

“I HAVE SLIGHTLY
PESSIMISTIC
PICTURE OF THINGS...”

INTERVIEW

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Anna Karolina Piekarska [AKP]:

Today—while preparing the next issue of the *Institute of National Remembrance Review*, devoted to the issue of the Great Patriotic War—we are talking about the propaganda myth, which is constantly being developed and updated, around the USSR’s military victory in World War II; this myth has been created as being a victory over fascism, including in the ideological sphere. What shaped the image of the Great Patriotic War in the USSR and Russia? What was it used for, and how is it still being used today?

Jan Szumski [JS]: In addition to the systematic academic research that I have been conducting for years on the politics of remembrance or the politics of history, as shaped by the head cells of central and party-state power in Moscow and the local “Western” Belarusian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian republics—that is, mostly the territories which were an integral part of the Second Polish Republic or were independent states before September 17, 1939—I also think I have considerable practical experience. I’m a Pole born in the late 1970s in the Soviet Union, so I can say that the entire process of my school education was inextricably linked with its indoctrination system, which started earlier than at the level of education in early childhood. The ideological indoctrination system assumed that the child adopts certain basic values along with his mother’s milk, values which would be developed later.

Brest Fortress Memorial –
the ‘Courage’ Monument
for the Fortress’ 1941
Defenders (1971).
Brest, Belarus, 2016.
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Among these values, I would undoubtedly mention the cult of remembrance of the Great Patriotic War.

The myth of the Great War didn't suddenly emerge during Vladimir Putin's reign; of course, it had its roots in the Soviet period, and the commemoration of the war had a slightly different representation at different historical periods in the USSR: Stalinist, Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's and the period of decline. There were dynamic changes in the short reigns of Andropov and Chernenko, and finally Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

Although the cult of memory of the Great Patriotic War obviously stemmed from Stalinist propaganda, it was largely shaped in the Brezhnev era, and what we are now seeing in Russia is in fact an adaptation (albeit with some obvious modifications) of the cult and rituals as established then. By this I mean, first of all, the recognition of the Great Patriotic War as an event that determined the course of history and one of the pillars of the ideology of the Soviet state, which proclaimed that the USSR was a peace-loving state that brought salvation and freedom to the enslaved peoples of Europe and the whole world.

Nevertheless, this message has undergone historical changes that are worth taking a closer look at. During the Stalinist period, until 1948, National Victory Day was a public holiday and a day off, and was celebrated as a state holiday in 1946 and 1947. But in 1948, pursuant to the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of December 23, 1947, the decision of May 8, 1945 was amended, making January 1 a day off, and May 9 a working day. The day off for the anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War was only restored during the reign of Brezhnev (I use the word "reign" on purpose), by the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of April 26, 1965. This does not mean, of course, that after 1948, during the epochs of Stalin or Khrushchev, this myth was not nurtured or built; rather, it is an observation that—during Brezhnev's reign—very significant changes were introduced that paid special attention to the events of the Great Patriotic War. It was then that Victory Day was reintroduced as a non-working day, the Victory parades were also reintroduced (the first one had taken place in the summer of 1945), and from 1965 until the collapse of the USSR, these parades were solemnly held in Moscow.



Front page of the *Pravda* issue of May 9, 1948, with the Soviet minister of armed forces Marshal Nikolay Bulganin's order to mark the third anniversary of the Victory Day with a gun salute in Moscow, other major Soviet cities and the "Hero Cities" Leningrad, Stalingrad, Sevastopol and Odessa.
Source: N.A. Nekrasov Library website

It can be considered that two events were being commemorated in such ceremonies: the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution and the anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War (holidays which were in some sense almost competing with one another). The second half of the 1960s was also a time of concrete, tangible commemoration, consisting of building large memorial complexes, one of the best examples of which is the Brest Fortress. Although the Museum of Defence at the Brest Fortress was established in 1956, it was only in the second half of the 1960s that work on the monumental building was started, covering an area of over 70 hectares, which was aimed at immortalising and commemorating the heroic effort of the Soviet defenders of the fortress in 1941. This effort was aimed not just at displaying the heroic deed of the Soviet soldiers, but also in a sense at obliterating the disgrace and catastrophe of the first days of the war. I don't think I need to add that in less than a week, the Wehrmacht traversed a distance of over 300 km, that is the distance from the then Soviet-German border, which was west of Białystok, to Minsk, the capital of the Byelorussian Socialist

Soviet Republic (the Russian name “Byelorussia” was used up to 1991), which was taken on June 28, 1941. In a sense, the Brest Fortress was to serve as an example erasing the disgrace and memory of the catastrophe of the first days of the war. That is, the Brest Fortress was a symbol of change, or rather of giving a new context, in the 1960s, and so it was opened in the early 1970s as a memorial complex. Other examples of such places of memory are the so-called Mounds of Glory and their accompanying memorial complex built near Minsk, on the site of the burnt village of Khatyn. The Germans and their henchmen burned a total of several hundred villages in the occupied territories, although this particular place was deliberately chosen for commemoration mainly because of



Mounds of Glory memorial,
Khatyn, Belarus, 2016.
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Brest Fortress Memorial –
the Eastern Gate Memorial,
Brest, Belarus, 2016.
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its name, which was intended to cause some confusion due to the similarity of the name to Katyn.

The Brezhnev period was a time when the myth of the Great Patriotic War was shaped by building certain rituals, which were obligatory at all levels of education and penetrated into every sphere of social and public life (because no kind of political life existed then). This state of affairs, lasted, with minor changes, until the collapse of the USSR. Then there was a short period in the early 1990s when the Victory Parade was not held in Russia, and it was not resumed until 1995. We could risk stating that the cult of the Great Patriotic War was initiated on the wave of victory in 1945, and was hardened and shaped most intensely during the Brezhnev era. And here

it is worth discussing other aspects, for example, how this myth was reflected and had its specific, tangible examples in literature, cinema and mass culture.

Referring to this aspect—the formation of the myth of the Great Patriotic War in various areas of social life in the USSR – it is worth emphasising that the Khrushchev thaw significantly contributed to raising topics that were taboo during the Stalinist period. By the way, in the Brezhnev period, they were once again placed under taboos and restricted.

First of all, it is worth discussing the topic of collaboration of the citizens of the USSR with the occupier. The second, extremely painful area, is the problem of Soviet prisoners of war, who were not only denied the right to any human treatment by the Germans, but were completely written off by the Soviet side. According to Soviet policy of the time, any soldier who had been captured was undoubtedly a traitor and deserved universal condemnation. Appropriate punitive measures were also applied to them when the Red Army took over camps where Soviet POWs were imprisoned. Of course, these were not the only taboos. Other topics, previously unmentioned, were discussed for the first time in the works of artists, historians and cultural activists during the Khrushchev thaw. On the occasion of the subject of Soviet POWs, one example is the film directed by Sergei Bondarchuk, entitled *The Fate of a Man* (Судьба человека, 1959) about Andrei Sokolov, a Soviet citizen who lost everything, and was taken prisoner by the Germans, where he managed to

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survive for three years. Apart from a certain propaganda message, because—let's face it—the film was supposed to fulfil certain functions, one important, very important element was that for the first time (or actually it was one of the few such examples), a film showed the tragic fate of Soviet prisoners of war. The fact that it was possible to write about the war in a non-ideological and very realistic manner was proved by the Soviet and Belarusian writer Vasil Bykaŭ. His novels, written right in the midst of the Khrushchev thaw (in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s): *The Crane's Cry* (Жураўліны крык, 1960), *The Dead Feel No Pain* (Мёртвым не баліць, 1965), and so on, showed a completely different picture of the war than had been permitted before—a very realistic picture, in which betrayal was accompanied by courage, and heroism was intertwined with cowardice. It was a testimony of a person who survived the war from 1941 to its end, first as a private soldier, then as an officer in the Red Army.

And these few examples indicated and in a way demonstrated (I'm not talking about the willingness and consent to open up at the summit of power) the enormous will of the rank-and-file soldiers who took part in the war to speak honestly and openly for the first time, not about heroism, but about all of their experiences and nightmares related to the fighting. In the Brezhnev period, these topics slowly began to be uncomfortable. And here it is worth citing the example of the publication by Aleksei Niekrich, who is probably known to the Polish reader thanks to the brilliant work that appeared in its second edition in the 1980s, entitled *Utopia in power*, co-written with another Sovietologist, Mikhail Heller. Interestingly, Niekrich was a Soviet citizen from an assimilated Jewish family; he also fought in the ranks of the Red Army; he defended his doctoral thesis, and in 1965 prepared a work under the meaningful title of *June 22, 1941*. The book was published and approved by the Scientific Council of the USSR's Institute of History, but after a short time it was criticised as part of the so-called discussion organised by the Central Committee of the CPSU, in which official military historians participated, and the author was forced to withdraw his theses as previously formulated. Ultimately, Niekrich was expelled from the Communist party and forced to emigrate a short later. Eventually, he ended up in the United States.

We can take a closer look at the catalogue of this historian's sins. First of all, Niekrich not only based his work on the claims and quotations from the classics of Marxism and Leninism, but he also held talks with the head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet Army (GRU), and with senior officers—including marshals of the Soviet Union. These talks resulted in a very pessimistic picture, which could have undermined the official foundation of the Soviet message and, as a result, tarnished it significantly. It is also worth emphasising that it was at this time that an official six-volume, supplemented work on the history of the Great Patriotic War was being composed. The first attempt to do so had been made during the Khrushchev period, and when Brezhnev came to power, it was considered that his own activities had not been sufficiently reflected therein. Therefore, an attempt was made to write a new, fuller version; one could risk the statement (simplified of course to a great extent) that this new version in a sense rehabilitated the approach to Stalin's person. During the Khrushchev period, some of the faults, the responsibility for failure (especially in terms of neglect during the first period of the Soviet-German war) was laid on the shoulders of Stalin. However, as early as the Brezhnev period, efforts were made to ignore these topics.

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Summarising the topic: the Khrushchev period was a time of thaw, including the highlighting of topics related to the Great Patriotic War, also showing some of the more inconvenient aspects (for example collaboration, which was very carefully discussed by Vasil Bykaŭ in his novel *Sotnikaŭ*, which was first published in 1970 in the journal *Новый мир*). In the Brezhnev period, we observe the preservation of a certain ritual or cult of the Great Patriotic War. And until the end of the existence of the Soviet Union, this last version, was shaped and hardened during the Brezhnev period, survived with minor changes. Of course, in the period of perestroika from 1985, new publications and numerous voices showed the so-called blank spots, while the created myth of the victorious Soviet people survived in one form or another until the end of the USSR's existence.

Franciszek Dąbrowski [FD]: What has surprised me for many years is the discrepancy between the public cult of

sacrifice and the effort with which the Soviet Union managed first to defend itself, then to attack and then to win the war, and how the victims of that war were actually treated. It has been known for some time that the soldiers fighting at the front were considered simply cannon fodder, and no attention was paid to the conditions in which they were fighting, or whether their life and health were at risk (because this was also true of the wounded). The order “not one step back” is notorious, as is the treatment of those Soviet soldiers who surrendered or were taken prisoner as criminals. All of this defies Western European notions of what it should be like to wage war and treat your own veterans. These are the things which surprise us. On the other hand, the indifference to the fate of their own soldiers who were captured by German, Italian, Finnish or Romanian forces, seems to be something completely shocking. This contradiction between emphasising the horror of the casualties suffered by the Soviet Union and the indifference to the fate of these victims is completely incomprehensible to the observer. To this should be added the indifference to the treatment of the bodies of the fallen: it is known that there were situations when it was not until the 1990s that the remains of the fallen, which had previously been lying in the open air for many years, even decades, began to be found and buried in a dignified manner.

JS: You referred to an issue that I also wanted to raise, only in a slightly different dimension, in a different perspective. You mentioned the inhuman, inhumane treatment of soldiers by the command of the Red Army itself, by the state-party system, by the state. For my part, I would like to turn to the post-war period: on the one hand, there is total indifference to the proper commemoration of the fallen, and on the other, on the propaganda level, there is incessant praise of the nation of victors, which brought freedom and liberty to the nations of enslaved Europe. This primarily concerns adopting a dignified attitude to the bodies of the fallen, about burying them, commemorating them—it was really striking. On the other hand, if we look at the attitude towards veterans of the Great Patriotic War, during the initial period, the first post-war years, it was even popular to wear a military uniform and display the decorations obtained during military operations; then after a few years this custom slowly disappears, and not

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of its own accord. There is unofficial pressure, which—you can see it—comes from the very summit of power. I can recall one example: during the Great Patriotic War, in addition to the people who died, fallen on the front, a huge number of war invalids and maimed people remained in the Soviet Union. People who lost limbs, numbering from 500,000 up to even several million. In the first years after the war, people who were begging, singing for money, and so on, were a common sight on the streets, and in 1948, by some decisions of the party-state authorities, they were removed from the streets in both a literal and a figurative sense. They were taken to the so-called “Homes for war and labour veterans”, deep in the Soviet Union,

including on the island of Valaam (Finnish *Valamo*) on Lake Ladoga. The deported invalids usually didn't have families and relatives to look after them. And although the conditions in which they stayed cannot be compared to those prevailing in the Gulags, the very fact that they were forced into such houses is shameful. As for those sentenced to the Gulag, they at least had a sentence under some article of the Criminal Code, but these invalids, these war veterans, weren't guilty of anything. Their only fault was that they had simply lost their physical health while fighting in the Red Army.

FD: So they stayed in such houses indefinitely? The prisoners in the camps had a chance to come out after some time and be free, but the veterans were sent there indefinitely?

JS: Yes, indefinitely. This was especially true for those who were incapable of living independently, to a large extent mutilated, so that they would not spoil the view—they would not disturb the image. Because who could the victor be? The winner is a young man holding a child in his arms, with decorations hanging on his chest—this image was interfered with by the sight of an invalid without arms, without legs, blinded, and so on. This didn't fit the image of a nation and state that had won. So these people were simply removed and placed in, let's call it, death houses—because these were not torture chambers, but simply death houses, although of course they provided primary care. The situation in these places improved slightly during the latter half of the 1960s.

In the early 1950s, the remainder of those people who had somehow managed to save themselves from isolation were

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sentenced under the penal articles, because the penal codes of individual Soviet republics provided for penalties for so-called antisocial lifestyles, which included having no permanent place of residence, that is, wandering around, and begging. These people fell under this article and were condemned on that basis. This is a situation that seems completely inhuman from our perspective, crying out to heaven for vengeance, especially since it concerned people whose only fault was that they had sacrificed their health and all their lives for a common victory. It is also one of those topics that are reluctantly discussed at present, because it works to the disadvantage of the authorities and, in a sense, undermines this unified

Soviet War Memorial
(Yevgeni Vuchetich, 1949),
Berlin, Treptower Park,
Germany.
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myth of the state's care for citizens and veterans. After the truth exposing the treatment of war invalids was published, there were voices trying to prove that in fact the conditions in the "homes for war and labour veterans" were quite decent, and in addition they were systematically improving, that no-one was forced to stay there, and so on. Another interesting element is that the various kinds of pensions and subsidies which had been due to veterans injured in the Patriotic War didn't appear immediately after the war, but only in the 1980s, in the Brezhnev period. I will just add that until 1948, those honoured with military decorations received financial allowances from the state depending on the rank of their order or medal. We know that in Soviet times you had to wait for everything, there were queues to get, for example, a wall unit for your apartment, to buy a car, even to get a telephone line and telephone set up at home, so in the 1980s (as I know from my own experience) it was the veterans of the Great Patriotic War who could get a phone first. Of course, this was an area for abuse; someone fictitiously registered that they had a veteran at home so they could get a phone, buy a wall unit, a car, get an apartment, etc. All of these special offers and privileges appeared relatively late on, when some of the real veterans had already died of natural causes. In the 1990s, in individual post-Soviet republics, and in Russia itself, a number of solutions were adopted at the legislative level which gave even greater rights and favours to the Great Patriotic War veterans, although they didn't matter as much, because by then they covered very few people. From the point of view of the state, it was no longer a significant expense.

AKP: You could end up in these camps—let's call them—for veterans—for not registering your residence and not working?

JS: Yes. In 1948, as far as I know, there was no specific decision, because usually such types of displacement and deportation actions were carried out under the decision of the NKVD, and then the MVD, or under certain articles of the penal code. The purge of 1948 was not legally binding, not even in the sense of Soviet law. As for the later "cleansing" of cities in the early 1950s, the penal codes of individual Soviet republics were used, which largely copied the example of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Soviet

Republic. Crippled veterans were removed on the basis of leading “an anti-social lifestyle”, that is lacking a permanent place of residence, lacking employment, begging in the streets, and so on. In the years 1951–3, on the basis of a decree of the USSR Supreme Soviet of July 23, 1951 “On combating antisocial and parasitic elements”, a total of about half a million people were arrested, of which about 70% were invalids of war and labour. So there had already been attempts to legalise it at the time, of course within the Soviet rule of law. It was even difficult to try to rehabilitate anyone sent to the so-called houses of war and labour veterans, because there was no legal basis for it. Not to mention any notion of compensation for such people. In the case of people who, for example, died during the Great Purges of 1937–8, there were certain grounds for rehabilitation (I’m talking about under the Soviet rule of law, of course), but there were also numerous categories of people to whom it was not possible to apply the Rehabilitation Act which appeared in the twilight of the Soviet Union’s existence.

AKP: I understand that cases of using kinship—real or fictional—with a veteran to obtain some inaccessible goods happened in the 1980s, under Gorbachev, rather than before?

JS: For me, another question arose regarding the attitude towards people who had spent any time in the areas previously occupied by Germany, Romania or Finland. The attitude towards these people was highly suspicious throughout the entire period, or at least during the first post-war decades, and basically they had to abandon their hopes of a career, a party career or achieving anything within Soviet institutions. In their cases promotion was always considered under a big question mark. Interestingly, the questionnaires which everyone had to submit asked not only about the person filling them in, but also about their family. For example, were any of your family or relatives on territory occupied by the Germans? In fact, the fault of these people was that the Red Army (or the Soviet Union) had left these territories—this blame was placed on the shoulders of people who, after all, could not have done anything about it. In the questionnaires for party members or academics—I know this from research—there was a column on World War II

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and whether the person had been in occupied territory. I emphasise once again: the mere fact of having been on occupied territory was a significant obstacle to career development, no one even mentioned collaboration here. Collaboration, in turn, is another inconvenient topic. We know of an enormous mass of Soviet citizens who, one way or another, were involved in collaboration, defining the term narrowly or broadly. For example, did someone who was ordered by the German occupation authorities to supply a certain quota of food collaborate with the Germans? In a way, yes, because he supported the administration (and that also qualified as a crime under an article of the Soviet Penal Code).

At present, though, it is a taboo subject in Russia, a thick red line has been drawn under it, on the basis of “They are unambiguously traitors to the Soviet nation, the Russian nation, and it is not worth talking about them at all”.

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FD: But these deliveries were compulsory, and if you didn't, you could be killed or sent to a concentration camp.

JS: Quite so. There was a risk of repression for avoiding the occupiers' orders. With regard to deportations to Germany, I can use an example from family history: my family lived in a region of the Augustów Forest, exactly where the Augustów raid took place in 1945. In 1942, my grandfather was called up to go to Germany for forced labour, and because he didn't show up in Grodno at a certain time, German policemen came, expelled the family members without letting them take anything, set the house on fire and told them to watch it burn. It was characteristic of the German occupation that severe penalties were imposed for refusing to carry out the order. On the other hand, the Soviets imposed criminal responsibility for carrying out the occupiers' orders. But let's move on to direct collaboration, a topic that is extremely sensitive. Already in modern Russia, in the 1990s, the matter was quite actively researched and discussed, for example concerning the activities of the Russian Liberation Army (Русская освободительная армия), the Kaminski Brigade, including the latter dealings during the Warsaw Rising. At present, though, it is a taboo subject in Russia, a thick red line has been drawn under it, on the basis of “They are unambiguously traitors to the Soviet nation, the Russian nation, and it is not worth talking about them at all”. All persons who in one way or another collaborated with the

Axis countries on the territory of the Soviet Union (I'm not talking only about the Germans, because in the south of the Soviet Union there were also Romanians, and also the Finnish occupation in the North), were considered as traitors, regardless of their motivation, which was often fear for their own lives. I'm omitting here, of course, the cases of deliberate cooperation, which of course also happened. All these people are now considered traitors in Russia.

FD: Exactly: Vladimir Bukovsky, who spent a long time in Soviet prisons and psychiatric hospitals for political reasons in the 1960s and 1970s, recalled in his memoirs (*To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter*, English 1978; in Russian as *И возвращается ветер*, 1979) that in prison he came into contact with people who had been involved in collaboration with the Germans during the war. They were a common category of policemen in the German service, and these people had most often been well known to the Soviet authorities for a long time, and had already often suffered some kind of punishment before. In the 1960s and 1970s, they had shown trials, these cases were well publicised. Bukowski—from the perspective of someone who had contact with these people in prison and looked at their fate through the prism of what the authorities were doing with their citizens—was convinced that it was about maintaining the propaganda pressure among the population, saying: “Look, we are still uncovering these enemies among us, even now, after 20 years.” If we accept this interpretation, it would seem to be part of the propaganda offensive. Does this really fit with the statement that Brezhnev's times were conducive to such a consolidation and hierarchisation of the propaganda image of the war?

JS: It seems to me—and this is not just my opinion, that is, I'm not alone in this opinion, I rely on the results of Russian and non-Russian researchers dealing with the Brezhnev period and politics of history—that it is important to emphasise here that in the Soviet period the term “politics of history” was not in circulation, but another very similar one was used in party documents: “our policy on the historical front”, or “on the ideological front”, “on the propaganda front”. “Policy on the historical front” was understood not only as the management of historical research, historical and propaganda

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Mounds of Glory memorial,
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The part of the monument
with the placenames
of villages destroyed
by Nazi German occupiers.
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institutions, but also as the management of a whole range of issues in this circle. It was primarily about a kind of conveyor belt, carrying certain ideological assumptions, schemes and interpretations, which were to reach a wider group of recipients in an easily digestible form, that is adapted to the needs of recipients at various levels of society, through historical or historical-propaganda institutions. At that time, people talked about “our policy on the historical front”. As for the preservation of the image of the Great Patriotic War under Brezhnev’s rule, I think it is worth agreeing that the Brezhnev period, which was quite long, naturally stabilised the policy. Of course, we are not talking about Brezhnev himself, who was very active in politics in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s: just recall the détente, the meeting with Richard Nixon. We should also note that Nixon visited the Memorial



in Khatyn: the Soviet officials tried to bring the most famous personalities there, once again to introduce confusion in the perception of the Katyn case. In addition to Brezhnev, there was a fairly large group of conservative activists in the Central Committee of the CPSU, including in the Science Department, the Culture Department, let's call them "the ideological Cerberuses", the "guard dogs", for whom it was convenient to refrain from taking up certain topics, while preserving certain theses, certain images, certain historical messages. So it was not only a question of Brezhnev's influence, because none of the Soviet leaders, apart from Stalin, personally wrote or set out the foundations of the propaganda. Stalin himself formulated some theses that are still present in the propaganda of a number of post-Soviet states: they are repeated again and again, especially when it comes to the interpretation of the initial period of World War II. Stalin did read historical works and, horror of horrors, he also wrote something, not only in the field of history, just as he was known to be a "great linguist", he was also an expert in other areas. Many of his works have been published: guidelines in the field of economics, linguistics [see e.g. *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, by J.V. Stalin, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1950], and historical research. Actually, none of the Soviet leaders, apart from Stalin, started directly formulating detailed theses, this was the purpose of that whole host of "ideological Cerberuses" as well as the ordinary "ants" doing the hard work. To sum up, the Brezhnev era was the period of the consolidation and cementing of the basic schemes of interpretation, the narrative methods and certain rituals related to the celebration and respecting of Victory Day which had already been imposed in the Soviet Union. Also, it was an attempt to impose a certain narrative on the satellites.

Let us emphasise that Poland also celebrated Victory Day until 1951. Yes, May 9 was a day off from work; then, from what I remember, some changes were introduced, following the example of the "older brother", but Victory Day was also celebrated in free Poland; we celebrated May 8 until 2015.

FD: However, it was not a day off, and after 1990 it was celebrated not on May 9, but on May 8.

JS: But until 1951 it was a day off.

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AKP: By the way, when we talk about various memories in this way, I remember from school, when we had to sing at the May 9 roll call: “Victory Day, every one of us dreamed about it”. In primary school there were special events not only on May 1, but also on the 9th. And even though it was not a day off from work, it was beaten into the young people’s heads that this was an important time; they learned poems by heart and participated in the colloquia.

FD: Of course, Jaruzelski’s dictatorship was also extremely militaristic in tone, and Victory Day was, shall we say, prolonged—in the sense that not only was there a lot of military propaganda in all kinds of media, but also efforts were made to talk about this day wherever it was possible. In the propaganda about the victory in 1945, they referred to it as having been achieved “also thanks to the Poles”. Especially events such as the Festival of Military Song in Kołobrzeg, which was a very well-known public event, were used to spread this myth. It can therefore be said that the May victory celebrations in Poland were even extended to June and July.

JS: Just one more thing that was somehow overlooked. We mentioned Bukovsky and his meetings in places of exile, or his imprisonment with people who, in one way or another during the war, had collaborated with the occupiers. Well, this increased prosecution of collaborators could also have been a symptom of a certain ideological struggle with the West as collectively understood. There was a great deal of emphasis, and I remember it well from my own experiences, still in the mid-1980s, on the threat from the Federal Republic of Germany. It was said that this was a country where militarism was also triumphant to that day, where there was a tendency to revive fascism (because the term “Nazism” was not used then). Perhaps this is not an appropriate reference, but it seems to me that paradoxically—and perhaps also very logically—this struggle with the collective West in contemporary Russia largely refers to the cult of the Great Patriotic War.

At the same time, Russian politics of history today is also creatively trying to adopt certain tendencies present in the politics of history of many other countries. I mean the exploitation of the subject of the Holocaust, which was previously absent from the Soviet narrative. Babi Yar in Kyiv was only a place of execution of Soviet citizens; when the

propaganda raised the topic of the atrocities of the German occupiers, it always talked about Soviet citizens, without emphasising or highlighting any ethnic questions. It was said, among other things, that every fourth inhabitant of Soviet Belarus died, not mentioning that the vast majority of them were people of Jewish origin or nationality. The theme of the Holocaust was virtually absent in Soviet propaganda, but now we see more and more references to it in various aspects and in various areas. I will just cite a few examples. In a series of speeches in December 2019, the Russian president, referring to the September resolution of the European Parliament assessing the decisive role of the USSR and the Third Reich in the events leading up to the outbreak of World War II, blamed Western countries for starting the conflict, and attacked Poland in harsh words. In June 2020, these theses were briefly repeated in an article published in the US magazine *The National Interest* (“The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”). The Russian president stated in the article that if the USSR had not taken over half of Poland, “millions of people of different nationalities, including the Jews living near Brest and Grodno, Przemysł, Lviv and Wilno, would be left to die at the hands of the Nazis and their local accomplices—anti-Semites and radical nationalists.” [*Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II*, “The National Interest”, June 18, 2020]. In the speeches of prominent political activists, including President Putin, the Soviet aggression in September 1939 is portrayed not only as the liberation of the subjugated Ukrainian and Belarusian nations, but also as salvation for the Jewish people, at least for refugees and exiles, because those who found themselves in the sphere of the Soviet occupation mostly survived. We are talking here about people who were exiled and deported, and this fact—paradoxically, to the great surprise of not only myself, but I think also of my colleagues—was raised and presented as an extraordinary achievement, that is, the deportations suddenly took on such warm, positive colours, the deportation was presented as a great good.

FD: This would mean that if someone died of starvation or cold in Kazakhstan, deported there against his will, it was, in fact, a favour done to him.

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Prof. Jan Szumski

The topic of participation in the Holocaust is being raised more and more often, including by the Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians; and the topic of Polish anti-Semitism has also been heavily exploited recently.

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JS: Yes, he died alone, of his own free will, no one tortured him, and that's how you should look at it. Another aspect of this mindset appears: taking responsibility in the battles with individual countries of Central and Eastern Europe over the memory of these events, the so-called memory wars. The topic of participation in the Holocaust is being raised more and more often, including by the Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians; and the topic of Polish anti-Semitism has also been heavily exploited recently. This is consistent not only with certain assumptions of Russian foreign policy, it corresponds—and I would not like to continue this thread here, because this is a topic for a separate conversation—with certain trends that are currently appearing in the public

debate, that is the responsibility of Poland as a state and Poles as a nation for the Holocaust. These are threads that were absent from Soviet propaganda, but are now appearing in Russian propaganda and media messages. When it comes to solid academic research, I haven't come across such examples. The cult of the Great Patriotic War is also present in the media and propaganda of contemporary Russia, but some of its features have been modified: instead of the victory parade—although parades are still being conducted—we can talk about a new, relatively young phenomenon,

the public actions of the “Immortal Regiments”, the marches organised and participated in by the grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, carrying the images of their brave ancestors. The Russian president also took part in one such action. Ironically, it turns out that it was journalists, not associated with the government, who started these actions, but they were swiftly taken over by government bodies.

I would like to briefly mention some of the legislative measures undertaken by the current authorities of the Russian Federation which are aimed at “channelling away” those versions and interpretations of events related to the World War II period which differ from the official ones. In May this year, the State Duma discussed a draft amendment to the law commemorating the victory of the Soviet people and the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War. This amendment to the Act and the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation

poses a threat to the academic research, as anyone who undertakes such a free debate in the Russian academic and information space may face a criminal penalty, in the form of a fine, or even more severe restrictions of liberty. This seems to be the culmination of those measures or half-measures that have been taken so far. Many observers and analysts see this as the response by the Russian authorities to the resolution of the European Parliament, in which the Soviet Union and the Third Reich were equated as two centres of evil. In addition to the Russian Federation, a second propaganda front is emerging at present in the Republic of Belarus, which could include certain statements by the prosecutor general and the current president, Lukashenka, on the responsibility of individual states for the genocide committed against the Belarusian nation. And this is not only about the Third Reich, because in this context statements have been made about interwar Poland, which allegedly occupied Belarus, and about Polish military formations which allegedly committed then the crime of genocide (including in the context of the case of Romuald Rajs, alias “Bury”).

FD: So an absurd, factually incorrect approach.

JS: At the moment, according to an announcement by the prosecutor general of Belarus, evidence is being gathered which will be transferred to international organisations. It is not known, however, what these institutions are and what they should do with this material... Apart from these formal and legal issues, it seems to me that it is about opening another ideological front, or another battle or war for history.

FD: In the context of shaping the image of the Great Patriotic War, not only does the completely utilitarian political treatment of it seem characteristic to me, but also the opposition of the Russian and Belarusian states to something that happened two or three decades earlier, when research and memories were released after the fall of the Communist dictatorship. Topics that had been tabooed, distorted or concealed were first freed up a little by Gorbachev as part of the freedom of research and *glasnost*, and then in the 1990s they could be freely discussed. Now we are dealing with the repeated suppression of the expression of opinion and freedom of research, for example by the imposition of the status of “foreign agent” on Memorial (and the request to the Russian Supreme Court

by the Russian prosecutor's office on November 8, 2021 to ban this organisation, as well as a subsequent verdict of the Russian Supreme Court of December 28, 2021 liquidating the Memorial organization – editors' note). The status of "foreign agent" imitates the construction from US legislation from World War II; it represents then a quite cynical approach. You mentioned that we are also dealing with the "channelisation" of any such initiatives that could somehow have released these undiscussed topics.

JS: It seems to me that it should be looked at from a broader perspective, from the perspective of the fight against the collective West. Of course I'm using this expression in a figurative sense, because the fight is not fought at the front and nobody uses cannons, planes or tanks. We are talking rather about an ideological war—of course with the economy in the background, because we must also remember that various types of disinformation campaigns, in addition to matters related to politics of history or worldview issues, also have an economic background. This information tap is turned on and off cyclically. It can be said that we can also observe similar examples in the history of the Russian Empire, in the history of nineteenth-century Russia. I mean this kind of cycle: attempts at reforms during the reign of Alexander I (1801–25), the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55) and the restriction of freedoms, the suppression of the uprisings in Poland (1830–1), in Hungary (1849), then the thaw in the form of the reign of Alexander II (1855–1881), reforms to the judiciary, freeing the peasants, etc., then comes Alexander III and the period of reaction, and finally Nicholas II. Such cyclicity is also present in the history of the Soviet Union: war Communism and the cruel Civil War, then the period of the New Economic Policy (1921–9), the period of the turnaround of 1929, initiating collectivisation and repression, the post-war tightening of the screw, then the Khrushchev thaw, etc. his cycle has its regularity, but it seems to me that, looking at the experiences of previous years, the tightening of this screw has certain limits, and is primarily intended to consolidate society, and to cover up some failures and failures, for example in the economy. If the economy is not going well, then somehow the public's attention has to be distracted. Perhaps the best example is the victory in the

Great Patriotic War, which has almost one hundred percent consensus in Russian society, whereby both the vast majority of citizens and the centres of power consider it to be an issue that must not be touched upon or questioned at all, and therefore, this is the only topic that can serve as such a bonding agent. This is a word very popular in the current Russian discourse; in Russian it is *skrepa* (*скрепа*), literally “the binder”, that is, a spiritual bond that can bind all layers of society together regardless of their views:

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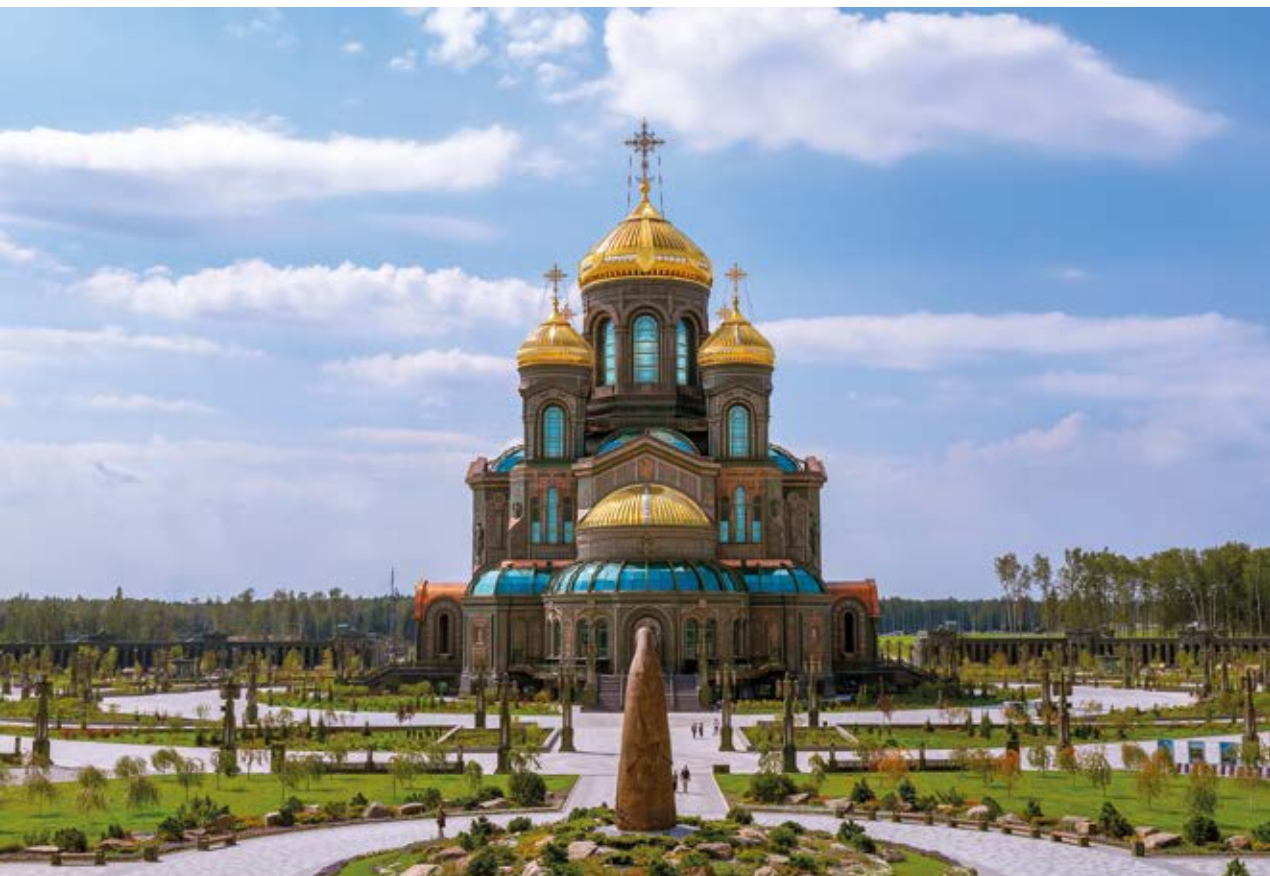
Communists, Democrats, Liberals, and others. The Great Patriotic War is the subject that is most suitable for such material, because other attempts have failed. Let me remind you, for example, of the attempt to replace the anniversary of the October Revolution with the Day of National Unity on November 4, which was supposed to be a symbol of liberation from the Polish occupation and the expulsion of the Poles from the Kremlin in 1612. This attempt didn't work. Despite attempts to promote this topic, it has not been possible to restore or give this holiday the importance it was intended to have. So the holiday of the October Revolution had gone, and another one had to be found. There has probably never been any doubt that the topic of victory in the Great Patriotic War, a victory written with a capital V, could bind the whole of society together.

FD: The peculiarity of this cycle, of thaws and tightening the screw, is that it really depends on the intentions and actions of the authorities. So I don't see any social dynamics here. There is, however, quite a specific look at history and how it happened. It is interesting how the ambitions of, say, the government's propaganda and education materialise. I understand that apart from monuments, the phenomena of the politics of memory include, for example, holidays, cyclical celebrations, and appropriately formulated educational programmes. Probably enough monuments are left over from the Soviet era, but I'm also referring to the authorities' use of museums as points of public expression and the replication of their attitude to the past. We otherwise know that the museum in Kyiv, once the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, now the National Museum of Ukraine during World War II, has undergone many metamorphoses in recent years. The aim was

to document the course of the war, but as a result, Ukrainian problems of community memory came to the fore. There is also a museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow: the question is, are any dynamics of change visible there?

JS: You have touched on a number of issues, each of which could very well become a river of a topic in itself. When it comes to the policies of memory in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus—despite some common features, such as the use of the cult of the Great Patriotic War (including in the case of the Ukrainians, who have a huge problem of how to reconcile it in the nation-building process, because this process is still ongoing)—each of these countries has slightly different ideas, slightly different methods of implementation, mechanisms and tools for this purpose. As for specific examples, let me go back to the Soviet past to refer to the rituals that arose during the Brezhnev period, including the celebration of Victory Day (May 9), but also other holidays every year, which were celebrated with obelisks and memorials, which were actually set up in every town, even in the smaller ones. The cross, important in Poland, was replaced on the post-Soviet territories of Russia or Belarus by an obelisk commemorating the fights of the Red Army, mostly fights from the liberation period, from 1943–4, because the first period of the war was deliberately forgotten. These memorials, these obelisks, became a certain point of reference in the process of shaping each human being, because there were celebrations when children were admitted to the Pioneer organisations, and they were also admitted to the Komsomol organisation, so it was not just an ordinary obelisk or monument. It was, say, a sacred place, a place of worship, a place where Soviet heroes were worshiped. Moreover, a new tradition among newlyweds, cultivated in the Soviet Union back in the 1980s, and even in Russia in the 1990s, was to lay flowers or a wreath on the graves of fallen soldiers. This was something that has firmly and permanently entered social life, to celebrate individual events.

When it comes to commemoration and other issues related to museology, this is a subject that is exploited very actively in Russia, because more and more often it is resorting to modern forms of disseminating information, which have hitherto just complemented the old methods, and instead uses such tools as,



for example, reconstruction groups. Currently, work is being carried out to modernise the huge memorial complex called the “Patriot” Military-Patriotic Park of Culture and Recreation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, which not only commemorates the victory of the Red Army in World War II, but also the Russian military’s other achievements throughout history. There we find places where historical reconstructions are held, starting from the French Invasion of Russia of 1812, through the I World War [World War I], and there is also an exhibition devoted to the contemporary conflict in Syria. Of course, there were such museums already, including the Tank Museum in Kubinka near Moscow, operating since the 1970s, where military equipment is collected, including so-called trophies, that is, arms captured from the enemies. Currently, the Kubinka museum hosts a branch of the aforementioned

Russian Armed Forces main Orthodox Church, part of the “Patriot” Park on the grounds of military museum in Kubinka, Russia, 2020.
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“Patriot” park. In 2020 Patriarch Kirill, with the participation of President Putin, solemnly consecrated the Orthodox Church of the Lord’s Resurrection on the grounds of the Park; this is the main temple of the Russian armed forces, the architecture and decoration of which refer to the events of the Great Patriotic War. The height of the temple (75 m) refers to the anniversary of the victory, and the diameter of the dome (19.45 m) to the year of the victory. Originally, President Putin was supposed to have been depicted on a wall surrounded by Russian soldiers, with Stalin on another wall, but this idea was eventually abandoned.

The government is now trying to give all these forms, which were still valid in the 1970s and 1980s, a more modern shape in order to reach as many recipients as possible. It can be said that the system of power in Russia is trying to keep up with the times, to keep up with all the technical innovations that make it possible to reach a wider audience. On the one hand, there is the “stick”: the system uses tools, for example in the form of bans and certain legislative solutions, and on the other hand, there is the “carrot”, for example, in the form of games, to reach the apolitical youth who are often uninterested in issues related to ideology. On the other hand, these modern technologies do make it possible to act on a subconscious level. When, for example, someone plays a game in which he is fighting on the Soviet side in Stalingrad, in Kursk, during Operation Bagration, or is liberating Central & Eastern Europe, that embeds itself somewhere; it builds up a corresponding image even without the needs to use any other kinds of mass media like television, which is ceasing to have any importance for young people.

AKP: Of course, you have to build a message using simple means; television may be of little importance, but TV series certainly are. After all, these series are created at different levels of ideologisation. Now I’m not talking only about the Great Patriotic War, although even now the number of contemporary Russian series that deal with this problem is huge. Here, too, I can see this propaganda offensive. When it comes to games, their specificity is such that they are not supposed to tell a story, but rather to involve the player in it and give him a sense of agency, of influence on events. And this is another subliminal message: the series gives context,

images with sound, a story, a plot, etc. Of course, if it is well made, the game allows you meanwhile to penetrate even more deeply into certain levels of the created reality. Awareness of this is not yet wide, because the gaming market is treated as collateral, as entertainment for a specific age group. But that's a huge market, currently two, two and a half times the size of film, television, music, of Hollywood and Bollywood combined. I think historians will also be interested in it at some point.

But this was, of course, a digression. I would like to refer to the discussion that we published in the first issue of our journal, and the interview with the director of the Auschwitz Memorial, Dr. Piotr M. Cywiński, which we published in the second issue of the magazine. They included two complementary, almost convergent theses: history is now a battlefield, there is a search for certain events and circumstances in the past that can be referred to, while at the same time, as Professor Chwedoruk said: you can play two roles: the role of the victim and the role of the winner. A seasoned player will know how to play both at once (but this has to be a really experienced player), and sometimes the role of the victim is more “profitable” than the role of the winner. Of course, there are also economic and legal contexts, sometimes associated with Holocaust denialism, the contexts of legal responsibility for an attempt to move the narrative in a way that does not correspond to the model (it does not even matter whether it is consistent with the facts), but which blocks any doubts or free discussion. It is a kind of scarecrow: “We don't touch it, it can't be moved.” In my opinion, this phenomenon of our times is also very interesting, although it is probably not new, but I think it is a sign of the times, of the last few years, which we will become part of. The problem of Polish politics of history (of course, at the moment there are many complex problems there), where we are in Poland, is that we are reactive, somehow derivative or passive responsive. The merely consequential nature of the reaction means that we are already twice as weak in the debate. I'm not talking about the difference in the potential of states—it is not even about that—but rather that we are starting from the level that “it is inconsistent with the facts, that it is impossible”, and this is a media discourse, it has nothing to do with facts. This topic was also touched upon

during our last debate: Professor Musiał and Professor Kornat considered to what extent the propaganda message about the Patriotic War is directed to Russia itself, so it is an element of the consolidation that you talked about; and to what extent it is also intended to affect the West—and to build up a paradigm there, a certain narrative, a certain type of message that is to be preserved. Professor Kornat recalled the reaction to the publication of the *Black Book of Communism* by the French Prime Minister Jospin, who stated that “nothing will change the fact that our ally was the Soviet Union.” The sentence itself is one of many opinions, but if it is delivered by the prime minister of a large European country, then politics of history is no longer a discussion among intellectuals arguing within the limited confines of academia, but this now becomes information warfare at some level.

FD: It seems to me that we are witnessing a situation in which the state or the political community, by using similar tools, that is education and public information (of course, where there is some respect for the role of education and historical research), are trying to bring out and popularise certain elements of those communities’ past, be it that of Poland or any other. On the other hand, we are dealing with other countries that want historical knowledge, community experiences and community consciousness to arm and direct them on the front of the ideological struggle (to use the Communist slogan mentioned above). The question is, to what extent are we immune to it? To what extent are we immune to falsehood and manipulation?

JS: I have a slightly pessimistic picture of things: it seems to me that we are in a difficult situation in the face of such a strong wave of powerful actions taken on the international arena, aimed at restoring, refreshing and modernising the message about the Great Patriotic War, which—let’s not deceive ourselves—have been operating in Western societies for a long time. That is, the message which was built in the USSR and Russia. This latter is only seen through the prism of the USSR, which contributed significantly to the victory over the Third Reich (which, of course, is a fact that no serious historian and researcher will deny). However, there is a common position around the world: “Why open up old wounds?”, so the many attempts made by Poland and

other countries, including the Baltics, to re-examine the past encounter strong resistance from opinion-forming circles in the West, both academic and political. I'm not saying, of course, that we are in a losing position, but we do have a rather difficult situation, because any attempt to engage in a substantive discussion on this topic is automatically perceived through the prism of Russophobia. Statements by politicians, not only that of the former French prime minister, but even from the last few weeks, about the alleged or actual Russophobia of Poles or Ukrainians sometimes get an answer; the former Prime Minister of Lithuania Andrius Kubilius in 2009 said: "I don't think that we are Russophobes, we are simply Russo-realists. There is a lack of such realism in Europe"—that is "we have had contact with Russia and we have such experiences, and whoever didn't have them may have a different, poorer perspective." I would not like to make a judgement here, but in the international dimension, when it comes to using and exploiting this topic for the purposes of foreign policy, and to build a positive image of the Soviet Union during the war, in my opinion there is greater submission to and wider acceptance of the narrative on the part of Western European countries, something which Russia is currently pursuing quite intensively in various areas. The Soviet and Russian historical narrative is positively received by both the opinion-forming and scientific circles, and any attempt to undertake a substantive discussion based on facts is of no importance. Despite hundreds of scholarly works, published collections of documents, photographs, established facts, and so on, in the propaganda war it does not matter. What matters is a quick message, the ability to mislead a huge number of recipients by showing a confusing image—it's not even about telling the truth, it is enough to confuse the image, to sow the seed of distrust. My pessimistic conclusion: it seems to me that when we speak about Poland, and only about the significance of the war, it will be difficult to break through to the public and present our opinion; it will be difficult to engage in a thorough substantive discussion, because in this respect, conducting a discussion which is purely content-related unfortunately does not make any sense.

In the international dimension, when it comes to using and exploiting this topic for the purposes of foreign policy, and to build a positive image of the Soviet Union during the war, in my opinion there is greater submission to and wider acceptance of the narrative on the part of Western European countries.

Prof. Jan Szumski

Part of the Polish historical milieu is in a certain vacuum, closed off, and is unaware that the world of historical research is governed by slightly different rules outside Poland. For example, in order for a book to reach the Western market, it must refer to specific things, there must be something that will interest the Western reader. This is sad because, in a way, it is an attempt to adapt to expectations (and not to the needs of historical research). On the other hand, there is also progressive commercialisation. The author of every book written in the West is already thinking about how to sell it, both literally and figuratively. In other words, you have to fight, you really have to fight; but you have to fight wisely, reasonably, not with a suicidal charge, because that does not lead to anything good; it only brings about counterproductive effects. But even with very strong evidence and the facts in hand, we won't get through because without the commentary and the preparation of the audience, it simply cannot speak for itself. Nevertheless it's worth trying, and I think it can be done, but in a wise, intelligent way. Unfortunately, such work cannot be done in a year, or two or three years; it is organic work that should take into account the perspective of more than just one five-year plan, to use the Soviet term, but it simply has to be spread over many years. It is a matter of educating the right researchers, mastering the methods of transmission, and reaching a wider audience.

AKP: Thank you for the interview.

Leonid I. Brezhnev
during the visit in Poland,
Katowice, July 22, 1974.
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