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RESEARCH ARTICLE

International memories in global politics: Making the case for or against UN intervention in Libya and Syria

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Abstract

This paper is interested in the role and function of memories in United Nations Security Council debates about humanitarian intervention. It posits that historical experiences and their lessons serve as interpretative devices for the abstract international norms and principles under discussion. The paper speaks of 'international memories' where the meaning and lessons derived from the past coalesce among a group of states. Empirically, its case study explores how the memories of totalitarianism/fascism and colonialism were employed in United Nations (UN) representatives' verbal pleas to intervene in Libya and Syria after the Arab Spring. It finds that those who supported or opposed humanitarian intervention held different interpretations of these memories and their lessons. In each case, however, memories provided essential normative guidance to states when it came to implementing the abstract international principles, norms, and rights that underlie humanitarian intervention.

Keywords: colonialism; humanitarian intervention; lessons from the past; Libya; memories; Syria; United Nations; totalitarianism/fascism

Introduction

'Please, United Nations, save Libya. No to bloodshed. No to the killing of innocents. We want a swift, decisive and courageous resolution.'[1] With this plea, Libya's representative at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Abdel Rahman Shalgman, appealed for international intervention in Libya in 2011. To underline the urgency of this cause, he drew parallels between Muammar Al-Qadhafi's government and the totalitarian regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Pol Pot: 'This resolution will send a signal for a definitive end to the fascist regime that is still in place in Tripoli.'[2] Similarly, in 2011, the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar Ja'afari, began to make repeated pleas before the UNSC, albeit for non-intervention in Syria. However, he, too, did so in reference to memory: 'We reaffirm that the age of colonialism has passed.'[3] By invoking the historical experiences of totalitarianism/fascism and colonialism respectively, representatives of both Libya and Syria, therefore, resorted to 'present[ing] recollections of past experiences', or what in this paper is defined as 'memories', to mobilise the UNSC.

This paper is interested in precisely this function of memories in mobilising international action. To that end, it theorises the invocation of memories as calls to political action that persuade, justify,

[1] UN Security Council, '6490th meeting: Peace and security in Africa', New York, 25 February 2011.
[2] UN Security Council, '6491st meeting: Peace and security in Africa', New York, 26 February 2011.
[3] UN Security Council, '6524th meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 27 April 2011.

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and thus mobilise via the lessons learned from the past. It posits that these lessons provide normative guidance for state representatives to interpret the abstract international norms and principles under debate when it comes to decisions about humanitarian intervention. It explores these processes empirically in a qualitative content analysis of the rhetoric of UN representatives at UNSC meetings, as well as their verbal pleas to get the Council to intervene (or not) under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, in the cases of Libya and Syria post-Arab Spring (2011–16).

Understanding the role and function of memories in taking concerted international action has broader implications for the study of world politics. First, such an angle theorises memories into devices for countries and their representatives to interpret abstract notions of international norms, principles, and laws.[4] Second, detecting evidence of the role and function of memories and their shared interpretations helps to map the contours of a collective identity of the international community by exploring countries' normative commonalities and divides.[5] Third, this paper's focus on the transnationality of memories adds to a small but growing number of International Relations (IR) works that aim to disentangle the nature and role of memory from the state and its domestic and foreign policies.[6] Fourth, while the cases of Libya and Syria serve first and foremost as examples to illustrate theory, their emphasis on memories also contributes new insights to the existing IR literature on humanitarian intervention more generally,[7] and in Libya and Syria specifically.[8]

The article proceeds as follows: first, it defines memories and lays out their link with political action. It builds on existing IR works and examples that describe how national memories provoke domestic and international action to theorise how memories can mobilise across borders and thus underwrite the international community's activities, i.e. UN interventions. In a second step, the paper illustrates these processes in its empirical analysis of the UNSC debates about humanitarian intervention in Libya and Syria after 2011. The conclusion derives insights from the function of memories in these two cases and points to their role in guiding the international community more broadly.

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[4]Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917; Ian Hurd, 'Law and the practice of diplomacy', *International Journal*, 66:3 (2011), pp. 581–96; Ian Johnstone, *The Power of Deliberation: International Law, Politics and Organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jeffrey W. Legro, 'Which norms matter? Revisiting the "failure" of internationalism', *International Organization*, 51:1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[5]Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Esref Aksu, 'Global collective memory: Conceptual difficulties of an appealing idea', *Global Society*, 23:3 (2009), pp. 316–32; Russell Buchan, 'A clash of normativities: International society and international community', *International Community Law Review*, 10:1 (2008), pp. 3–27; Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Collective memory: The two cultures', *American Sociological Association*, 17:3 (1999), pp. 333–48; Thomas G. Weiss, 'Researching humanitarian intervention: Some lessons', *Journal of Peace Research*, 38:4 (2001), pp. 419–28.

[6]Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (eds), *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Sebastian M. Büttner and Anna Delius, 'World culture in European memory politics? New European agents between epistemic framing and political agenda setting', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:3 (2015), pp. 391–404; Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (eds), *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Maria Mälksoo, 'Criminalizing communism: Transnational mnemopolitics in Europe', *International Political Sociology*, 8:1 (2014), pp. 82–99; Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, 'Memory unbound: The Holocaust and the formation of cosmopolitan memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5:1 (2002), pp. 87–106; Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases, and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[7]Stephen Hopgood, 'The last rites for humanitarian intervention: Darfur, Sri Lanka and R2P', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 6:2 (2014), pp. 181–205; Stephen Hopgood, 'Challenges to the global human rights regime: Are human rights still an effective language for social change?', *International Journal on Human Rights*, 11:20 (2014), pp. 67–75.

[8]Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:4 (2014), pp. 889–911; Tim Dunne and Jess Gifkins, 'Libya and the state of intervention', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65:5 (2011), pp. 515–29; Justin Morris, 'Libya and Syria: R2P and the spectre of the swinging pendulum', *International Affairs*, 89:5 (2013), pp. 1265–83.

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Memories as calls to political action

Memories are present interpretations of past events.[9] These interpretations, however, do not serve to recount the past as it was, but, instead, they derive lessons learned from it. Recalling a historical event always serves the purpose of mobilising future action – not just any action, though, but a course that aligns with the normative guidance that flows from a specific interpretation of a past event. This renders memories subjective and, of course, value-laden. When we invoke the past, we emphasise a particular ethical/moral lesson learned.[10] Be it as individuals, social groups, or, as is the case in this paper, states and their political representatives, whenever we make references to past events, we aim to provoke a specific kind of action and justify it as 'right' because of the lessons we drew from the past.

In politics, too, memories serve as calls to action and normative guidance for it. Memories are useful political devices to mobilise and persuade others. Furthermore, as 'present interpretations', memories are malleable to contemporary political needs and manipulation. Invoking memories in political discourse necessarily implies simplifying complex events into actionable forms.[11] During this process, the lessons derived from the past can change, and the same memory can come to justify opposite policies and courses of action.[12]

To illustrate, take the famous example of Germany's Nazi past and its memory of the Holocaust. So far, several lessons have been derived from this past that led to opposite courses of action. The lessons, 'Never again Auschwitz' and 'Never again war', for instance, gave rise to an anti-militaristic stance and the practice of non-interference in international affairs in the post-war era.[13] However, in the light of changing political needs, these lessons were reinterpreted and thus served as calls for intervention to actively hinder mass atrocities, gross human rights abuses, and wars from happening again. This was the case, for instance, in 1999, when Germany's past was re-engaged to provoke and justify its participation in the NATO intervention in Kosovo.[14] Similar reinterpretations are currently occurring in Germany's public debates about a more proactive German military and security policy and the war in Ukraine. In short, the message from the memory of the Holocaust and Nazism can mobilise and justify both non-interference and military intervention, depending on a specific present interpretation of their lessons.

According to the politics of memory literature, the link between memories and a subjective course of action manifests in two principal ways: first, memories can be used deliberately for present action. Scholars hereby assign an active agency to political leaders and state representatives to manipulate and fabricate past events to provoke a specific political action. Notably, memories,

[9]See a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on 'collective memory' that goes back to Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, eds. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and now spans psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the political sciences, e.g. Alan Confino, 'Collective memory and cultural history: Problems of method', *The American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997), pp. 1386–403; Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2010); Michael Schudson, 'The past in the present versus the present in the past', in Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (eds), *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 287–90; Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, 'Social memory studies: From "collective memory" to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 241:1 (1998), pp. 105–40; James V. Wertsch, 'The narrative organization of collective memory', *Ethos*, 36:1 (2008), pp. 120–35.

[10]George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905); Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, 'Commemorating a difficult past: Yitzhak Rabin's memorials', *American Sociological Review*, 67:1 (2002), pp. 30–51; Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[11]Kerry Goettlich, 'Connected memories: The international politics of partition, from Poland to India', *International Political Sociology*, 16:4 (2022), pp. 1–22; Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 9, 89, 235; Lina Klymenko, 'The role of historical narratives in Ukraine's policy toward the EU and Russia', *International Politics*, 57:6 (2020), pp. 973–89.

[12]Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory*.

[13]Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Tamed Power: Germany in Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[14]Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 114–47.

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in this view, become an active opportunity for policymakers.[15] Second, memories passively shape present action. Building on the sociological scholarship and its direct link between memory and group identity, these scholars assume that memories subconsciously underwrite identity and therefore constrain behaviour, and particularly the active agency of political leaders.[16] In this view, memories passively define the agency of state representatives towards a specific action, and political representatives are genuinely motivated by memories that form an integral part of their belief system and identity.

Whether memories are deliberately invoked by politicians or passively underwriting state action, what works have in common is that they predominantly focus on national memories to explain state action. This is because the politics of memory literature is closely entangled with the nation-state and domestic politics. During the 'memory boom' of the 1980s and 1990s, scholars across disciplines came to see collective memory as almost synonymous with national memory and identity.[17] It follows that when politicians are guided by or use memories, they use national memories and derive lessons from them that are assumed to resonate with the national community they represent.[18] According to the politics of memory literature, memories actively or passively provoke political action by mobilising a specifically bounded national collective.

National memories as calls to foreign-policy action

National memories, however, serve as calls to action not only in domestic politics but also in foreign affairs. Building on the politics of memory literature, IR authors note memories' role in international politics. In the international sphere, memories either actively serve or passively constrain a country's international action.

IR scholars working within the first (active) strand examine how state representatives, foreign-policy actors, and diplomats use memories through their deliberate recall. Memories hereby feature as state-produced, officially sanctioned narratives;[19] as fabricated diplomatic tools for strategic gain;[20] as designated foils to aid foreign-policy decision-making;[21] or as 'playing the history card'.[22] For example, take the strategic use of the Nazi legacy by Germany and Austria, both of which were former Nazi perpetrators. In the 1950s, their foreign-policy elites narrated diverse stories about this legacy. Austrian diplomats forged an image of 'innocent victimhood', whereas West German political leaders told a story of a 'guilty yet atoning perpetrator' to the world, each for a strategic foreign-policy goal: independence and neutrality in the Austrian case; reintegration into the Western world community in the West German case. In each example, the past was amendable to strategic interests and became another diplomatic tool to reach designated international goals.[23] Through the

[15]Kathrin Bachleitner, 'Diplomacy with memory: How the past is employed for future foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:4 (2018), pp. 492–508; Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003); Berthold Molden, 'Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory', *Memory Studies*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 125–42; Barry Schwartz, 'Memory as a cultural system: Abraham Lincoln in World War II', *American Sociological Review*, 61:5 (1996), pp. 908–27; Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); MacMillan, *Uses and Abuses*.

[16]John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Schudson, 'Past in the present'.

[17]Sebastian Conrad, 'Entangled memories: Versions of the past in Germany and Japan, 1945–2001', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:1 (2003), pp. 85–99 (p. 85); Astrid Erll, 'Travelling memory', *Parallax*, 17:4 (2011), pp. 4–18 (p. 6).

[18]Goettlich, 'Connected memories', pp. 2–3.

[19]Jennifer M. Dixon, *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[20]Bachleitner, 'Diplomacy with memory'.

[21]Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[22]Karl Gustafsson, 'Is China's discursive power increasing? The "power of the past" in Sino-Japanese Relations', *Asian Perspective*, 38:3 (2014), pp. 411–433 (p. 414).

[23]Bachleitner, 'Diplomacy with memory'.

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deliberate invocation (and fabrication) of their respective national memories, post-war leaders thus actively narrated their countries into international action.

That national memories pose an active opportunity for politicians to influence international political outcomes is also apparent in the more current example of Ukrainian foreign policy. Lina Klymenko, for instance, describes how Ukraine's pro-Western politicians, since President Petro Poroshenko in 2014, have invoked Ukraine's national history in a way that embedded the country into Europe rather than Russia's orbit.[24] By commemorating the Christianisation of the Kyivan Rus in 2018, President Petro Poroshenko claimed that the introduction of Christianity more than 1,000 years ago was not only a religious, but also a political, i.e. European choice. This particular invocation of Ukraine's national memory pointed towards a specific future – Europe – and thus came to mobilise and legitimise his pro-European foreign policy.

Furthermore, political leaders can not only use their own national memories to achieve a foreign-policy goal, but they can equally use the national memories of other countries to mobilise their support. For instance, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky made use of others' national memories in his shuttle diplomacy at the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Speaking before Western parliaments, he invoked different national memories to gather support for Ukraine. In Paris, he referenced the national motto of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité'; in Japan, the nuclear disaster; in Germany, the Berlin Wall; and in Washington DC, the 9/11 attacks. In London, he adjusted Churchill's iconic speech from 1940 to fit Ukraine's geography: 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. And, I want to add, we shall fight on the spoil tips, on the banks of the Kalmius and the Dnieper. We shall never surrender.'[25] The purpose of his invocations of national memories was, without doubt, to mobilise Western support.

In either case, however, when politicians use memories as an active tool for foreign-policy gains, they employ first and foremost national memories, be they their own or those of others. The same is true for the second (passive) strand. IR authors hereby examine how international action is passively shaped by a state's memory. A state's memory, however, again refers to a country's national narrative of its historical experience.[26] This national memory or, as it is more commonly called in IR, a state's identity then passively underwrites state behaviour in the international sphere.[27] To this assumption belong constructivist studies that examine how state identity subconsciously moulds actors' foreign-policy interests,[28] and, per extension, state action itself. Furthermore, the notion of a state's 'narrative identity' and its link to international state behaviour was refined particularly by IR's ontological security scholarship. Departing from Giddens's conception of 'biographical continuity',[29] for instance, Steele considers the link between a country's biographical narrative and its international actions.[30] Equally, Subotić speaks of a state's autobiographical narrative as a powerful

[24]Klymenko, 'Role of historical narratives', pp. 974–5.

[25]Volodymyr Zelensky, Address to the UK Parliament, London, 8 March 2022.

[26]Felix Berenskoetter, 'Parameters of a national biography', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 262–88; Consuelo Cruz, 'Identity and persuasion: How nations remember their pasts and make their futures', *World Politics*, 52:3 (2000), pp. 275–312.

[27]For related work in International Relations (IR), see authors who view the state as its 'national biography', e.g. Felix Berenskoetter, 'Parameters', or as its 'national or biographical narrative', e.g. Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Steele, *Ontological Security*. Equally, in his study, Erik Ringmar views 'state identity' as 'necessarily at the mercy of the interpretation given to it through the stories in which it features' ('On the ontological status of the state', *European Journal of International Relations*, 2:4 [1996], pp. 439–466 [p. 452]).

[28]Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 157–83; Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*.

[29]Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[30]Steele, *Ontological Security*.

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explanation for state behaviour.[31] Along related lines, Mälksoo adds the concept of 'mnemonical security' and Bachleitner the concept of 'temporal security'.[32] In all these cases, 'identity narratives' or 'national memories' provide a subjective guidance for state action – and therefore passively constrain state behaviour, attitudes, and choice in IR.

To illustrate this passive process, take the prominent example of Germany's national identity as an 'atoning perpetrator' with regards to its Nazi legacy, which scholars regularly name as a constraint on Germany's international behaviour. It manifests as a continuing German reluctance to participate in international military action[33] or as its support for Israel against what are considered 'traditional' material (economic and security) interests in the Middle East.[34] The memory of National Socialism, in this view, forms a robust part of the German national identity and thus 'forces' German representatives to act accordingly in their foreign-policy decision-making. In this case, therefore, the past is not actively amendable to strategic interests but rather forms these interests. Hence, memories, in this IR strand, passively constrain the agency of state representatives in their international actions. Yet, again, also in that regard, the memories that constrain international state action are first and foremost nationally defined.

It follows that whether actively used or passively constraining, IR scholars have so far predominantly explained the role of national memories in international politics. However, even if states remain the main actors within the international sphere, diplomacy in international fora is not always exclusively aimed at realising individual state interests and actions, but, at times, also at getting the international community in its entirety to act. Does the described link between memory and action also unfold with regards to the international community? Can state representatives mobilise the international community by recourse to memories, and which memories do they use in an international context?

International memories as calls to action for the international community

In most of the existing IR literature on memory, the link between memory and action focuses on states and thus unfolds between their national memories and foreign-policy action.[35] My paper builds on these findings, but it investigates the link between memories and the action of the international community. By 'international community', this paper means the UN and the UNSC, where all countries are represented and where concerted international action is decided. This paper asks the question of whether, in UNSC debates, state representatives take recourse to memories, and if yes, it asks which memories can be used to get the UNSC to act. From existing works, we know that national memories mobilise and persuade states into (international) action, but do 'international memories' exist, and if yes, do they have the power to mobilise the international community into concerted action? To answer this question, we need to ask first, what international memories are, and second, how they can become mobilising factors within the international arena.

What are international memories?

A small but growing IR literature on the transnationalisation of memories gives insights into the ways in which memories can be 'international'.[36]

[31] Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security'.

[32] Maria Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37; Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[33] Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*; Katzenstein, *Tamed Power*.

[34] Kathrin Bachleitner, 'Ontological security as temporal security? The role of "significant historical others" in world politics', *International Relations*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 25–47.

[35] Exceptions are IR works which focus on the sub-state level and individuals and on the supra-state level using the example of the European Union and European memories. However, to my knowledge, no IR work focuses on the international level and global memories of the international community to provoke the actions of the international community.

[36] Aksu, 'Global collective memory'; Assmann and Conrad (eds), *Memory in a Global Age*; Sebastian M. Büttner and Anna Delius, 'World culture in European memory politics? New European agents between epistemic framing and political agenda setting', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:3 (2015), pp. 391–404; Resende and Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma*.

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First, historical experiences and their memories can be shared across borders. However, authors hereby find that memories have a regional (i.e. European) rather than a global slant.[37] Mälksoo, for instance, points to distinctly 'Atlantic-Western European' and 'East-Central European and Russian ways of remembering WWII'.[38] These transnational memories thus remain anchored in well-bounded communities based on a shared historical experience.

Second, not the historical experience but its interpretation can be shared across borders.[39] In this view, memories are meaningful beyond the communities that experienced certain historical events. As such, memories no longer concern a historical event in question from the perspective of a country but rather from the abstract moral message they send.[40] The experience of totalitarianism or colonialism, occupation, and war are examples in point. They are not international memories insofar as these historical events have been experienced by everyone equally but rather insofar as the international community derives a shared message from them.

As an illustrative example, take the memory of the Holocaust. Over the last half-century, the experience of the Holocaust was socially transformed from being the trauma of the Jewish people into the most dominant representation of trauma and suffering of our time.[41] It became a tragic archetype and the general benchmark for human suffering for the entire liberal world.[42] Along these lines, Assmann conceptualised the Holocaust not as a European historical memory but a transnational memory, 'a universal norm', or 'global icon'.[43] MacDonald, too, views the Holocaust as the 'preeminent symbol of suffering' that is used by various groups to represent their traumas.[44] Levy and Sznaider go so far as to call the Holocaust a 'cosmopolitan memory', as the abstract nature of good and evil that symbolises the Holocaust has the potential to be anyone's memory.[45] Its lesson, therefore, must also speak to all humanity. The shared message from such a 'cosmopolitan memory' is to protect human rights from the dangers of totalitarianism. This belief that the memory of the Holocaust can mobilise global human rights politics was also picked up by the UN and translated into its 'Holocaust Remembrance Initiative'.[46] In theory and practice,

[37] Laure Neumayer, 'Integrating the Central European past into a common narrative: The mobilizations around the "crimes of communism" in the European Parliament', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:3 (2015), pp. 344–63; Aline Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions* (London: Routledge, 2014); Tea Sindbaek Andersen and Barbara Törnquist Plewa (eds), *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Mälksoo, 'Criminalizing communism'.

[38] Maria Mälksoo, 'The memory politics of becoming European: The East European subalterns and the collective memory of Europe', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:4 (2009), pp. 653–680 (pp. 654–5).

[39] See Dovile Budryte, 'Travelling trauma: Lithuanian transnational memory after World War II', in Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 168–81 and Astrid Erll, 'Travelling memory'. Erll's concept of 'travelling memories' suggests that memories can travel between different contexts, even if they do not participate in constructing what she calls 'a container culture' (Astrid Erll, 'From "District Six" to District 9 and back: The plurimedial production of travelling schemata', in Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney [eds], *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014]). Furthermore, there is no assumption that someone must claim to have been part of an experience in order to have a memory of it.

[40] Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, 'Memory unbound. The Holocaust and the formation of cosmopolitan memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5:1 (2002), pp. 87–106.

[41] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

[42] Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections of the Relationship between Past and Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[43] Aleida Assmann, 'The Holocaust: A global memory? Extensions and limits of a new memory community', in A. Assmann and S. Conrad (eds), *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 97–118.

[44] David B. MacDonald, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[45] Levy and Sznaider, 'Memory unbound'.

[46] Thomas Olesen, 'Global injustice memories: The 1994 Rwanda genocide', *International Political Sociology*, 8:4 (2012), pp. 373–89.

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therefore, a globally shared interpretation of the Holocaust is believed to mobilise all countries into the same international action, i.e. towards safeguarding human rights in the face of mass atrocity crimes.

However, immediate red flags arise with such an 'international' theocratisation of the Holocaust memory and its link to a universal message and lesson that justifies a specific course of action. Which memories matter, for whom, and how? Why, for instance, did the Holocaust become anyone's symbolism for good and evil and not the experience of colonialism? Levy and Sznaider recognise that cosmopolitan memory is at risk of reinforcing a utopian Eurocentrism while ignoring the experience of non-Western regions. Together with post-colonial scholars, they note a crowding-out effect of an 'international' Holocaust memory vis-à-vis the historical experiences of the Global South. As a result, the link to international action – i.e. the link to the promotion of human rights – plays out differently within the West and the Global South. 'Internationalising' one historical experience and its memory opens an experience up for competition with other memories instead of offering the desired moral guidance for a certain action by the international community.[47] This makes it clear that memories, even if lifted out of a specific national experience, always construct a particular kind of purpose and thus speak to a particular community rather than the international community in its entirety.[48] Their invocation therefore can lead to different courses of action within these communities.

Taking this critique into account, international memories in this paper are defined by their transnationality. In my definition of international memories, it is not the historical experience that is shared across borders, however, but the interpretation and meaning or lessons derived thereof. International memories, in other words, are international 'memory narratives' or 'frames'. We can speak of an 'international memory frame' when a group of countries interprets a historical event in a similar way and derives a similar lesson/guidance from it for future action. Transnationality, according to my definition, thus does not require universality in a way that all countries interpret an international memory in a uniform way. Instead, a memory in this article is considered 'international' when a group of countries shares its interpretation of the lessons learned. Of course, this definition warrants immediate nuance: memory is a multilayered, complex phenomenon, and several countries will never interpret a historical event and its lessons in exactly the same way. Furthermore, states may have a range of motivations for appealing to memories. Yet what this definition suggests is that their interpretations can nevertheless overlap and show at least similarities across countries at specific points in time. Such defined 'international memories' then are posited to serve as tools to mobilise and persuade in the international arena, and they harbour the possibility of leading to different courses of concerted international action through a shared interpretation and reinterpretation of the lessons learned from the past.

How do international memories mobilise in the international arena?

To explore how memories mobilise for international action, and whom they target/persuade in the international sphere, let us look at how international political processes play out in multilateral organisation and cooperation more generally. As Johnstone expressed it, international organisations, such as the UN, are places where argumentation occurs beyond nation-states and 'interpretative communities' coalesce.[49] That means that in international fora such as the UNSC, countries resort to ideas and interpretations that are widely shared. IR authors have so far explored

[47] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

[48] See the critique of Erll, 'From "District Six"'.

[49] Johnstone, *Power of Deliberation*, pp. 33–54.

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how this works with recourse to international norms, laws,[50] or principles;[51] however, as this paper argues, it can also happen through the invocation of memories.

In general, 'diplomacy operates between the internal needs and interests of the state and their explanation in an external "language"'.[52] Like international norms, laws, and principles, international memories are another 'explanation in an external "language"'. Yet, so far, IR authors have only found numerical evidence that memories are employed frequently in international debates, for instance, at the UN General Assembly.[53] They have not, however, examined their function in these debates in detail. Like international norms, memories are not mere rhetoric, but, equally, they mobilise international action. For example, for Johnstone, 'international norms' 'explain, defend, justify, and persuade'.[54] International memories mobilise in just the same ways: they explain, defend, justify, and persuade a 'right' course of action based on the lessons learned from the past.

However, notably, with international memories defined by a shared interpretation of their lessons, their link to action unfolds only where interpretative communities coalesce regarding the lessons learned from the referenced historical events. Like international norms and principles, international memories thus, too, speak to specific communities who share a collective identity, most likely on the regional but potentially also on the global level.[55] In either case, because there is no firm, unified, international, collective identity, they thus only ever mobilise a particular group of states: 'There is no [international] "community" if this word implies shared values and common convictions.'[56] This term, therefore, is without a 'policy edge'.[57] There are only different 'international communities' with loose collective identities, such as 'the West', 'the Islamic world', and 'the Global South'. Representatives of different 'international communities' will likely hold diverse interpretations of the same historical event and, therefore, derive from these opposing courses of action.

In either case, however, international memories, like norms, laws, and principles in IR, create a 'shared meaning' in global politics and serve as normative guidance for international action. Moreover, international memories, through their lessons learned from the past, provide practical guidance for action: as stated above, referencing memories simplifies complex historical events into 'actionable forms'.[58] Their lessons, therefore, serve as reference points that render the abstract notions of international norms, laws, and principles 'real' in the first place and thus provide policymakers with interpretative devices to navigate tricky normative matters in global politics.

The case study: Debating humanitarian intervention at the UN Security Council

In the theoretical framework, it was posited that in international fora, international memories mobilise for international action. Wherever the interpretation (message) from an invoked historical event is shared across borders, it normatively guides a group of states. To explore how this process unfolds in practice, my case study looks at the rhetoric of UN representatives at UNSC debates regarding humanitarian intervention. Notably, I am not seeking to establish causality with

[50]Hurd, 'Law and the practice of diplomacy'; Legro, 'Which norms matter'.

[51]Catherine Hecht, 'The shifting salience of democratic governance: Evidence from the United Nations General Assembly General Debates', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 915–38; Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics'.

[52]Hurd, 'Law and the practice of diplomacy', p. 589.

[53]Tracy Adams and Mor Mitrani, 'Juggling identities: Identification, collective memory, and practices of self-presentation in the United Nations General Debate', *British Journal of International Studies* (2023), available at: {https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1177/13691481231156906}.

[54]Johnstone, *Power of Deliberation*, p. 55.

[55]Adler and Barnett (eds), *Security Communities*; Buchan, 'Clash of normativities'.

[56]Weiss, 'Researching humanitarian intervention', p. 423.

[57]Ibid., p. 424.

[58]Goettlich, 'Connected memories', p. 7; Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory*, pp. 9, 89, 235; Klymenko, 'Role of historical narratives', p. 977.

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this between the invocation of a memory and UN interventions. Instead, I am interested in the nature and role of international memories, and I show their existence and function by analysing how actors invoked them to mobilise concerted action.[59]

Empirically, I am studying this process through a qualitative content analysis of the speeches made by state representatives at UNSC meetings in two recent cases: the debates surrounding collective intervention in Libya and Syria.[60] For Libya, the timeframe of analysis is the year 2011, when, in February, anti-government protests broke out and escalated into a violent crackdown. Analysed speeches concern the lead-up to Security Council Resolution 1973 (on 17 March 2011), in which collective action was decided unanimously. Resolution 1973 authorised a humanitarian intervention under Chapter VII of the Charter that implemented a 'No-Fly Zone' over Libyan airspace and implicitly invoked the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).[61]

In contrast, in the Syrian example, international action did not take place. However, as in Libya, in Syria anti-government protests also broke out and escalated into a civil war in early 2011 and since then have called for continued debate in the Security Council to take collective action. For the case of Syria, I therefore analysed all UNSC meetings concerning the situation in Syria between 2011 and 2016 when the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon officially declared the international community's 'collective failure to intervene and end the conflict in Syria'.[62]

Moreover, the UNSC was chosen as our empirical laboratory because it is a truly international forum and holds unique powers to issue collective action. As such, state representatives' contributions at the UNSC meetings contain pleas for action. They are also much less legal and technical than the already-agreed-upon texts of treaties, agreements, and UNSC resolutions. Furthermore, the Security Council, unlike the UN General Assembly, is not merely a rhetorical platform but also holds the power to decide collective action. The UNSC meeting notes,[63] hence, constitute a unique barometer of states issuing calls to action to the international community.[64] Security Council meetings thus form an optimal forum to research the potential existence and invocation of international memories as calls to action for the UN.

Based on the theories, we postulate that political representatives reference international memories to mobilise for or against international intervention by positing lessons learned from the past. To explore this practice, I start by analysing the speeches made by the Libyan and Syrian representatives and single out via a content analysis the 'memories' that these speakers employ and the 'lessons' they draw from them to guide UN action. As per our definition of international memories, I coded not only the invoked historical events but also the lessons and guidance for future action that are derived from them. In a second step, I turn to the P5 veto powers that get international action in the UNSC underway: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China,

[59] Hendrik Wagenaar, *Meaning in Action: Interpretation and Dialogue in Policy Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[60] Analysed were all UNSC documents that reference Libya and Syria between February 2011 and December 2016.

[61] Bruno Pommier, 'The use of force to protect civilians and humanitarian action: The case of Libya and beyond', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93:884 (2011), pp. 1063–83; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 'Power in practice', p. 900.

[62] Security Council, 'Syrian tragedy "shames us all", Secretary-General Tells Security Council', UN Press Release (21 September 2016), available at: {https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12526.doc.htm}.

[63] UNSC meeting notes were available at: {https://www.securitycouncilreport.org}.

[64] Keren A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011); Courtney Smith, *Politics and Process at the United Nations: The Global Dance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Riener, 2006). Note that minutes are only available for meetings of the Security Council that are open to the public. However, the Security Council also has a mechanism called 'informal consultations' where the members retire to a separate room to discuss matters. These 'informal consultations' are not open to the public and are completely off the record, and therefore no minutes are provided. Given their non-public nature, these consultations are a venue for honest and frank discussions. The decisions are made after these consultations, and they are announced in the formal (open) meetings. The 'announcements' made in these open meetings are nevertheless useful because they are almost always accompanied by formal speeches delivering an official justification for the relevant state's position. This reinforces their usefulness for our research purposes because in these meetings, these speeches are purposive and deliberately worded, rather than being off the cuff. For more information, see Michael C. Wood, 'Security Council working methods and procedure: Recent developments', *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 45:1 (1996), pp. 150–61.

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and Russia – and their memories. Do their interpretations of selective historical events and their lessons coalesce with those of the representatives?

My analysis illustrates the theory that international memories mobilise and persuade where their shared interpretation coalesces, yet without claiming any causality between these memories and the final decision to act. However, I also hope to add to the existing IR literature on humanitarian intervention in the cases of Libya and Syria an emphasis on memories and their use by political representatives before the UNSC. So far, scholars working on these two cases in IR describe how 'the ghosts of Rwanda and Srebrenica … haunted advocates' of the R2P more generally,[65] and how key UNSC members use the experience of previous interventions to discourage future interventions.[66] My paper contributes to them a focus on memories and their transnationally shared lessons as state representatives employ them to mobilise or dissuade the P5 from intervention.

Making the case for intervention in Libya

'Please, United Nations, save Libya. No to bloodshed. No to the killing of innocents. We want a swift, decisive and courageous resolution.' These were the words of Libya's UN representative Abdel Rahman Shalgman, as he pleaded to the UN Security Council in its 6490th meeting on 25 February 2011 for humanitarian intervention in Libya. To mobilise support within the UNSC, he resorted to several past experiences of totalitarianism, referencing Pol Pot of Cambodia and Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany in particular:

> Pol Pot, head of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, was asked why he executed one third of his people. He said he did it because of the people. Before invading the Soviet Union, Hitler recalled Rommel from Libya and told him, 'General, I intend to invade the Soviet Union'. Rommel told him, 'Operation Barbarossa will cost us 2 million lives'. Hitler responded, 'What does it matter if 2 million Germans die in service to the glory of the Führer?'[67]

With these reminders, the Libyan representative warned of crimes against humanity occurring in Libya. He characterised the Libyan president Muammar Al-Qadhafi as highly dangerous, emphasising that he – like Pol Pot and Adolf Hitler in the past – was willing to kill peaceful and unarmed people for the sake of his rule.[68] In drawing these parallels and calling Al-Qadhafi's government yet another 'fascist regime',[69] the Libyan representative mobilised for humanitarian intervention: Libyans urgently need to be liberated from the murderous whims of a dictator before it is too late.

Moreover, that such a liberation would have the support of the Libyan people rather than being an unwelcome external intervention was assured through another historical reminder of fascism and its present parallels:

> Fear not, Libya is united. Libya will remain united. Libya will be a progressive State. But I say to my brother Al-Qadhafi, leave the Libyans alone. However many of these steadfast people you kill – these people that offered up half of their own numbers to fight Mussolini and Graziani, and this when they were barefoot, hungry and poor – they will not surrender. Libyans will not surrender.[70]

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[65] Hopgood, 'Last rites', p. 182.

[66] Morris, 'Libya and Syria'; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 'Power in practice'; Dunne and Gifkins, 'Libya and the state of intervention'.

[67] UN Security Council, '6490th meeting: Peace and security in Africa', 25 February 2011.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Edward Wyatt, 'Security Council calls for war crimes inquiry in Libya', *New York Times* (26 February 2011), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/world/africa/27nations.html}.

[70] UN Security Council, '6490th meeting: Peace and security in Africa', New York, 25 February 2011.

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Adding Al-Qadhafi into an infamous list of historical totalitarian dictators and portraying the Libyan protests as resistance to fascism raised the stakes and the potential costs of human lives when not intervening. It invoked the memory of the dangers that emanated from Pol Pot, Hitler, and Mussolini and thus sent a clear message for urgent international intervention on humanitarian grounds: the rights of the people must be ensured in the face of totalitarian governments. Mr Dabbashi, also representing the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, confirmed this logic in his expression of relief once the decision to intervene had been taken:

> This resolution will send a signal for a definitive end to the fascist regime that is still in place in Tripoli … I would like to thank the Council once again. I hope that my people will soon be able to realize their dream of liberty and an end to this dictatorial regime.[71]

Libya's representatives, therefore, referenced the memories of fascism and totalitarianism to mobilise for military intervention on humanitarian grounds. The lessons drawn from these pasts were to protect human rights against tyrannical dictators through a military intervention that removes the regime. Flowing from this interpretation is clear guidance for future action: human rights must take precedence over those of states and must be guarded and defended by the international community. The lessons learned from this interpretation of fascism and totalitarianism unambiguously spoke for a UN intervention on humanitarian grounds in Libya.

Making the case against intervention in Syria

While the Libyan representatives lobbied the Security Council for humanitarian intervention, the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar Ja'afari, spoke out against it. In his regular pleas to the international community between 2011 and 2016, he also repeatedly made recourse to memories, particularly by invoking the experience of colonialism:

> The unbridled tendency of certain Western States to interfere in our internal and external affairs by various means is neither sudden nor novel. It has frequently and systematically occurred since the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917, not to mention the limitless support provided to Israel's aggressive and hostile policies and its occupation of Arab lands.[72]

Through the reminders of external interferences in internal affairs, he characterised international intervention as Western, and therefore partial,[73] discrediting humanitarian motivations as a false pretense: 'certain officials have suddenly fallen in love with the Syrian people after centuries of emotional hibernation towards them. Such people foolishly dream of the return of colonialism and hegemony through these resolutions.'[74] In such an interpretation, Western countries mask their intentions as 'humanitarianism', while they target the 'sovereignty, national security, independence and stability'[75] of other countries. Furthermore, by referring to the crimes committed during the colonial era, the Syrian representative aimed to expose the current actions of the UN and Western countries as 'neocolonial':[76]

> Through such conduct, they undermine international legitimacy and seek to lead the entire world into a new colonial era and military adventures in various places that are bound and

[71] UN Security Council, '6491st meeting: Peace and security in Africa', New York, 26 February 2011.
[72] UN Security Council, '6710th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 31 January 2012.
[73] UN Security Council, '6524th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 27 April 2011.
[74] UN Security Council, '6710th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 31 January 2012.
[75] UN Security Council, '6627th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 4 October 2011.
[76] Ibid.

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> doomed to fail. Those very States led the whole world into two world wars that claimed millions of lives on our planet. With their colonial behaviour, their enslavement and their attitude, they caused the untold suffering of hundreds of millions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.[77]

Moreover, the legacy that the French and British mandates have left on Syria and the Middle East specifically served as the starkest reminder of their double standards:[78]

> Those colonial countries, particularly France and the United Kingdom, which spoke this morning before the Council and used indecent terms against my country, are wrong to think that human memory is too short to recall the crimes against humanity that they perpetrated during the eras of colonialism and slavery. Is apologizing for these crimes compatible with the concept of the protection of civilians? Or are there different categories and classes of civilians – some from the North, some from the South? Are they not equal as human beings?[79]

That the protection of civilians serves particular Western interests was furthermore underlined with regular hints of Israeli aggression against Palestinians and the inability of the Security Council to take concerted action because of the US veto.[80] Along similar lines, Arab countries that favoured intervention were reminded of the common Arab cause to liberate Palestine and stand united against Western interference.[81] Moreover, and in direct analogy to the catastrophic legacy left by colonial rule, past international interventions were cast as 'neocolonial' failures: 'can anyone assure us that what was done to Libya, Somalia, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo will not be repeated in the case of Syria?'[82]

The message from these historical references is clear: do not intervene, because – in the exact words of the Syrian representative – 'the age of colonialism has passed. All the peoples of the world are now aware of the new methods used by some States to interfere in the affairs of other States, be it in the framework of the so-called responsibility to protect or that of humanitarian intervention.'[83]

With the memories of colonialism and the frequent reminders of the devastating legacy colonial rule and previous interventions had left on the Global South, the Syrian representative mobilised against UN intervention on humanitarian grounds. The lessons drawn from these pasts were to guard the rights of states and their right to self-determination based on an equal right to sovereignty as protection from outside interference. Flowing from this interpretation is clear guidance for future action: do not interfere with the sovereignty and rights of each state. In this interpretation, the lessons learned from the colonial past unambiguously spoke against a UN intervention on humanitarian grounds in Syria.

Did international memories mobilise and persuade the P5?

The theories posited that memories are international and mobilise only where the interpretation of a historical event is shared among a group of states. This part of the paper thus explores whether the lessons drawn from the memories of totalitarianism/fascism and colonialism coalesce with those of the P5 and their selected courses of action in Libya and Syria. In the Libyan case, the memory of totalitarianism/fascism was supposed to guide them towards humanitarian intervention based on

[77] Ibid.

[78] UN Security Council, '6826th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 30 August 2012; UN Security Council, '6949th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 18 April 2013; UN Security Council, '6751st Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 14 April 2012.

[79] UN Security Council, '6650th Meeting: Protection of civilians in armed conflict', New York, 9 November 2011.

[80] UN Security Council, '6524th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 27 April 2011; UN Security Council, '6711th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 4 February 2012; UN Security Council, '6650th Meeting: Protection of civilians in armed conflict', New York, 9 November 2011.

[81] UN Security Council, '6710th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 31 January 2012.

[82] Ibid.

[83] UN Security Council, '6524th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 27 April 2011.

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the sanctity of human rights in the face of mass atrocities/crimes against humanity. In the Syrian case, the memory of colonialism was to guide them towards non-interference based on the sanctity of the rights of states.

A content analysis of the speeches made by the Russian, Chinese, American, British, and French representatives at Security Council meetings between 2011 and 2016 shows that 'fascism' and 'totalitarianism' were not explicitly referenced by the P5. When faced with the Libyan and Syrian situation in 2011, the P5 remembered 'out loud' neither past dangers emanating from fascist regimes nor the harms that came from a belated international reaction to fascism. The memory of 'colonialism', however, came up twice in the speeches of the Russian UN representatives. In the first instance, it echoed the Syrian interpretation in its aim to discredit the international community as driven by Western interests: 'How about putting an end to interfering in the affairs of other sovereign states? Just give up these colonial customs and leave the world in peace.'[84]

The second mention served to distinguish Russia from Western colonial and 'neocolonial' practices:

> Our country has never had any colonial interests in the Middle East or North Africa and has never unleashed wars for resources in those areas or imposed its configuration of the political map of the region. From the beginning our presence there has been aimed at promoting communication among nations and the coexistence of the various cultures and religions – what is commonly now called the dialogue of civilizations. Based on many years of friendship and partnership between Russia and countries of the Arab world, we are today promoting reasonable and mutually respectful dialogue on the whole range of regional issues and are negotiating new forms of interaction.[85]

The Russian interpretation of colonialism and its lessons for future actions thus coalesced precisely with that of the Syrian representative.

Furthermore, the Russian, US, UK, and French representatives (but not the Chinese) frequently referenced previous interventions of the international community – in particular, the Libyan experience during the debate about Syria, but tragic instances of non-intervention such as Srebrenica and Rwanda also came up throughout the UNSC debates (Morris came to similar conclusions).[86] Each memory was interpreted differently by them, with the same UN intervention being portrayed as either a success or a failure. As a result, the lessons drawn from previous UN interventions varied and sent a message either for or against international action.

Take, for instance, the Libyan memory in the debates around Syria. The Russian representative used it as a warning for Syria: 'The Libyan model should remain forever in the past … Responsibility for the inevitable humanitarian consequences of the excessive use of outside force in Libya will fall fair and square on the shoulders of those who might undertake such action.'[87] While in the Russian interpretation of the UN intervention in Libya, the lesson drawn for the international community was to stay out of Syria, the US representative employed the Libyan case to underline the urgency for international intervention:

> Consider what happened when the League of Arab States and the Security Council came together to protect civilians in Libya. That show of solidarity helped produce a strong Security Council resolution that saved Benghazi from destruction at the hands of a tyrant. Thanks to

[84] UN Security Council, '7785th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 8 October 2016.
[85] UN Security Council, '6841st Meeting: Situation in the Middle East – High level meeting of the Security Council on peace and security in the Middle East', New York, 26 September 2012.
[86] Morris, 'Libya and Syria'.
[87] UN Security Council, '6756th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 21 April 2012.

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> the support of that broad coalition, the people of Libya now have the chance to write their own future.[88]

Moreover, while the Russian representative insisted on viewing the Syrian case in the light of the failed Libyan intervention, the US representative saw this as a 'false analogy' because the Syrian situation was 'unique'.[89]

Furthermore, with regard to other memories of previous UN interventions, the interpretations of the Russian and US representatives were polar opposites. While the Russian UN representative regularly pointed to 'ambiguous experiences in protecting civilians during peacekeeping operations sanctioned by the Security Council',[90] the US representative, recalled instances where bloodshed happened because the international community failed to respond: 'More than a dozen parachute bombs fell on a school today. It is not history. It is not Srebrenica 20 years ago. It is not Rwanda 22 years ago. It is Grozny, but it is today and in eastern Aleppo.'[91] With these memories, the US representative, of course, reminded the international community of its accountability:

> When one day there is a full accounting of the horrors committed in this assault of Aleppo – and that day will come sooner or later – those countries will not be able to say that they did not know what was happening and were not involved. We will all know what was happening, and we will all know that they were involved. Aleppo will join the ranks of those events in world history that define modern evil and stain our conscious decades later: Halabja, Rwanda, Srebrenica and now Aleppo.[92]

With similar memories and their interpretation, the French representative issued their appeal for international intervention: 'How can we collectively tolerate this? The Secretary-General has spoken of war crimes. We all recall Guernica, Srebrenica and Grozny. What is happening before our eyes in Aleppo is the sinister repetition of those tragedies.'[93]

From the Russian, American, French, and British memories of past successes and failures of UN interventions, we find that the interpretations of the American, French, and British coalesced with one another, whereas the Russian interpretation of past events and their lessons overlapped precisely with those of the Syrian representative. The notion of a shared responsibility of the international community to protect civilians that the Libyan representative sought to mobilise thus was echoed only in the American, British, and, most strongly, in the French rhetoric:

> When a Government attacks civilian populations instead of protecting them; when the atrocities committed sear the human conscience; and when the stability of an entire region is affected, the international community has a responsibility to intervene and to protect civilians.[94]

The notion of giving precedence to the rights of states and their self-determination, which the Syrian representative sought to persuade others of, was echoed in the rhetoric of both the Russian and Chinese representatives. In one instance, the Chinese representative explained:

> Responsibility to protect civilians lies with the government and the parties to the conflict: The Syrian Government should bear the primary responsibility for protecting civilians. The Syrian

[88] UN Security Council, '6841st Meeting: The situation in the Middle East – High level meeting on peace and security in the Middle East', New York, 26 September 2012.

[89] UN Security Council, '6710th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 31 January 2012.

[90] UN Security Council, '6531st Meeting: Protection of civilians in armed conflict', New York, 10 May 2011.

[91] UN Security Council, '7795th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 26 October 2016.

[92] UN Security Council, '7834th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 13 December 2016.

[93] UN Security Council, '7785th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 8 October 2016.

[94] UN Security Council, '7394th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 26 February 2015.

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opposition should, alongside the Syrian Government, take measures to protect civilians and support efforts to deliver international humanitarian assistance.[95]

Interestingly, to underline the importance of leaving the responsibility with the state, and not with the international community, only Russia, but not China, resorted to invoking past interventions of the international community as failures.[96] In fact, the Chinese UN representatives did not reference memories at all, yet they still shared the Russian interpretation of their lessons for global politics.

While this warrants more research, two plausible explanations have been put forward by scholars. The first concerns China's relative power. Research has found that more powerful countries do not resort to the past as much, possibly because they have other tools to mobilise and persuade. While Bachleitner reached this conclusion for the post-war United States,[97] Gustafsson confirmed this notion for China: as China's material capabilities increased, her use of historical memories in diplomatic interactions decreased.[98] Yet because the US representatives resorted to memories in their UN rhetoric regarding Libya and Syria, an explanation that relies on political culture may be more convincing: China is 'forward-looking', whereas other countries are traditionally focused on the past. China's future orientation, for instance, is reflected in the Chinese Communist Party's chief foreign-policy goal of promoting a 'community of the common destiny for mankind'.[99] However, further research is warranted to explore in more detail the relationship between power, political culture, and memory in different global actors.

To sum up, in the P5's debates about Libya and Syria, the historical events directly referenced by the US, British, and French representatives deviated from that of the Libyan representative, but the lesson they derived from these happenings coalesced: the international community must ensure human rights and intervene when governments commit atrocities. In the case of Russia and China, the message from the Syrian representative coalesced precisely with that of the Russian interpretation of colonialism, but it also coincided with the Chinese understanding of international politics, namely, to put emphasis on sovereignty and guard states against outside interference. As such, each refence to the past gave meaning to selective courses of action yet mobilised a specific group of states rather than everyone in a uniform way. The interpretation and message derived from any of these memories was not shared uniformly across the P5 but rather split them along the lines of the United States, United Kingdom, and France on the one side, and Russia and China on the other. Each interpretation and lesson thus coalesced only with a selective group of states, or certain 'international communities' – 'the West' and 'the non-West' respectively. As such, international memories as interpretative devices help explain the Russian and Chinese abstention in the Libyan case in 2011, and then, to a large extent also because of the lessons learned from Libya, their veto in the Syrian case.

Conclusion

Drawing on the recent surge of studies related to the influence of memories in IR, this article developed a theoretical framework that highlights the existence of international memories and their function in mobilising for or against UNSC intervention. Memories were termed 'international' where the lessons learned from a historical event are shared across borders, thus providing normative guidance for a group of states in their international relations. Future research is advised to pick up on this and study memories in IR not merely as national memories that underwrite foreign-policy choices through their lessons, but also as international memories propelling concerted behaviour by the international community itself.

[95] UN Security Council, '7394th Meeting: The situation in the Middle East', New York, 26 February 2015.

[96] For similar conclusions, see Morris, 'Libya and Syria' and Dunne and Gifkins, 'Libya and the state of intervention'.

[97] Bachleitner, 'Diplomacy with memory'.

[98] Gustafsson, 'Is China's discursive power increasing?', p. 428.

[99] I thank Alexander Yen for this suggestion.

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To observe the posited link between international memories and international action, the UNSC meetings about Libya and Syria post-Arab Spring served as this paper's empirical laboratory. In mobilising for or against UN intervention, the UN representatives of Libya, Syria, and the deciding P5 (with the exception of China) referenced several past events such as the memories of totalitarianism/fascism, colonialism, and previous UN interventions. For the Libyan, French, British, and American representatives, the lessons drawn from these memories prioritised human rights and their need for protection by the international community. For the Syrian and Russian representatives, on the other hand, the lessons drawn emphasised the rights of states to sovereignty and the need for their protection through the international community. What this shows is that memories, through the lessons they offer for future action, provide normative guidance for countries regarding abstract notions contained in international norms, principles, and laws.

It follows that a focus on the existence and function of international memories in IR also has broader implications for the study of world politics. Detecting evidence of international memories and their shared lessons promises an alternative way for scholars to research international norm compliance and track global commonalities and divides when it comes to the interpretation of abstract principles. Furthermore, memories are not only interpretative devices in international fora but equally a form of social identity creation. As Jeffrey Olick stated, when we remember as groups, we also constitute those very groups and their members concurrently in the act.[100] The study of memories in international fora thus provides an additional means for IR scholars to explore the existence of a collective identity of the international community, or at least, of different international communities and their diverging normative horizons.

Furthermore, the normative guidance offered by memories and their lessons is never fixed but open to permanent reinterpretation. Future research could explore, for instance, whether the memories of totalitarianism/fascism or colonialism lead to diverse messages on the protection of human rights and sovereignty in different contexts. As present interpretations, the lessons derived from memories do not offer a permanent to-do list for the future. Invoking the memory of colonialism does not always have to speak out against humanitarian intervention but could also be reinterpreted as calling upon, for instance, humanitarian actions. Similarly, invoking the memory of fascism and totalitarianism does not necessarily require humanitarian intervention. Memories are interpretations and reinterpretations, and hence, in the light of new interpretations, they can generate different meanings, lessons, and, as such, diverse outcomes.

Moreover, beyond adding to IR scholarship on the role of memories in international politics, I am inclined to think that, with this, the paper also contributes a fresh perspective to the literature on humanitarian intervention.[101] After all, the topic of humanitarian intervention encapsulates the philosophical dilemma of a 'just war' on the one hand and a delicate trade-off between the rights of states and those of humans on the other. How international agreement can be reached in such tricky moral contexts where principles clash has long been debated within IR. As an ethical dilemma, humanitarian intervention is inexplicable through a realist, material cost–benefit lens and instead intrinsically linked with norms and principles grounded in ideas, ideologies, identities, and values. It is to this constructivist work that this paper speaks and adds an explicit focus on memories. Notably, its framework emphasises memories not as a mere addition to constructivists' concepts but as underwriting them. Memories create the ideational frame through which a purpose for action is socially constructed in the first place. They, by teaching lessons, constitute a normative guidance for countries and their decision-makers. Memories thus render abstract notions and shared ideas, such as human rights or sovereignty, practical and 'real' for actors to conduct their international relations.

[100] Olick, 'Collective memory'.

[101] See Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 'Power in practice'; Hopgood, 'Challenges'; and Weiss, 'Researching humanitarian intervention'.

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