
Nationalizing Russian (War) Memory Since 2014

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 659

July 2020

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After two decades of (official) American neglect of Russian/Soviet sufferings during World War II, President John Kennedy, in his 1963 address at American University, [recollected](#) that “no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union in the Second World War.” Such a recognition was a vital step toward Soviet-American understanding and the start of détente. However, the memory theme shifted on May 8 this year when President Donald Trump overlooked the sacrifices made by the Red Army and the Soviet people on Victory in Europe Day. He [reveled](#), “America and Great Britain had victory over the Nazis!” This “nationalization of history,” a trending phenomenon over the last two decades, is a sign of a renewed split between Russia and the West. Loss of common ground increases the threat of (emotionally-driven) conflict in the bilateral relationship and everywhere. The mechanics of this separation process are visited here, with Russia serving as an example, with its alienation from the West and development of particular national views. A return of universal values could begin to bridge many splits.

Twisting History into Memory

Russia, Europe, and the United States have been implementing a “nationalization of their pasts” in different forms as a result and reinforcer of multiple domestic and international tensions. It is a commonsense idea that national history is a vital part of any nation-building. However, nations need more than merely a narrative of a common past, they also need heroes, villains, tragedies, and victories. In short, they demand emotions, typically expressed, for example, as pride or indignation. States (and politicians) need memory because they want to legitimate themselves through the emotions of the nation. To do so, they turn fact-based history into sensorial memory and sometimes even inflate forgotten pasts into emotionally explosive issues. Emotions, however, are hard to manage, as we can see with the case of Russia.

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In order to make sense of the political use of the past, we need to examine the many relations between the fields of “memory” and “history,” which range from antagonistic to inclusive. Both history and memory are modes of dealing with the past. While history requires the establishment of a distance between *us* and *them*, memory breaks time, makes distance impossible, and fills the past with emotions and contemporary judgments. Obstructing this today, for the first time in the modern era, is that we have no shared vision of social progress within an attractive future. The disappearance of a common “future” is central to the interplay between factual studies and personalized memories. Our common past was possible only from the perspective of a common future, in that all nations want the same “broad-spectrum” future, albeit by different paths. Our memories of the past become all the more different without any unifying future.

Past and present fuse memories into a knife edge that cuts time into a future. For a historian, this memory domination is a “presentism” because memory does not recognize the independence of the past. However, the advent of presentism is another side of the disappearance of the future. Indeed, our current societies seem stuck in the present with no positive idea of change, and both the future and the past, as two periods distinctly different from our current era, suffer simultaneously. Memory Studies is a new and quickly growing field dealing with traumas and emotions. History involves analytical differentiation and understanding; it claims to be universal while memory belongs to somebody, a person or a group.

Memory can chafe at traumas when it addresses some contemporary issues linked to the past. Sometimes, such a connection is created from scratch and the contemporary meanings are ascribed to historical symbols created in a different era. Recent examples can be seen in the current U.S. conflicts over Confederate monuments, or in using Stalin’s name and image in Russia (sometimes as an anti-corruption moniker). It does not matter whether a particular monument to a Confederate soldier was erected to commemorate Confederate casualties or acclaim the “Lost Cause,” all U.S. monuments became representations of racism. Some Stalinists may see Stalin’s era as having statehood successes and low corruption, while for most Russians, his name represents state cruelty and mass repression.

A Victory Day With and Without Allies

The “nationalization of war history” was first developed in the Cold War era when each side began to claim its own major role. The amount of recognition “the Allies” received appeared to signal the start of détente, reset, or another rapprochement.

Long-serving Russian President Vladimir Putin [used](#) these words to greet Soviet Allies in World War II during the Victory Day military parade on May 9, 2015:

We are grateful to the peoples of Great Britain, France and the United States of America for their contribution to the Victory. We are thankful to the anti-fascists of various countries who selflessly fought the enemy as guerrillas and members of the underground resistance, including in Germany itself.

Similar references to “the Allies” were a common feature of many previous Victory Day celebrations since the end of the Cold War. The idea of a common victory over Nazi evil was part of the hegemonic narrative of World War II developed in throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The notion was that the Soviet Union, while being a repressive state under Stalin, was on the *right side* of the greatest divide of the 20th century; Moscow was the most important ally of Western democracies in their fight against Nazism.

Such a narrative implied Russia’s “belonging to Europe” in its most noble appearance. The great sacrifices of 27 million Soviet people put the country on an elevated position in the community of nations—beyond just having a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Domestically, the USSR’s key role in the world war somehow justified, or rather reconciled people with, such a huge war toll. It was a very important message in the post-Soviet war narrative: Our grandfathers died for the *right cause*, not only for the USSR, but for *all* humankind.

Putin began to change the tone of his parade speeches in the years following the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s growing conflict with Western countries. In 2016, his reference to the West in his speech was rather different. All Putin [said](#) about the international dimension of World War II was that the Red Army smashed “an aggressor that harnessed the economic potential of almost all of Europe” and that it was “the Soviet people that brought freedom to other peoples.” In 2017, he claimed that the war’s “monstrous tragedy was made possible primarily... due to the lack of unity among the world’s leading nations.” And he [reminded](#) us that “it was our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers who won back Europe’s freedom and the long-awaited peace.”

Somehow a return of “the Allies” was demonstrated in 2018, when, standing next to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, Putin mentioned “the brave fighters of the Second Front... the contribution made by the anti-Hitler coalition countries... the brotherhood-in-arms of those who stood up against Nazism.” But he [underlined](#) that “countries, all people back then, understood that the outcome of World War II was determined by the Soviet Union, that this great sacrificial feat was achieved by our soldiers and our people.”

In 2019, Putin [repeated](#) the idea that the Soviets were the kind of “people who... became the hope and a tower of strength for humankind, the main liberator of European nations.” He also mentioned the Second Front, but it was not about “the Allies.” Instead, he addressed the hard work of the Russian people in the war-time economy, claiming that it

was “what marked the opening of our “second front” – the heroic labor front.” Putin still recalled foreign nations in his speech:

Today, we see how a number of countries are deliberately distorting war events, and how those who, forgetting honor and human dignity, served the Nazis, are now being glorified, and how shamelessly they lie to their children and betray their ancestors. Our sacred duty is to protect the real heroes.

Finally, during the jubilee parade in 2020 that was postponed from May 9 to June 24, Putin again [reminded](#) us that Red Army soldiers “paid an irreparable price for Europe’s freedom.” And he honored “the brave service members of the armed forces of all countries of the anti-Hitler coalition,” without naming any nation.

Such a rhetorical shift demonstrated an overall turn to the “nationalization of victory,” making it mostly or exclusively Soviet or even Russian. The shift happened in the context of Russia’s alienation from the international community over the Ukrainian conflict, its more aggressive foreign policy, and its hunt for “foreign agents” among Russian non-profits, and as important regime proxies turned increasingly nationalistic. The most dramatic transfiguration happened with the Russian Orthodox Church, which became more nationalistic, including over its conflict with other Orthodox churches about Ukrainian autocephaly early in 2019.

A Memory War With Poland

By nationalizing its war narrative in the context of growing international isolation, Russia was deprived of an important argument it had used to promote its position of being on the “right side” in that war. If Russia was fighting World War II without (democratic) allies, then the absolute evil of the Nazi regime is weighed not against liberal Anglo-Saxon democracies, but against Stalin’s Soviet Union. In such narratives, the war becomes a battle between two totalitarian regimes and the argument slides into puerile comparisons of Stalin and Hitler.

Not accidentally, that is exactly how the Polish official narrative is shaped. The country was divided in 1939 by Germany and the USSR. Nazi and Soviet rule appear as two simultaneous and also subsequent occupations; being occupied helps nationalists to export all responsibility for any ugly page of their national history and exploit national victimhood to get popular support. The Red Army in this narrative appears not as a force of liberation even in 1945 but as another occupation force.

One could imagine the two narratives co-existing Recognizing the Red Army’s role in the liberation of Europe from the Nazis in 1944-45, on the one hand, and acknowledgment of the 1939 division of Poland and imposition of a pro-Soviet regime in Warsaw after the war, on the other hand, are not mutually exclusive – for historians. However, for memory

activists, such an agreement looks impossible. Nationalist politicians on each side consider the other side's narrative as an insult to the sacred memory of the war's victims while portraying themselves as the defenders of the memory of the deceased.

Putin's Personal Immersion in History

At least, for Putin, he genuinely seems deeply immersed in historical research. Late in 2019, the Russian president promised to fully explain the causes of World War II. During his annual news conference on December 19, he [said](#), "I mean to write an article about this event. I will definitely have it published because I asked my colleagues to select archive materials for me." On the next day, he continued lecturing various CIS presidents about the Munich agreement and the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty and he made several additional anti-Polish remarks several days later.

Russian leaders do not frequently engage in writing on scholarly topics. Some may recall Stalin's editing of the 1930s textbook *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* or his essay on *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* that was published in 1950. However, today's case is rather different. Putin is definitely not Stalin, and the whole rationale behind writing on history themes could hardly be explained by purely domestic concerns.

In order to grasp Putin's indignation, we should investigate the evolution of his use of the "war past." His initial, universal, and well-grounded arguments evolved (thanks partly to his own propaganda) into a questionable and vulnerable position that became hard to defend. As for now, the COVID-19 pandemic not only postponed the Russian 75th Victory Day anniversary, but made untimely and obsolete Putin's article about how World War II began, which was recently [published](#) first in English in *The National Interest*.

Putin's article was less emotional toward Poland and repeated the official condemnation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty of August 1939. But it also reinforced the Soviet-era narrative about the Soviet foreign policies of the first months of World War II. This included reference to the Baltic states whose "accession to the USSR was implemented on a contractual basis, with the consent of the elected authorities," he wrote, and "was in line with international and state law of that time." The article was also a call for the recognition of every country's responsibility for World War II, which can be seen as another attempt to re-enter the historical community of European nations—now sharing not a victory but responsibility.

Nationalizing the Past, Losing the Present

Since his rise to power, Putin has used the Memory of World War II for the legitimation of his rule. He has managed to link his regime to the "Soviet Victory" and he continues to invoke that victory each time he needs a sacred blessing before running for office or before

announcing an important decision. Russia's contemporary propagandists took into consideration the Soviet Union's victorious role and have used it as an asset in international disputes. Yet, they have been poorly prepared for when historical politics turns against itself.

The fact is that the annexation of Crimea, intervention in eastern Ukraine, and accusations of interference in the 2016 U.S. elections and in some European countries put Russia into a clear defensive position internationally. This helped Poland and other Eastern European states promote their World War II narratives, including at large European conferences and forums and before the European Parliament. Poland did not invite Putin to the commemorative events marking the commencement of World War II in September 2019, nor to the celebration marking the liberation of Auschwitz in January 2020. Moreover, the Red Army was hardly mentioned at the liberation ceremony while some European politicians said that Auschwitz was liberated by the Allies (which isn't wrong, technically). History and Memory in Russia went the full gamut from being an inclusive attempt to share both tragedy and victory to a stark "nationalization of its past" that became overly political, leading to backfire.

Domestically, there are more dimensions of the History and Memory divide. All the alternative variants of Russian domestic memories have also been alienated. For example, the NGO Memorial was labeled a "foreign agent" after decades of inattention to it by the authorities because the Kremlin came to need "unified emotions" behind the memory frontline. One brief example as an important alternative to the state's memory are the versions streaming from the [Immortal Regiment movement](#), which was partially hijacked by the Kremlin.

Conclusion

Attempts at nationalizing war memory can be described as a replacement of history with memory driven not only by domestic political needs but also by the universal loss of a future. However, that loss was in no way inevitable (think climate change rather than natural disaster). Some political forces worked toward such a goal with high energy and devotion while not quite foreseeing how it could backfire. Manipulated emotions can lead to international conflict, or at least aggravate those already existing. Alas, it seems hardly feasible to get politicians to refrain from inflating "memory" over "history," or from elevating career historians to positions as experts when national "memory issues" are inflamed.

A more attainable hope is the turn of humankind toward the discussion of a better, broad, universal future. Within the Trump and Putin times, there is demand for such a discourse. People in United States and in other countries are out on the streets right now, calling for renewed dialogue about painful themes founded in history and grounded in memory.

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