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Russia's Use of History as a Political Weapon

Justyna Prus

Russia's use of history as a political weapon may have long term negative consequences. The manipulated narrative will be difficult to reverse and, could lead to an even more confrontational attitude towards immediate neighbours and the West. Western countries cannot remain passive. To counter Russian historical propaganda, they will have to adopt and effectively use the narrative based on truth and common values.

The Soviet victory over Germany in 1945 takes central place in Russians' historical memory, and thus it has been a tempting object for mythologisation both in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. It serves as a useful and efficient tool to reach specific political goals far beyond commemorating the victims of the war and praising the efforts of the Soviet soldiers. Domestically, it is used as a means of self-assertion, consolidating society, as well as preserving the current political system and legitimising its actions. In foreign policy, Russia uses the myth of the "exclusively defensive" war to legitimise aggressive and confrontational policy. It is particularly useful in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, presented by Russian propaganda as a struggle against the "revival of Nazism."

Such manipulation of history is becoming a growing challenge for the West, since it helps to sustain Moscow's confrontational course in foreign policy, and to fuel anti-Western attitudes within Russian society. The West faces a difficult task of counteracting it in such a way that would not further alienate Russians. This demands a deep understanding of how Moscow's historical policy is used today to capitalise on the Great Patriotic War.

History as Part of Self-assertion Strategy

The second half of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s saw an outburst of interest in Soviet history, and especially in disclosure of the crimes of the Stalinist and communist regime. Many archive material became accessible, and there was active historical research and public discussion concerning the whole range of historical subjects connected with the USSR. Russian leaders have, however, never decided to face up to the Soviet past. The wave of broad social interest in history faded in the second half of the 1990s, as the economic crisis and disappointment with the reforms intensified.

The tendency to take history into the realm of state policy became visible in the 2000s. There were many factors influencing this process, among them the search for a new identity and self-assertion, divisions in a society that was not willing to reach a unanimous verdict on the Soviet regime, and idealisation of the Soviet times fuelled by disappointment with the reality of post-Soviet Russia. History gradually became part of Putin's policy of "bringing Russia up from its knees" and presenting the turbulent 1990s as a consequence of geopolitical weakness, caused to a great degree by the West. In 2005 Putin called the fall of the Soviet Union the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." This year also marked a comeback

of a Victory Day Soviet-style triumphant commemoration of the end of the Second World War. In the second half of the 2000s the attempts to institutionalise the historical policy became more direct, and at the same time the mythologisation of the victory as a means of national self-assertion intensified.

Instruments of Historical Policy

In 2006 the Kremlin inspired and supervised the initiative of providing textbooks for students and teachers that were introduced a few years later. In general they were to exclude discourse on totalitarianism and concentrate more on modernisation as the main goal of Stalin's policy, which was an obvious allusion to Putin's modernisation. Work on the "unified" textbook, proposed by Putin in 2013, is now underway. It is supposed to present a "unified conception and official evaluation of events."

On 15 May 2009 the special Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests was created by decree of then president Dmitry Medvedev. Among its goals were analysis of information concerning facts and events aimed at diminishing the international prestige of the Russian Federation, and preparation of a counterstrategy. The commission did not however undertake any significant actions and ceased to exist in 2012. But clearly it indicated the direction of state historical policy as a means of institutional counteraction of "improper" interpretations, and a method of anchoring in society and among historians the idea of a need to fight "falsification to the detriment" of the state.

In 2009, Sergei Shoigu, then minister of emergency situations (at the time of writing, minister of defence), proposed penalising negation of the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War (the Russian name for the Second World War) and the "rehabilitation of Nazism." The proposal was approved by the Duma in April 2014 and signed by Putin on 5 May of the same year. Its stated aim is to "counteract attempts to encroach historical memory concerning the events taking place in the period of the Second World War." A new article (354.1) was introduced to Criminal Code, relating to the rehabilitation of Nazism. Under this article, "Negation of facts and justifying crimes established by Nuremberg Tribunal" can result in a fine of up to 500,000 ruble (around €8,600, or PLN 34,400) or five years imprisonment (if the offence is committed in the media). Another part of the article relates to giving false information concerning the activities of the USSR during Second World War. The ambiguity of this law means there is a risk that it could be used selectively, or abused, in order to limit activities that are not perceived as "patriotic" enough.

Also in 2009 Medvedev approved a decree called Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020. One of the points of this decree indicates that history is also perceived as a sphere of national security, saying that "Negative influences on the state of national security in the cultural sphere are intensified by attempts to revise perspectives on Russia's history, its role and place in world history."

Regulating access to archives is another instrument of historical policy. "The Russian law on declassification of documents upon the expiry of the 30-year period does not work. The law stipulates that researchers are granted access to these documents after this period, and that only individual documents can remain classified upon special decisions. Instead, it is common practice in Russia to declassify each document individually, a process carried out by a specific departmental commission. This practice will definitely persist, and access to documents will only be granted to 'selected' researchers working 'on order'." This is a convenient tool of informal regulation by promoting the research and historians that are perceived by the state as useful, and limiting access for others.

Interpretation of History

Vladimir Medinskiy, minister of culture and author of the "myth busting" book *War: Myths of the USSR* wrote: "The facts themselves don't mean too much. I will be more brutal: in the historical mythology they do not mean anything. Facts only exist in the context of a concept. Everything begins not with facts but with interpretations. If you like your motherland, your people, history, what you will be writing will always

be positive.”¹ This is a good indicator of how history’s role is perceived in Russian ruling circles. It is in contradiction to the very idea of historical research.

According to historian Alexei Miller, instead of creating institutes of national memory (similar to those in Poland or Ukraine) or establishing other institutional instruments, Russia chose a different tool. He wrote: “Russia opted for a solution that was more technologically successful. It used the efforts of formally independent public organisations that could be assigned relevant tasks and given archival materials lucrative for the customer. In essence, this was a modification of the familiar technology for media leaks, in which case leaked information is not necessarily false, but can be manipulated. Historical research loses its scholarly nature and turns into a political-technological contract; decisions on financing and assessing works are made by the political authorities, not by the professional community.”² Examples of organisations following this path are Alexander Dyukov’s Historical Memory Foundation (Fond Istoricheskaya Pamyat’) and the Historical Perspective Foundation of Natalya Narotchnitskaya, historian and former MP, who later became head of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, an NGO that got state financing and dealt with monitoring human rights violations in the West. This is not to say that there is no debate among professional historians in Russia. It takes place but is being limited, and more importantly it does not reach the broader masses of society.

The year 2009 was an interesting example how some of the mechanisms work. Although president Medvedev’s “destalinisation” policy was officially in force, a big public historical campaign was conducted, totally contradicting his notions of an honest evaluation of Soviet politics. This was the year of the 70th anniversary of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact, and preceding it was a fiery public discussion, on many platforms, justifying the pact. It included discussions between historians, intelligence document leaks, media coverage and documentaries. It was notable that those historians and experts who represented the “official” interpretation prevailed among those, who were invited to voice their opinions in the mass media.

State media control is yet another instrument of historical and memory policy as it helps to promote the “right” opinions and exclude the so called “revisionists” working to “detriment of Russia.”

Monopolisation and Mythologisation of the Victory

The Great Patriotic War, perceived mostly in the context of the victory, is at the centre of Russian historical memory. It is perceived by most Russians (86% according to the Dec 2014 survey by the Obshchestvennoye Mneniye Foundation) as the most important date not only of the 20th century, but of the whole history of their country. After the fall of the Soviet Union it became a common denominator, the only thing that an otherwise divided society accepted as a common value. Thus it was perceived also by the state as the foundation of a new Russian identity, and the development of the glorified version of the war became more institutional.

The glorified version of history also became a means of self-assertion. As sociologist Lev Gudkov puts it, “this was the victory over Germany but also over the West” in this sense that the Soviet Union did what others were not able to do. According to Gudkov, the transformation of the meaning of the victory in social memory also became a demonstration of power and a source of Russia’s moral right to dictate its will to others.³

In the last 70 years, memory of the Great Patriotic War was transformed significantly. It shifted from being “trench truth” to a glorified version of the events, from memory of sufferings to pride and triumph, from “no more war” to “we can defeat anybody.” Victory also became increasingly an achievement of the state, not of the people. This grants the state the right to present the “official,” obligatory, interpretation of history.

¹ W. Medinskiy, *Voyna. Mify SSSR. 1939-1945*, Moscow, 2013, p. 658.

² A. Miller, “The Labyrinths of Historical Policy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2, 2011, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Labyrinths-of-Historical-Policy-15240>.

³ R. Ukolov, “Sdvig v storonu gordosti i paradnosti”. Kak propaganda izmenila pervonachal’nyy smysl Pobedy,” *Lenta.ru*, 20 April 2015, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2015/04/20/denpobedy>.

There is also a tendency to underline the great number of Soviet (or Russian) victims, both soldiers and civilians, and compare them with significantly smaller numbers among the Western allies. These numbers often repeated by Russian officials are to show that the Soviet Union's role was decisive in defeating Germany. The often used phrase "This is our victory" hints that in fact the role of the allies was marginal (they sustained fewer losses). The Lend-Lease contributions to the USSR during the Second World War are practically absent from Russian public debate.

In 2010, Putin said that Russians would have won the war even if the Ukrainians had not fought alongside them, pointing out that the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic bore as many as 70% of the victims and costs of fighting the war. Among the nations that were part of the USSR, Russia positions itself as the main heir of the victory and, though it officially admits others' right to the legacy, it claims the arbitrary right on how the war should be interpreted and even commemorated by others. Presenting victory increasingly as a Russian, not a Soviet or allied achievement, is used to monopolise and shape memory, as well as to attempt to impose Russia's vision on other countries.

The main myth about the Great Patriotic War is that it was exclusively defensive. Russians continue the Soviet tradition of using the name Great Patriotic War, to underline that it was started by German aggression on 22 June 1941. Although the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact was condemned officially in 1989, the public and historical debate in last decade aimed to conceal Soviet responsibility for the division of neighbouring countries (by omitting the existence of secret protocols) and Stalin's alliance with Hitler. In 2009, in an article in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Putin called the pact "amoral" and said it deserved condemnation. But at the same time he said France and England signed the "well known" treaty with Hitler in Munich, which "broke all hopes for creating a common front to fight against fascism."

In 2014, during a meeting with young historians, Putin said that Poland, in the wake of the Second World War, "did the same" as the Soviet Union had done, by taking part of Czechoslovakia. Putin said that "serious research should show that this was the way foreign policy was done in that time." He said that there was nothing to criticise about the pact. "What is bad about Soviet Union not wanting to fight?," he asked. He did not however mention the secret protocols. Another argument he used was that the non-aggression pact was a means of gaining time before the inevitable start of the war with Germany. This argument is also broadly repeated in Russian debate. Putin insisted that those are the interesting directions for historical research.

The participation of the Soviet Union in the division of neighbouring states (on the basis of secret protocols to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) is presented as "Liberation of brotherly people of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus" or more pragmatically as gaining time and territories before the inevitable German aggression. The defensive character of Russian participation in the war is also connected to the policy of concealing the facts about Soviet–German alliance, and the material help that the Soviet Union gave Hitler before 1941.

Presenting the war as exclusively defensive is aimed at limiting or marginalising the debate about Soviet crimes and wrongful decisions. Stalin's alliance with Hitler in 1939–1941, and the oppressive policy of the USSR, is inconsistent with the image of the USSR as the strongest opponent of fascism and greatest victor of the Second World War.

The so-called "price of victory" is also a taboo subject in Russia. There is a tendency to constraint, also institutional, in debate on subjects concerning for example the mistakes of the Soviet government and commanders during the war (resulting in causing or increasing losses) and wartime repressions. Other subjects that do not fit with the idealised image of the Great Patriotic War and are thus omitted or relativised are the pre-war repressions in the army, crimes committed by Soviet soldiers during liberation, especially in Germany, Soviet commanders' (including Stalin, as head commander) mistakes that resulted in increased casualties, Russians fighting on the side of Nazi Germany, repressions of the former Soviet POWs coming back from the war, and the Sovietisation of Central and Eastern Europe (increasingly presented exclusively as liberation, and therefore justified).

One of examples of this attitude was the political and societal reaction to a survey conducted by the Dozhd TV channel in January 2014. The question asked during the discussion aired on the eve of the 70th

anniversary of the lifting of the 872-day Siege of Leningrad was: Should the Soviet Union have surrendered Leningrad in order to save some of the hundreds of thousands of people who died during the blockade?

The fiery discussion that started afterwards, with the participation of Russian officials, was used as a pretext to exclude the independent TV channel from cable TV packages in Russia. But it was also another example of a new trend, that of presenting a historical question in exclusively “moral” terms, and resulting in consequence in moral condemnation. The Duma called it “an insult to the sacred memory of the war and all who died during the siege.”

The case was also declared⁴ by Russian MPs to be “rehabilitation of Nazism” and used as pretext to resurrect the project of penalising such an offence. A bill to this effect was adopted by the Duma, and signed by the president in May 2014.

Redirecting the historical debate and interpretations into the moral context is part of the sacralisation of the war. The war, the memory of victims, the veterans, are “sacred.” The language that is used in official debate, also in the media, is redolent of religion. The newspaper *Izvestiya*, for example, writes about “reliquiae of the war.” Sacralisation, as well as the accusation of “rehabilitation of Nazism” has the goal of limiting the debate or even totally closing it down.

Stalin as an “Effective Manager”

According to the April survey of the Levada Center, as many as 45% of respondents say that the repressions were justified by the modernisation of the country. In 2012 this was 25%. Since 2012 the number of Russians saying that there can be no justification for the repressions has fallen from 60% to 41%. As many as 37% support the idea of a Stalin monument (24% in 2010).

In January 2015, the Levada Centre revealed that 52% of respondents answered that “Stalin played a positive role in the history of the country” (10% more than in 2006). Thirty per cent claimed the opposite. This means that the strategy of relativisation of Stalin era crimes has been effective. Apparently, more and more Russians tend to think that modernisation or important state interests can be a decent justification for crimes or limiting the rights of citizens. This notion has an obvious reference to modern Russia, where the current regime attempts to explain limiting democratic institutions and citizens’ rights as necessary steps towards the development of a strong and respected state.

In 2009, when asked about Stalin during a national teleconference, then prime minister Putin said Stalin could not be “assessed as a whole.” Between 1924 and 1953 the country ruled by Stalin turned from an agricultural to an industrial one, although the peasantry was destroyed. The USSR won the Great Patriotic War and “nobody can now throw stones at those who planned and led this victory.” However, he admitted that there was repression that killed millions of citizens, and not only was Stalin the object of a cult of personality, but committed massive crimes against own people. Putin said such a way of running a state is unacceptable.⁵

The attitude to Stalin in Russia is ambivalent. This is one of the factors influencing the Russian state historical policy and the fact that the criminal character of the Stalinist or communist regime was never legally fixed (apart from the “trial” of the Communist Party in 1992). Univocal condemnation of Stalin’s rule (or comparing Stalinism to Nazism, which is strongly opposed by Russia on the official level) is incompatible with the mythologisation of the victory. Thus, as there is no direct praise of Stalin from Russian officials, and on the contrary there were very critical statements (for example, Putin’s latest statement about the forceful Sovietisation of Eastern Europe), the question of assessing Stalin’s rule is intensively relativised on many levels, in the officially promoted school and university textbooks, in which he is presented as an “effective manager,” and increasingly in public debate, in which “independent” experts promote similar views.

⁴ “Yarovaya: zakon o zaprete reabilitatsii natsizma nuzhno prinyat kak možhno skoreye,” *Tass.ru*, 31 January 2014, <http://tass.ru/politika/928250>.

⁵ „Putin o Staline,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5W3TYEx-og>.

There have been multiple appeals from the Communist Party and social activists to bring back Stalin's monuments, and there are a couple of dozen Stalin statues in different regions of Russia. In 2005 there were plans to place such a monument (of three participants of the Yalta conference, Stalin among them) in the Great Patriotic War Victory Park memorial in Moscow⁶ and on the Kurskaya metro station in the Russian capital (2009). The Kremlin would not take any direct action to stop this kind of initiative, but usually distances itself from such ideas by saying that the decision is within the competence of local authorities. However, in February 2015, on the premises of Livadya sanatory in Yalta, a new monument to Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill was erected, to commemorate the Yalta Conference. Duma speaker Sergey Naryshkin was present at the unveiling ceremony, which is a clear indication that it was part of state policy on the federal level. Russian authorities avoid direct praise of Stalin but do not hesitate to use his "legacy" instrumentally.

Forgetting the Victims of the System

Modern Russia has never made the commemoration of repression a central part of its official historical memory policy. In 1991, 30 October was officially named a Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions. Since then many local memorials were created and special publications have listed the names of victims. There, however, is no state policy concerning this subject. Many places of repressions, as well as mass graves of victims are still not known or have been destroyed.

Putin attended the Butovo Memorial on 30 October 2007, and former president Medvedev published a video-blog in 2009 saying that the falsification of history also refers to the repressions. He explained that fighting falsifications of history is also about defending the victims, and that justification of those who annihilated their people under the pretence of reinstating of historical justice cannot be accepted. Medvedev also said that memorial centres need to be built in Russia, searches for mass graves should be conducted, the names of victims published and, when necessary, they should be rehabilitated.⁷

None of the presidents have, however, visited the Solovetsky Kamen' in Moscow's Lubyanka Square, which is the place of commemoration of the victims. Commemorative actions are organised annually by NGOs such as the Memorial Society, and some local or low profile officials attend, but not the president or prime minister.

During Medvedev's presidency, the Presidential Council for Human Rights and the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy started work on a common project to commemorate victims of repressions. At the end of last year Putin announced that new laws should be introduced concerning the commemoration of victims, and an official memorial monument would be built by 30 October 2015.

On the other hand there is increasing opposition to state commemoration of victims of repressions. In June 2014, the Ministry of Culture said that the programme of victim commemorations was "inexpedient."⁸ The Communist Party and its supporters also perceive such actions as insulting. One of the subjects of this social protest against commemorating victims was the Perm-36 political repressions museum. It was created on the premises of the former Soviet prison camp for political prisoners, who worked there as late as the last part of the 1980s. It was an important centre of commemorative activities. Every summer, the Pilorama festival was organised there, attracting thousands of people, dissidents and human rights activists among them. After a wave of protests from "patriotic" organisations such as Sutvremeni, set up by pro-

⁶ "Na Poklonnoy gore ustanovyvat pamyatnik Iosifu Stalinu," *Lenta.ru*, 19 January 2005, <http://lenta.ru/russia/2005/01/19/stalin>.

⁷ D. Medvedev: "Nelzya opravdyvat tekh, kto unichtozhal svoy narod," *RBK*, 30 October 2009, <http://top.rbc.ru/society/30/10/2009/341699.shtml>.

⁸ "O pozitsiyi ministerstva kultury Rossii v otnoshenii FTsP 'Ob uvekovechivanii pamyati zhertv politicheskikh repressiy,'" 26 June 2014, <http://president-sovet.ru/presscenter/news/read/1756>.

Kremlin scientist and politician Sergey Kurginyan, who presented the museum as a fifth column and communists who said its activities insulted veterans, it was closed down in March 2015.

It remains to be seen whether state policy of commemorating victims will take place, and how it will be shaped. The tendency to praise Stalin's achievements indirectly may be a serious obstacle to conducting an honest reckoning with the past.

Risks for the West

The policy of "forgetting" about the dark sides of history leads to justifying violations of the law by using the nebulous concept of "state interest." A lack of functioning democratic institutions, no media freedom, and limiting the freedom to conduct historical research can lead to abusive uses of history. In Russia, the mythologised version of the "defensive" war in the past is used as justification for aggressive policy today, and this tendency will probably deepen in foreseeable future.

For quite a few years now Russia has been fighting alleged "rehabilitation of Nazism" abroad. Conflicts over the allegedly blasphemous treatment of monuments commemorating the Soviet liberation of Europe was a subject of the foreign policy agenda. In Estonia, the removal of the Bronze Soldier monument was accompanied by riots sparked by Russian citizens, in which one person died. This was followed by a Russian propaganda campaign (falsely accusing Estonian police of killing and torturing prisoners, as well as force feeding them psychotropic substances) and a cyberattack on Estonian government networks, which totally paralysed them (a Russian link, however, was never proved). Russia says that countries such as Estonia or Latvia, accusing the Soviet Union of "occupation," are the arenas of reviving Nazism, encouraged and patronised by the state. Surprisingly enough there is no similar reaction when the monuments are moved or destroyed in countries that are not in political or ideological conflict with Russia, such as, for example, Uzbekistan. This is yet another confirmation that history is used instrumentally.

The cult of the Great Patriotic War became a means of justification and legitimisation of Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine. As events in Ukraine unfolded, Russia had increasingly used the rhetoric of "fascist, neo-Nazi forces taking over Kyiv and Ukraine." Such declarations were made, among others, by Putin and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. The Ukrainian conflict is presented as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War. This notion is being exploited in Russian media coverage and TV shows.

While fighting "fascism" in Ukraine, Russia is openly collaborating with extreme right and neo-Nazi parties and organisations in Europe, using them as Trojan horses in EU countries and trying to influence the EU decision making process with their help. This shows that the "anti fascist" rhetoric is used selectively and instrumentally.

The Great Patriotic War was also used as part of the justification for the annexation of Crimea, with Sevastopol and Crimea presented as the places of Soviet military glory and victories during the war, as well as the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kyivan Rus', in proving Russian rights to the territory. Russia claims that its actions restored historical justice, because in 1954 Crimea was transferred to Ukraine illegally. The transfer was however conducted in accordance with USSR law. More importantly, the argument of "historical justice" is used to justify the unlawful annexation and other illegal actions in the light of international law.

Moscow uses the accusation of "supporting fascism" against those parties abroad that refuse to accept Russian policy in Ukraine. The West has, therefore, according to Moscow, become an ally of Ukrainian "fascism," allegedly threatening Russia. The refusal of Western leaders to attend the parade commemorating the victory, on 9 May, as a means of protesting against Russian aggression in Ukraine, is presented as an attempt to "rewrite history" and belittle Russia's role in the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. It is also suggested that, behind these decisions, stands an unwillingness to commemorate the victims.

Historical interpretations became part of Russian propaganda, which serves as an instrument of building confrontational attitudes to Russia's neighbours, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and the West in general.

Using history in domestic and foreign policy already has a negative impact and poses serious risks for future relations with Russia's immediate neighbours and the West. The historical component in international

relations should not be neglected any more in the Western debate. On the contrary, as Russia is increasingly using history in its foreign policy, it should be addressed with special attention. There should be no approval for using the memory of those killed during the war as affirmation of imperial policy. The victory in the Second World War cannot be perceived as bestowing the right to zones of influence or to dominate other countries. In Russian expert debate, it is often said that the world needs a “new Yalta” agreement, as the world order constituted after the end of the Cold War is dysfunctional. The problem is that this “New Yalta” envisages creating new spheres of influence. No such proposal should be met with understanding in the free world.

Russia uses the victory to divide, thus the answering strategy should be to use it to unite. It is important to make a clear division between recognising and appreciating the Soviet Union’s role in defeating fascism on the one hand, and, on the other, condemning and rejecting anti-historical practices (manipulation, selective use, and instrumentalisation) of Russian policy. There should be no acceptance of Russian “monopolisation” of the victory, which deprives other nations that used to be part of USSR of this legacy. The same refers to Western allies, whose role is persistently marginalised in the Russian narrative. It seems expedient to promote more actively the idea of common international commemoration of the end of the Second World War, which would concentrate on preventing war and Europe’s integration experience as a means of maintaining peace. This should not be perceived as being in competition with Russia’s celebrations; on the contrary, the invitation should be open to everybody. Berlin, as the place where the war in Europe ended, but also where the reflection on a new united Europe began, could host of such commemorations.

The West should support research in Soviet archives. Much Soviet archive material in Russia is not accessible to foreign researchers, but some is accessible in former Soviet republics (for example, Ukraine has recently decided to make open all Soviet archives). Although such material can only give a partial image of the era, it should be studied thoroughly in order to increase knowledge of the Soviet period. The EU could finance digitisation of those archives that could then be used by historians. New projects engaging both historians from the EU and the Eastern Partnership should be launched in order to promote research and popularise knowledge.

The debate on history should not be conducted without Russian historians, but they need to observe the rules of an intellectually honest historical discussion. Russian historians should be invited to international debates on history as often as possible. Confrontation of the West’s vision of the Second World War with arguments presented by Russian historians is a precondition for overcoming Soviet myths about the war.

Victims of both totalitarianisms should be commemorated equally. Russian protests against equating Nazism and Stalinism, referring to their different specifics (Nazism aiming to destroy specific nationalities and Stalinism declaring no such goals) should not be accepted. Both should be consistently treated as two totalitarian regimes. Thus 23 August, the day of remembrance for victims of Stalinism and Nazism, should gain more meaning in the whole of Europe. This day was designated by the European Parliament and is observed by EU bodies and some Member States, mainly those that were in the Soviet zone of influence. It has not, however, been implemented in all of Europe, which is indicative of a deeper problem.

Until 1989, two visions of the Second World War dominated, one from the West and the other from the Soviet world. After the fall of the communist regime a new experience started to be expressed, that of Central and Eastern Europe, which had until then been suppressed. Common European values should be based on the sum of European historical experiences, thus it is important to promote knowledge of both Nazism and Stalinism equally. The European Commission should undertake such a task. To begin with, it could engage in promoting the implementation of 23 August as a day of commemorating all victims of totalitarian ideologies, but clearly there is more to be done in order to make the knowledge of this experience truly common.