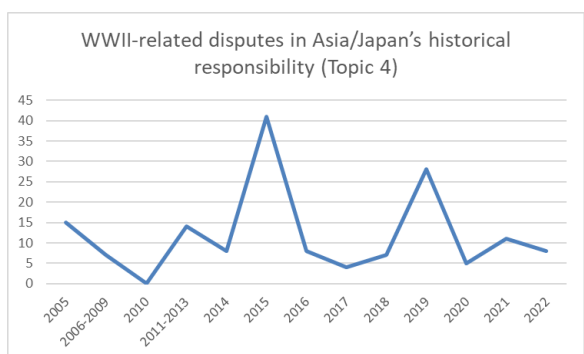


Topic 16: Veterans (3.64%)

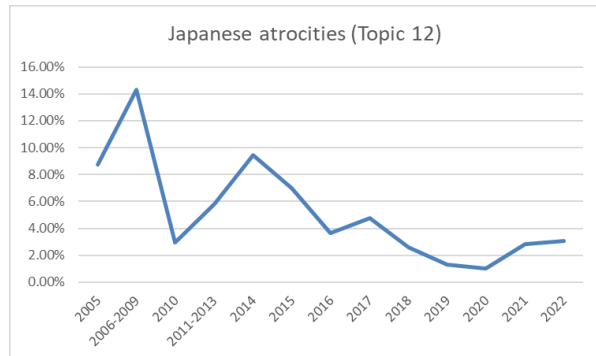
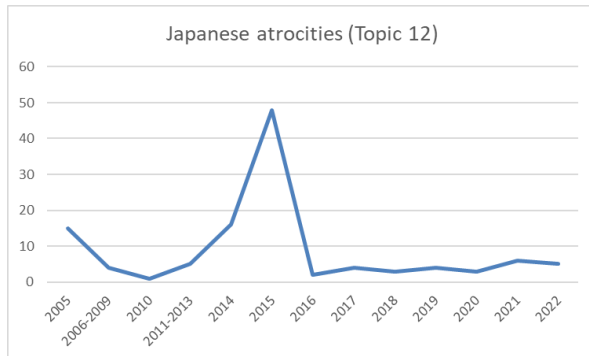


Frame 2: Japan's historical role and responsibility (18.44%)

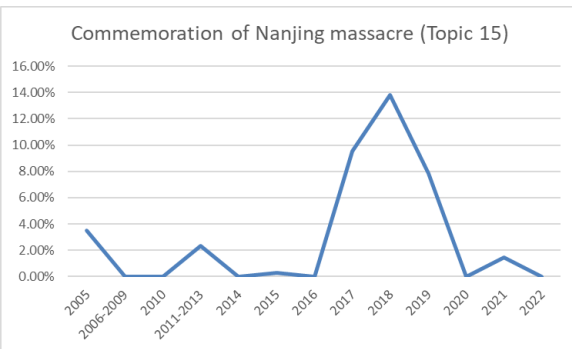
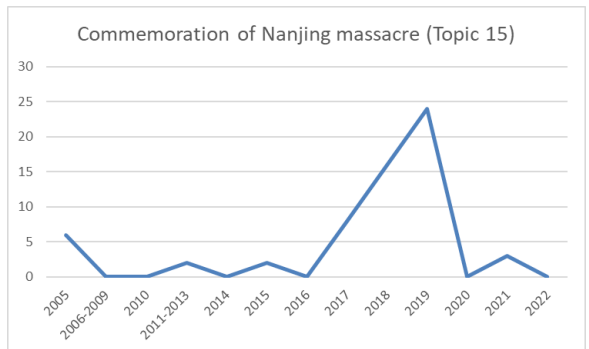
Topic 4: WWII-related disputes in Asia/Japan's historical responsibility (6.37%)



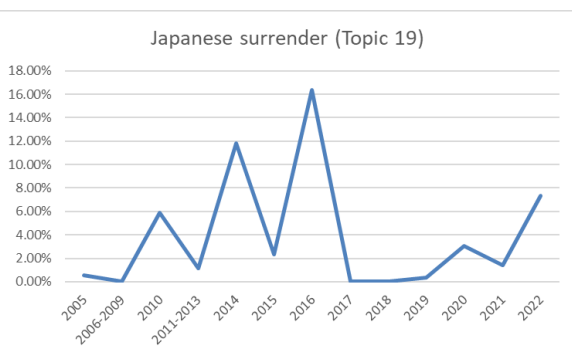
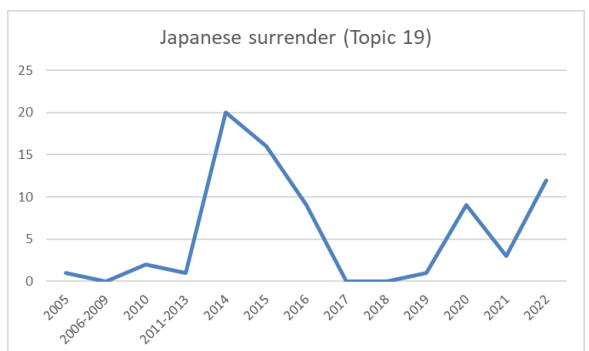
Topic 12: Japanese atrocities (4.73%)



Topic 15: Commemoration of the Nanjing massacre (4.08%)



Topic 19: Japanese surrender (3.26%)

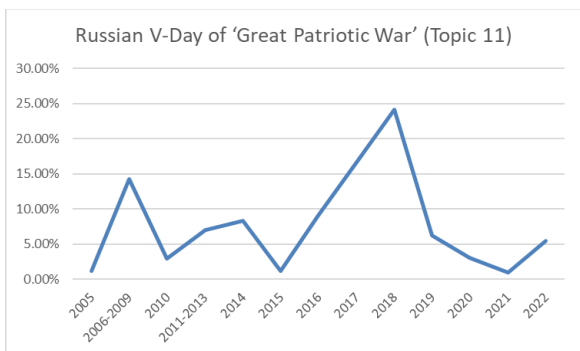
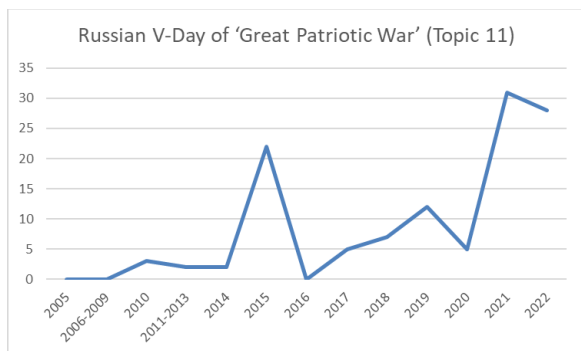


Frame 3: Russia's Victory Day (20.46%)

Topic 1: Russian Victory Day parades (9.26%)



Topic 11: Russian V-Day of "Great Patriotic War" (4.82%)



Topic 17: Russian narratives and joint commemorations (3.53%)

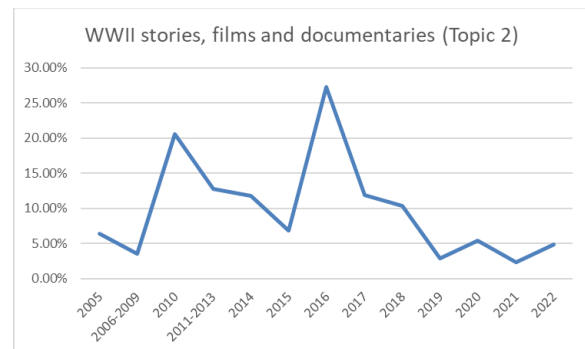
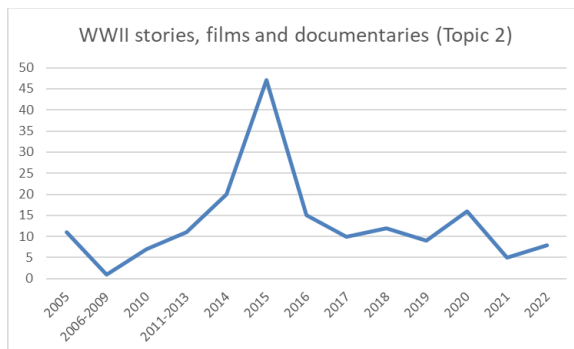


Topic 20: Military equipment showcased during Russian V-Day parades (2.85%)

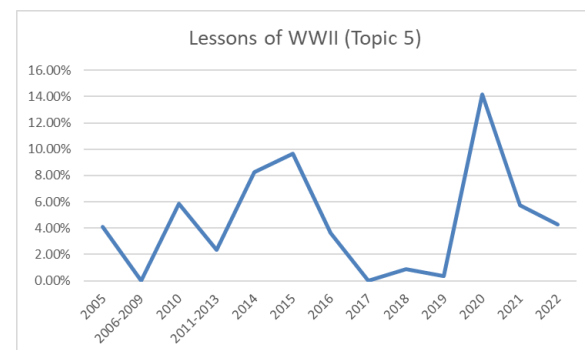
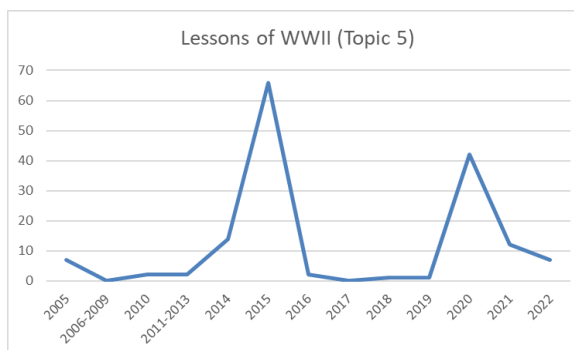


Frame 4: Global legacies and lessons of World War II (26.62%)

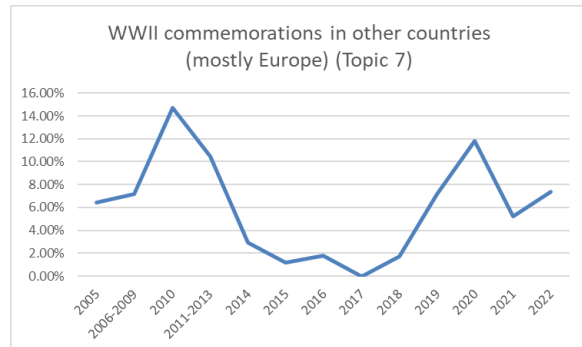
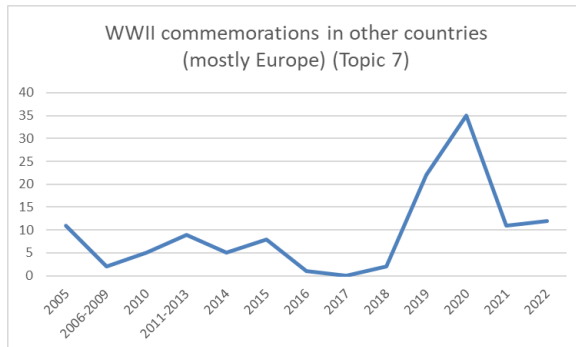
Topic 2: WWII stories, films and documentaries (7.02%)



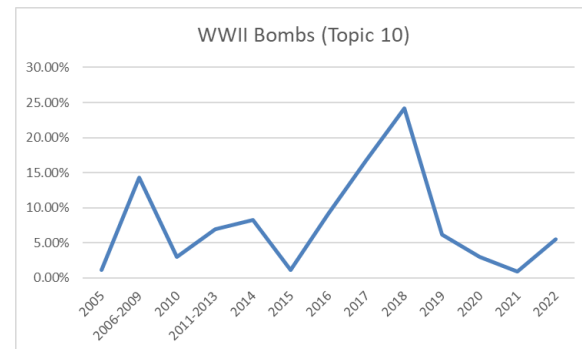
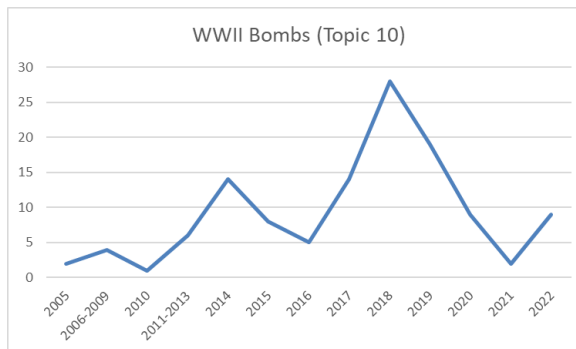
Topic 5: Lessons of WWII (6.36%)



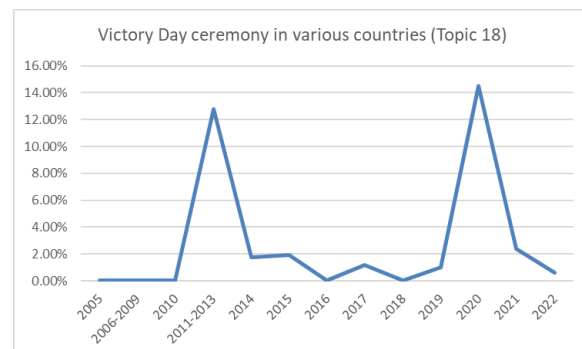
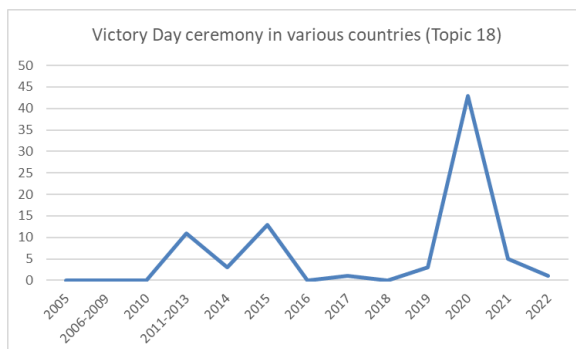
Topic 7: WWII commemorations in other countries (mostly Europe) (5.02%)



Topic 10: WWII bombs (4.94%)



Topic 18: Victory Day ceremony in various countries (3.28%)



Annex 9 Methodological contributions and limitations

In this project we designed and operationalised a sophisticated set of qualitative and quantitative methods to examine and compare four text corpora comprising over 14,000 news articles published by Russian and Chinese state-controlled media outlets in three languages over a time span of 21 years (2003–2023).

This project is unique in terms of its comparative nature, extensive multilingual scope and mixed-methods design. Studies of strategic narratives often focus exclusively on the discourse of a single country (e.g., Russia *or* China), and within these confines, sometimes only on a single language (e.g., only Russian or only English for a study of Russian discourse). In many cases, moreover, such research is solely qualitative and does not utilise any of the sophisticated new context-based natural language processing (NLP) techniques that have become available in recent years for analysing texts, including in modern Cyrillic script such as Russian and non-alphabetic script such as Chinese.

Perhaps reflecting a lingering compartmentalization of Area Studies and a persisting West-centric bias in Political Studies, International Studies and History, comparative studies involving Russian and Chinese discourses are few and far between. Most available studies have relied primarily on English-language text corpora, again reflecting the scarcity of deep non-Western area knowledge and the necessary language expertise that continues to characterise these disciplines and fields of study.

This project attempts to redress these deficits in existing work. In doing so, the project introduces some methodological innovations, which we outline below. Any pioneering research comes with its own limitations and for the purposes of transparency and future improvement we reflect on these in some more detail below.

Innovations and contributions

Quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary and can strengthen each other, provided they draw on a sound design and are carefully executed. In view of the respective limitations of each type of method, this project has sought to critically combine context-based computational language processing methods for text analysis with well-established

qualitative methods. In this way, we hope to contribute to the development of digital methods in Memory Studies and humanities-informed International Relations.

In terms of quantitative analysis, the main methodological contribution of this project is its use of the function `findThoughts()` in the [stm](#) R-package as a categorization algorithm. Studies have shown that topic modelling (including structural topic modelling) is an effective tool for uncovering broad subject-matter-based themes but not subtle nuances of the discursive features of topics (Weston et al. 2023). Topic labels generated by the function `stm()` (e.g., FREX words) alone are often insufficient or even misleading for devising accurate topic labels. The function `findThoughts()` provides a potential remedy, as it outputs the most representative documents for a particular topic. The function's n argument allows researchers to define the number of documents to be displayed. While it is common practice to display a small number ($n < 10$) of most representative articles, we found this insufficient for understanding and labelling the generated topics. Furthermore, `findThoughts()` does not currently allow users to append document-level metadata to displayed examples, thus restricting the possibility of tracking differences across time or across source-type (e.g., outlet, political affiliation or country) within a given topic. In view of these limitations, we used `findThoughts()` as a categorization algorithm, instead of using it to display a small number of most representative articles. To do so, we determined how many (n_i) most representative articles should be categorised under each topic. We first calculated the exact topic proportion (P_i) for all topics based on the following model, in which each document (j) has a probability θ (calculated by `stm`) of belonging to topic i , and the total number of documents included is N :

$$P_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^N \theta_{ji}}{N}; n_i = \text{nint}(N P_i) = \text{nint}(\sum_{j=1}^N \theta_{ji})$$

We then ran the `findThoughts()` function for each topic, specifying argument $n = n_i$ and retrieved document-level metadata (date and outlet) from the corpus, using the index number of each output document from `findThoughts()`. This approach allowed us to obtain a much more complete picture of the documents associated with the topics, which in some instances caused us to revise the topic labels that were previously established based on the reading of FREX words in combination with a small number of example documents. Moreover, this also allowed us to qualitatively analyse how outlets engage in the same topic differently.

Limitations

Qualitative text analysis methods are known to be susceptible to a lack of rigour and to suffer from biases caused by the analyst's preconceived notions and expectations. Computerised methods can help redress these concerns as they allow the analyst to "defamiliarize" from the data and reduce selection bias. At the same time, quantitative techniques have their own limitations, which supports the abovementioned benefit of using quantitative and qualitative methods to complement and corroborate each other. Below we outline four limitations of the quantitative analysis in this study.

Data completeness. The completeness and representativeness of the data cannot be guaranteed. As set out in [section 1.2](#), [section 3.1](#) and [section 4.1](#) of the report, it is possible that an (unknown) number of articles were omitted from either of the corpora that should have been included given the aim of this study, due to the following factors:

- Media outlets may not have published all their articles online, especially in the earlier years of the period reviewed.
- Media outlets may have removed older articles from their websites. For instance, Xinhua periodically removes articles from its website that are more than six years old.
- Data retrieved from third-party databases may be incomplete. It is not possible to evaluate the completeness of the data collected from third-party databases beyond what they disclose about their methods of data collection.

Textual data quality. We experienced poor data quality of textual data web-scraped from web pages created in the 2000s. In some instances it seemed impossible to separate the body text of a news article from other parts of the webpage. For example, the scraped text of some articles in our corpus contained references to other "relevant articles". In other instances, the scraped text contained identical duplicates of the article's content. Those issues are more prevalent in articles before 2010 in the English-language Chinese corpus than the other three corpora. It is conceivable that these issues influenced the subsequent quantitative analyses (though most likely to a limited degree), as any irrelevant or duplicated texts will be counted during the transformation of the data to a document-feature matrix (DFM).

Defining frequency thresholds. During the preprocessing of the four text corpora we applied a document frequency filter to the DFM using the trimming function `dfm_trim()` from the R-package [Quanteda](#). We set the filter to a range of 0.02–0.90, such that words with a document frequency below 2% or above 90% were removed from the corpus. These frequency thresholds might not be optimal and might negatively affect the accuracy of STM modelling and topic allocation. The `dfm_trim()` function generates a DFM based on researcher-defined ranges of document frequency and/or term frequency. A universal consideration when using `dfm_trim()` is reducing the size of the DFM to speed up subsequent analysis. This can be desirable if subsequent analysis requires considerable computing power, such as in the case of STM. There are also substantive reasons for using `dfm_trim()`, as it can be helpful for subsequent analysis to remove the following types of words: (1) words that are used in virtually all documents in the corpus, but that are likely to be irrelevant to any discursive differences between documents (e.g., the term “Chinese” of “WWII” in English-language Chinese articles); and (2) words that occur in almost none of the documents and therefore are unlikely to have a substantive impact on the discursive features of the corpus or the topic. Although setting frequency thresholds is conceptually justified and reflects common practice in STM, researchers need to define the range arbitrarily and cannot know if the selected range is optimal.

Accuracy of topic allocation. There are differences between digital algorithmic and human interpretations of topic coherence and topic allocation. As mentioned in [Annex 3](#), we used semantic coherence as a statistical indicator of the optimal number of topics for our text corpora. Semantic coherence in the statistical sense refers to how commonly the most probable words in a topic co-occur, but this might differ from a human interpretation of logical coherence. It is possible that choosing a different number for our text corpora could have resulted in a conceptually or thematically more “accurate” or “logical” categorisation of articles under topics. For example, we found that a small number of articles categorised under a certain topic by STM fit better under another topic. However, this problem could also be a result of the abovementioned issue of frequency thresholds.

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