‘You Still Live Far from the Motherland, but You Are Her Son, Her Daughter.’ War Memory and Soviet Mental Space (1945–2011)

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Before our eyes we have the image of an uncomplicated Soviet person neglected abroad, soaking up the idea of brotherhood and solidarity, a patriot, left behind, wherever he was, in the battle for truth, freedom or peace (…) You still live far from the Motherland, but you are her son, her daughter!

In its November 1958 issue, the bulletin Za Vozvrashchenie na Rodinu! (For the Return to the Motherland!) encouraged former Soviet inhabitants who had settled in the Atlantic World after the Second World War to move back or visit their birthplaces.¹ The bulletin belonged to The Committee for Return to the Motherland (Komitet za Vozvrashchenie na Rodinu – the KVR), an organization set up by Soviet authorities during the Thaw. Since Soviet people living abroad had been perceived as clear enemies of the state by the Stalin regime, official contacts had been broken off. The softening of the regime facilitated contact making and enhanced traveling. The KVR was designed to play a pivotal role in the Soviet attempt to influence the minds of Soviet people abroad, in this sense creating a transnational mental space _avant la lettre._

This chapter shows that immigrants from the Soviet Union who settled in Belgium after the Second World War were influenced by the way organizations such as the KVR represented what had happened during the war while constructing their narratives of war memory. Despite the Cold War context, that construction took place in a transnational way, that is, in constant negotiation with agencies of war memory articulation on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Traditional Cold War
historiography focuses on high politics being locked in conflict and confrontation, whereas newer research concentrates on practices of connection and interaction between members of societies in the East and West (Mitter and Major, 2004, p. 3; Autio-Sarasmo and Humphreys, 2010, p. 17). By applying this new perspective to research conducted on Soviet war memory, this chapter widens the frontiers of the geographical space scholars assume to have been affected by this war memory and by its reshuffling after the collapse of Communism.2

During the war, the Stalin doctrine had propagated a discourse of loyalty toward what it called the Motherland, and incited Soviet people to combat the real enemy of socialism: Fascism. Afterwards, the Soviets’ victory over Germany served as the ultimate legitimacy of the Russian Revolution and the installation of the Soviet system. However, the Second World War had also caused spontaneous destalinization, since the Communist Party had not been able to control social life and had been forced to offer people more freedom of initiative.

In the post-war period, both in Western and Eastern Europe, official narratives reinterpreted the events of the Second World War through the perspective of the ongoing geopolitical crisis. The Western world was eager to equate Communism with Nazism and set itself the duty to contend with this new but similar form of totalitarianism, whereas in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party was afraid that the remembrance of war freedom would destabilize political life. It therefore silenced the war experiences of many individuals, including those citizens who had experienced (part of) their war outside of the Soviet Union. It also changed the meaning of Soviet propaganda concepts, stressing that the Soviets’ continuous concern for peace in the world, brilliantly displayed through the Soviet Union’s participation in the defeat of the Fascist Nazi regime, had been forgotten by Great Britain and the USA. The homogenizing societies from the Cold War period froze the diversity of narratives on Second World War memory. Standardized, top-down articulations of what the war had been like prevailed in societies for almost half a century. The end of this societal model re-awakened diverse narratives on Second World War memory, unheard or interpreted differently during the Cold War (Judt, 2002; Diner, 2007).

Since the 1990s, in the countries formerly described as being ‘behind the Iron Curtain’, repressed memories of many survivors of the Second World War have come to the fore. Researchers have started to interview war survivors, now that they are willing to speak about their past. Due to the weakened or even absent civil society, recent studies on the memory of the Second World War have tended to focus on the individual