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# THE RELIGION OF VICTORY, THE CULT OF A SUPERPOWER

## THE MYTH OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR IN THE CONTEMPORARY FOREIGN POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

### **Abstract**

The glorification of the Soviet victory over Nazism is the focal point of Russia's politics of history and an element of the ideological offensive that aims to legitimise Russian great-power ambitions. The narrative centred on the victory has a strong religious, not to say, messianic dimension. It aims to whitewash the dark chapters of Soviet history and legitimise the wars Moscow waged after 1945. According to the contemporary neo-Soviet interpretations, these wars were always defensive and justified by external circumstances. At the same time, distinctly anti-Western rhetoric is becoming more and more perceptible in Russian

propaganda. The repeated accusations of “eternal” attempts by the West to destroy Russia and destabilise the global order are intensifying. The official discourse is marked by the nostalgia for the lost empire and the “concert of powers” that was established at the Yalta conference; it also seeks to justify violence as a tool of foreign policy. Its overriding aim is to legitimise the authoritarian regime and Moscow’s contemporary strategic goals, such as the hegemony in the post-Soviet area and the reshaping of the European security architecture. The official narrative is promoted by the state institutions, the educational system, the Kremlin-controlled media outlets and a network of social organisations subsidised by the state. It is also safeguarded by the administrative and criminal law and the apparatus of repression.

**Keywords:** Russia, the Great Patriotic War, the Victory of 1945, politics of history, the great power politics, authoritarianism, World War II, propaganda, Russian foreign policy

## Introduction

The 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazism, celebrated in 2020, was designed as the crowning moment of Vladimir Putin’s twenty-year-long rule. It also marked the peak in shaping Russia’s politics of history. In this paper, the term “politics of history”, itself a matter of controversies and disputes (Materski 2017, pp. 7–11; Ponczek 2013), is defined as a systematic promulgation of an approved interpretation of events and historical processes by state institutions and other state-controlled entities. It entails government-designed activities (including in the sphere of national law) that aim to form the collective memory and historical discourse in line with the political interest of the ruling elite. The role of this strategy is to strengthen the legitimacy of the model of rule that best serves those in power. In democratic states such an arbitrary shaping of the politics of history is constrained by the primacy of freedom in academic research and is subject to public scrutiny. In authoritarian systems like Russia, by contrast, the authorities strive to hold a monopoly over the desired version of history. The scope of their ambitions blurs the line between the politics of history and neo-totalitarian

propaganda, especially since the growing ideologisation of political discourse goes hand in hand with the overt falsification of history.

In the nineties, the Russian authorities were reluctant to actively frame the politics of history as it would be reminiscent of the state-controlled Soviet ideology. The only element reintroduced at that time was the celebration of the Victory Day on the 9th of May. This holiday, revived in 1995, was supposed to create a positive myth that would unite Russians at a difficult time of political and economic transformation. Then, during Putin's rule, the Kremlin gradually revived other narrative strands and techniques characteristic of the Soviet propaganda. The dynamics of this process was determined both by domestic-political developments in Russia and Moscow's relations with the European Union, the US and NATO.

The first signs of Russia's attempts to actively construct its politics of history came in 2002–2003 when Vladimir Putin addressed historians, asking them to adopt a “patriotic” approach when writing history textbooks (Ostrowska 2010, p. 130). This trend became more comprehensive in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and in the context of the 60th anniversary of the victory in the World War II (2005). A strong impulse for the final re-Sovietisation of historical discourse came in 2014 when the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity heightened the Kremlin's sense of insecurity, which in turn led to Russian military aggression. The justification of the latter required extraordinary propaganda measures. The anti-Ukrainian smear campaign was based on the eclectic ideology, focused on the myth of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), which was expressly embedded in contemporary geopolitical rivalry with the West.

In the Russian narrative, the term “World War II” is much less common. It is typically used when referring to the military actions outside the USSR in 1939–1945, regarded as the background context for the Great Patriotic War. This terminological lapse is marked ideologically and politically. It is especially prominent as regards Moscow's perception of the post-Soviet area, which is regarded as a common Russian-speaking culture space, united, *inter alia*, by the memory of the war against Nazism. It is significant that those post-Soviet countries that have chosen to integrate with the West





(such as Ukraine or Georgia) depart from the term “the Great Patriotic War” and use “World War II”, instead. In this way, they place their wartime experience within the global rather than Soviet context—the latter being often regarded as a colonial framework.

This paper presents the main elements of the myth of the Great Patriotic War against the background of Russia’s foreign policy goals. It is argued that this myth is an instrument of the Kremlin’s anti-Western policy. The rationale for it should be sought in the nature of the Russian authoritarian regime, its imperial legacy and great-power ambitions. Other reasons involve the problems with identity-shaping that Russia needs to face up to as well as current domestic-political developments. The myth of war is presented here in the functional approach. The analysis focuses on the elements which, according to the author, are the most significant in the current ideological offensive. The Great Patriotic War serves to legitimise the aggressive foreign policy of the state that has been repeatedly portrayed as the Russian-Soviet great power. This image has been created for the sake of external as well as domestic use. Therefore, this paper focuses on yet another aspect of the problem, namely, the question of how this policy is perceived by the Russian public.

Due to volume limitations, this paper cannot address all the questions that form the context of the theme presented. Extensive references to the literature given in the article should help to bridge this gap. Problems that require further



research include the use of historical topics in foreign policy, the propagation of the Russian narratives at home and abroad, the analysis of imperial tradition, and the politics of memory of the 1990s, as the latter forms a background for the historical propaganda in the Putin era.

The methodology adopted in the article hinges on the analysis of the discourse designed by the Russian authorities. Public speeches of the Russian officials, strategic documents and the language used in the state media provide rich material for such studies. In addition, the analysis is based on the works quoted in the article, publications and lectures by the members of the Russian Free Historical Society and the Memorial society, all of which are used to explore the changing perception of history among the ruling elite and the Russian public. Especially relevant to this paper are the publications by Olga Malinova, Ivan Kurilla and Nikolai Koposov, which analyse the evolution of narratives concerning the Great Patriotic War in the broader perspective of Russian symbolic policy. Nikolai Koposov's works, in particular, provide valuable research on the legal and institutional mechanisms employed to defend the official historical discourse (compare *inter alia*, Malinova 2015a; Malinova 2015b; Malinova 2017a; Malinova 2017b; Kurilla 2012; Kurilla 2018; Koposov 2018; see also the following studies by the Russian Free Historical Society, *Вольное Историческое Общество*, and the Memorial society, *Мемориал* (available at: <https://volistob.ru/> and <https://www.memo.ru/ru-ru/>).

The Kremlin Wall. Moscow, Russia. © Brillenstimmer / Shutterstock



## Determinants of Russia's Politics of History

The politics of history is utilised as an instrument for the domestic-political legitimisation of Putin's regime. Its significance grew when the impact of other legitimising factors (economic, social, political) waned. The Russian political-economic model, based on the export of raw materials, the patrimonial concept of the state, and the primacy of control over development is unable to offer attractive prospects for the future or guarantee sustainable economic growth (Domańska 2019a). In its attempts to fill the ideological void and compensate for the lack of forward-looking policies, the Kremlin offers the mythologised version of the bygone superpower era. It also seeks legitimacy through foreign rather than domestic policy.

Specific features of Russia's politics of history stem from two types of factors. First, it is a particular socio-cultural substrate formed in the turbulent 20th century, which was marked by the discontinuity of the state institutional system, totalitarian repression that led to the destruction of the social fabric, and the struggle for physical survival that affected large social groups. The generations formed by the memory of totalitarianism are characterised by pragmatic subordination to the dominating imperial narrative, which serves to compensate for an acute lack of rootedness. These generations developed defence mechanisms, such as the habit of "doublethink" and the fear of openly cultivating individual or family memory, whenever it is incompatible with the state-imposed "truth". Only recently have some attempts been made to revive the alternative, "second" memory (which is still rather short-ranging) that is focused on individual experience and demystifies the official historical narratives (*Kakoe proshloye* 2017). Another formidable challenge for the collective identity was the fall of the USSR, and the subsequent deep socio-economic and political crisis in the country, as well as the need to build a new national state on the ruins of the Russian empire. The search for the "national idea", which began in the 1990s, took the hazy shape of pseudo-conservative "patriotism" and the cult of the 1945 Victory as the only reference points uniting Russians under Vladimir Putin's rule.

Second, the shape and instruments of Russian politics of history are conditioned by the current interests of the authoritarian regime. They replicate the Soviet templates in a new so-called post-truth garment (a term coined by modern journalism). The narrative is meant to legitimise the authoritarian model of rule as being optimal for Russia, thus perpetuating the model of state-society relations convenient for the Kremlin. The Russian elite has learned from the period of the empire's collapse that the key threat to the security of the ruling class is weakness of the state's power, and its inability to fully control domestic socio-political processes. It therefore became a priority to strengthen the apparatus of prevention and repression, as well as the state's position in the international arena (understood primarily as the ability to defend itself against "hostile" democratisation).

This approach hinges on two basic assumptions which automatically lead to a biased selection of stories about the national past. The first of these holds that the only driving force in the creation of national history is the state, while society is the object and not the subject of history and politics. The second assumption is a dogma of the essential compatibility

The Soviet veteran's decorations.

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The Soviet veteran's decorations.  
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of the interests of the government and the nation. It grows out of the Slavophile belief in the organic symbiosis between the rulers and the ruled, resulting from voluntary subordination. According to this vision, conflicts between authorities and citizens, and discords that break the natural harmony are invariably the result of external inspiration or an example of “fake news”—a tool in international information warfare.

The defensive function of the Russian politics of history is typical of non-democratic states. It is based on two basic elements: emphasising only those aspects of collective memory that are related to the evil that “others” have done to “us” and denying or suppressing the guilt of the authorities for the wrongs inflicted on its citizens (Langenbacher 2010). There is a clear retreat from pluralistic research and discussions about history, which was one of the characteristic features of the 1990s. The eradication of pluralism from the public discussions about history logically results from the broader, systemic fight against freedom of speech, containment of political competition, free media or independent structures of civil society. Such an instrumental approach to politics of history leads to its strong ideologisation or even mythologisation: out of these myths and narrative strands, one can make up any tale. Historical material is flexible enough to be shaped as required owing to classic methods of distorting historical facts: omission (silence), falsification (denial of facts, creation of facts); exaggeration or embellishment; manipulation of cause and effect relationships; and blaming “objective circumstances” or enemies for one’s own misdeeds (Klaś 2013).



## Russia’s Great Power Interests

The most significant factor responsible for how the Kremlin policy-makers think about foreign interests and which foreign policy tools they choose is the inferiority complex stemming from the “phantom pains” after the decomposition of the Soviet empire. Problems with shaping “the national idea” have made the Kremlin tap into the ready-made model of Russia’s international identity as the great power with imperial background. The traditional attributes of empire are put to the

forefront, such as Russia's vast territory, its military potential and abundant raw materials, which in practice boils down to the country's capacity of destabilising its international environment. The politics of history directly refers to the Soviet patterns of presenting Russia's past, which are marked by the distinct anti-Western attitude. This strategy has a dual goal: it is meant to legitimise the aggressive foreign policy in the eyes of Russian society, and provide a rationale for its great power ambitions in the eyes of the international community. The Soviet templates have been chosen for several reasons. First, it is the temporal proximity of the USSR with its superpower status. Second, it is convenient to use ready-made patterns and symbols, which are still recognized and appreciated by many Russians. Third, such a choice reflects the way of thinking and serves the interests of the key beneficiaries of Putinism, namely the former officers of the Soviet security services formed by the Cold War conflict with the West.

Russia is pursuing three key strategic interests in its foreign policy. First, it aims to get the Western approval of the Russian hegemony over the post-Soviet area (while this term is becoming increasingly dubious due to the heterogeneity of the former USSR territories, it is still firmly rooted in the political thinking of the Kremlin's officials). Second, to reshape the European security architecture in line with Moscow's interests. This would lead to the marginalisation of NATO, which is regarded by Kremlin as the main enemy and a threat to Russia's survival, as well as limitation of the US's presence and influence in Europe. Russia also seeks to force the West to create a security buffer zone in Central Europe, and gain the right of veto in all questions regarding European security. All these postulates were explicitly presented in Russia's ultimatum made to the US and NATO in December 2021 (*MFA RF* 2021). The third goal is to win the maximal benefits from the economic and political cooperation with the West without concessions on Russia's part.

Due to Russian authorities' great-power aspirations, history in Russia has been subject to increasing "securitisation" for the past two decades. Historical "truth", convenient for the Kremlin, is presented as strictly related to the existential security of the state, as well as to its vital but endangered national interests. In effect, historical issues have become

extremely politicised and excluded from free public debates. The pseudo-historical narratives are used as a weapon in geopolitical rivalry and as such they are part of permanent “special operations” characteristic of the Putin model of state management. History is an important element of Russian information warfare and “active measures” (Darczewska and Żochowski 2017), which are targeted to manipulate public opinion and the decisions of political elites abroad (so-called reflexive control). Given this, the defence of “historical truth” calls for direct action and legitimisation of extraordinary measures, such as adopting laws that penalise unwanted historical narratives. The army and secret services are also engaged to shape the monopolistic discourse (Bækken and Enstad 2020). Departure from the imposed historical narratives, especially regarding the Great Patriotic War and World War II, is regarded by the Kremlin as an element of the “cognitive warfare” against Russia (Lepekhn 2016). This way of thinking has been reflected in strategic documents (*Strategiya* 2015; *Doktrina* 2016; *Voennaya doktrina* 2014; *Kontseptsiya* 2016). The duty to defend the “historical truth” has also been enshrined in the amended Russian constitution of 2020 (Domańska 2020).



## The Myth of the Great Patriotic War

One of the key instruments used to legitimise Russia’s great power ambitions is the myth of the Great Patriotic War, and in particular, the Victory of 1945 as its centrepiece. It has become, in fact, the founding myth of the Putin era. The image of Russia “rising from its knees” has been the prevailing leitmotif in the government’s rhetoric throughout this period, which served to legitimise the authoritarian model of government. The myth of the Victory resonates with the large part of the Russian public. It helps to overcome—at least partially and on an *ad hoc* basis—the social atomisation inherited from the Soviet era, so as to make Russians feel united and rally around the government. It also helps to compensate for the economic degradation of the country, the growing ossification of the political system and the deteriorating public mood (Dmitriev 2020).

In this sacralised, messianic myth the Victory is presented as the pivotal moment in Russia's history and the peak of the state's superpower status, while the Soviet Union—as the only genuine and unwavering Nazi opponent that saved the world from the absolute evil. In the Russian narrative, Soviet troops brought nothing but liberation to their neighbouring countries in 1944–1945. Any discussions undermining this “canonical” version are viewed as blasphemy. A compelling example of this type of “mythical” thinking is the ideological campaign by Vladimir Medinsky, an assistant to the president and the former minister of culture, who has perpetuated the legend of “Panfilov's 28 Men” (*Panfilovtsy*, Russian: Панфиловцы). These were soldiers of the 1075th rifle regiment, killed in the battles near Moscow in November 1941. Although as early as 1948 an investigation carried by the USSR Military Prosecutor's Office proved that the legend was bogus, Medinski continued to promote his specific hagiography and went as far as to call the *Panfilovtsy* the “saints”. He even tried to lend credibility to the story by referring to alleged archival documents (*Medinskiy o 28 panfilovtsakh* 2016; Medinskiy 2018).

The Tomb of Unknown Soldier,  
Kremlin, Moscow, Russia.  
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A standard weapon used by Russia in its anti-Western information warfare is the notorious swapping of notions and roles. The West (including the pre-war Second Republic of Poland) is accused of being jointly responsible for the outbreak of the world conflict. This narrative was intensified in December 2019 when Poland became the victim of Russia's unprecedented propaganda attacks and was portrayed as Hitler's ally (Domańska 2019b). In this context, the Munich Agreement of 1938 has become a catch-all excuse used to whitewash all the hostile actions of the Soviet Union towards its neighbours, starting with the spring of 1939. Thus, Russian confrontational Cold War rhetoric dominates over the memory of the united allied effort in 1941–1945. Although the latter is not entirely excluded from the official state propaganda, the contribution of the Western allies to the victory is deliberately played down or glossed over. By contrast, the Soviet victory in the war against the Third Reich is presented as an almost self-reliant, unaided achievement.

The criticism of the pre-war West's policies, the immense suffering of the Soviet people during the war, and the emphasis on the unique contribution of the Soviet Union to the war effort—all of the above are meant to legitimise Russia's vision of desirable international order, both at the global and European level. Officially, this vision refers to a “non-bloc” system of “indivisible” international security, the exact shape of which should be determined by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (compare with, for example, Vladimir Putin's initiative presented in January 2020 at the World Holocaust Forum, regarding the need to call a summit of five permanent members of the Security Council to prevent the danger of conflicts and to maintain the world peace: Putin 2020b). In reality, Russia aims to revive and legitimise the system established at the Yalta Conference. First, it postulates the division of Europe into zones of influence and entrusting great powers with keeping these zones stable. Second, it seeks to gain official recognition of the principle of “non equal sovereignty”—a concept contradictory to international law, which assumes that only great powers with strong military potential can be fully sovereign, whereas the independence of other countries is limited by definition. The latter are expected to consider the interests of the powerful



international actors as the main guideline for their foreign and domestic policies. Satisfying these demands would mean enabling Russia to interfere with the Euro-Atlantic security architecture in the name of “stabilising” the international situation. At the same time, the safeguard mechanisms of the authoritarian regime (such as its increasing control over domestic information space) would diminish the capacity of the West to impact Moscow’s activities both within its zone of influence and beyond it.

The memory of the war and the 1945 Victory is heavily militarised and regularly used as a pretext to demonstrate Russia’s military power, which is, in turn, supposed to bolster its political claims. The traditional occasion is the annual Victory Day parade on May 9. Since 2000, Putin has made it the centrepiece of the national calendar, usurping Russia’s monopoly on the legacy of Victory (Yelchenko 2020). What deserves attention is the trivialisation of the war myth, often with a tawdry tinge, and the unreflective participation of the public in ideologised rituals, which results in further familiarisation with violence. Many of those who attend the mass events on 9 May dress up children in military uniforms and make up prams as plywood tanks or aircraft; also historical

Russian children disguised as Soviet soldiers from World War II.  
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reenactments are held, including scenes of executing Nazi collaborators. Paradoxically, such forms of expression are at odds with the sacral concept of Victory. Yet, at the same time, the profane elements consolidate and familiarise the elements of *sacrum* by unleashing the symbolic violence. The message is no longer—“No more war”; it rather implicates that any future war will end in victory (Arkhipova, Doronin, Kirzyuk, Radchenko, Sokolova, Titkov, Yugay 2017).

Given that emphasis is put on the triumphant and military aspects of the war myth, the attention focuses on the state and the authorities (personified by the army), rather than on the human and social dimension of the tragedy—while the latter is more and more stressed in the main strand of Western historiography. In Russia, the social aspect, if mentioned at all, is shaped by the state-centred narration and portrayed in an instrumental and one-dimensional way. Lifeless, cardboard heroes are merely *pars pro toto* of the state. This approach is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that the authorities are taking control over grassroots initiatives such as the “Immortal Regiment” (Domańska 2015). Attempts to give nuances to the myth of the stout-hearted Soviet patriots, to show multifaceted dimensions of life under occupation, including its inglorious episodes, and to analyse individual experience of “non-patriotic” wartime trauma are nipped in the bud. One example thereof is the negative attitude of the authorities towards the attempts to humanise the history of the siege of Leningrad. For instance, Телеканал Дождь, an independent internet television service, broadcast a programme in which respondents expressed their views concerning a hypothetical surrender of the city for the sake of civilians’ survival. The broadcast was followed by a widespread hate campaign against Dozhd. A similar slanderous attack was launched against Elena Chyzhova, the author of an essay “My memories from the siege”, in which she criticised Stalin’s activities as well as the contemporary Russian politics of history (Rogoža 2014, Chizhova 2019). Attempts to maintain the “living memory” of this humanitarian disaster, compared by Vladimir Putin to the Holocaust (Putin 2020c) and still largely unresearched, shatter the monolithic narrative of heroic fight that started with defence of Moscow and ended in the victorious attack on Berlin (Kantor 2019).

Russian warplanes leave the trail in Russian national colors, May 9 parade in 2016, Moscow, Russia.  
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At the same time, the official discourse carefully avoids the topic of Stalinist repression, and the few statements made by the authorities on this subject either relativize or minimise its scale (to the point of openly falsifying its causes and justifying the terror), or are limited to ritual commemoration. The latter is not accompanied either by naming the victims (this is done by non-governmental organisations, often persecuted by the authorities, such as Memorial), or even less by in-depth research on the mechanisms of terror and the responsibility of the perpetrators. The anonymity of the victims leads to the anonymity of the executioners and thus takes responsibility away from the state system. Consequently, the repression becomes an abstract notion. This approach also translates into the contemporary vision of state-citizen relationship: the anonymous individual is merely an element of an undefined mass, deprived of civil rights. Stalinist terror is also presented as a necessary cost of the modernisation of the Soviet state. This bias is not surprising given that the role of historians coming from the army and secret services (the institutions that consider themselves heirs of the KGB/NKVD/Cheka) has been growing since the 1990s (Darczewska 2019a; Darczewska 2019b). Attempts to create their own narrative of the Soviet period, and whitewash the image of the Soviet security apparatus, have gone hand in hand with the consolidation of Putin's ruling elite since 2000. At present, former KGB officers play leading roles among the chief Kremlin's decision makers.

The huge death toll of the USSR during the war has been used as an argument to deprecate the claims of the





neighbouring countries that they fell victim to the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions. Russia has been systematically countering any criticism of Soviet foreign policy before and during the war (it refers to the aggression against Poland and Finland, the annexation of the Baltic countries, mass killings of the Polish prisoners of war, and repression against the inhabitants of the annexed territories). Both legal provisions ("memory laws") and the neo-Soviet Kremlin's rhetoric are meant to justify the departure of the official narratives from the interpretations of war events which were prevalent at the

T-34/85 tanks during  
9 May parade in 2021,  
Moscow, Russia.

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turn of the 1980s and 1990s. That period is harshly criticised under Putin's regime as the time of "Smuta" [a reference to the period of the country's political disintegration at the beginning of the 17th century]. As the official propaganda puts it, the weakness of the state in the pre-Putin era made Russia adopt the "hostile" and "anti-state" Western viewpoint on its own history.

The re-Sovietisation of historical narratives is especially conspicuous as regards two themes: the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the Katyn massacre. Until the end of 1989, the pact was presented as a strictly defensive agreement and the USSR denied that any secret protocols to it had ever existed. In December 1989, the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union condemned the secret protocols and declared them invalid from the moment of signing. In 2009, in an article for Polish daily "Gazeta Wyborcza", Putin still claimed that there was "every reason" to condemn the pact (Putin 2009). The official narrative started to change noticeably in 2014: during a meeting with young historians, Putin mentioned "disputes" concerning the assessment of the pact (Putin 2014b) and relativised the partition of Poland in 1939 by comparing it to the Polish annexation of Zaolzie [part of Silesia seized by Poland in 1938 from Czechoslovakia]. He also reverted to the old interpretation of the pact as "a non-aggression agreement", which expressed the USSR's desire to avoid war. In the months and years that followed, the advocates of the pact became increasingly vocal; they defined it as the greatest achievement of Soviet diplomacy and a source of pride (for example, Medinskiy 2019; Ivanov 2019). New legal initiatives have been launched, too (so far with no support from the government), aiming at cancellation of the 1989 resolution adopted by the Congress of People's Deputies. The relevant bill was submitted to the State Duma on May 27, 2020, by Aleksey Zhuravlev, the leader of the nationalist Rodina party. In his explanatory memorandum, Zhuravlev stressed the discrepancy between the resolution and the principles of "historical justice" as well as Russia's political interests. He also claimed that the resolution was inspired by "external forces", seeking the dissolution of the USSR (*Zakonoproekt No. 963443-7 2020*). The conclusion and the implementation of the aggressive agreement are

in fact presented as justified methods of broadly defined «defence». The preventive use of force against other countries is treated as a legitimate way of pursuing national interests and strengthening the national security. This is also how Vladimir Putin justified the Soviet aggression against Finland in 1939 (Putin 2013).

There is a similar chasm between the official assessment of the Katyn massacre as of 1990 (NKWD was declared responsible for the massacre, the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office of the Soviet Union launched an investigation into this crime) and that of today. The latter is dominated by an "anti-Katyn" narrative and accompanied by the reorganisation of the symbolic space in Katyn and Tver, which aims to cover up the truth about the repression. The term "anti-Katyn" refers to the relativisation of the Soviet crime by propagating a spurious story about the Soviet prisoners of war deliberately exterminated in Polish POW camps (also referred to as "concentration camps") between 1919 and 1921. At the same time, the numbers of Soviet casualties (thousands of the POWs indeed died, mostly of infectious diseases) are regularly overstated, up to 100 thousand people—while the results of research carried out by Polish and Russian historians are unequivocal and contradict these inflated estimates (compare: Karpus 2002a; Karpus 2002b; *Krasnoarmeytsy* 2004; Materski 2006; *Jeńcy sowieccy* 2013; Olszewski 2012; Olszewski 2013; *Tuchola* 1997; *Tuchola* 1998; *Tuchola* 2007; *Aleksandrów* 2008; *Brześć* 2020; compare also the database of the Head Office of the Polish State Archives: *Red Army Soldiers and Internees in Prisoner of War and Internment Camps in Poland (1918–1924)*: <http://jency1920.archiwa.gov.pl/en>). These allegations are supposed to diminish the historical significance and the unprecedented character of the Katyn executions. Yet in 2010, Vladimir Putin, then the Prime Minister, condemned the massacre and called it an unjustifiable Stalinist crime. The resolution of the State Duma adopted the same year was maintained in a similar vein. However, in 2017–2018, two exhibitions organised in the Russian part of the necropolis in Katyn had an unmistakable anti-Polish stamp (Rogoża, Wyrwa 2019). On March 5, 2020, the day of the 80th anniversary of the

decision to execute the Polish prisoners of war taken by the Political Bureau of the Soviet Communist Party, the government agency RIA Novosti published a feature article presenting the crime as perpetrated by the Nazis (Shved 2020). On May 7, 2020, two memorial plaques were taken off a wall of the Medical University in Tver (where the NKVD prison was located during the war). The plaques commemorated the execution of the Poles, buried at the cemetery in Mednoye, and the Soviet victims of the NKVD.



## The Key Tools and Techniques of the Official Propaganda

Russia's politics of history is shaped in a centralised way (its main tenets are formulated in the Kremlin). However, it is implemented by a whole array of organisations and institutions of different status, which is supposed to simulate pluralism and ideological engagement at grassroots level. Most of the state propaganda activities are addressed to the Russian public and serve to legitimise the Kremlin's confrontational policy towards the West. The desired narratives are also propagated among Western audiences, although they have limited impact there. It is worth underlining that the Kremlin's domestic and foreign agendas often overlap (see below: it refers, for example, to the legal amendments on the protection of war monuments or the persecution of the Memorial Society).

The "canonical" version of the myth of the Great Patriotic War is disseminated across Russia by the powerful state machine: government institutions, state media, some academic circles, a network of organisations financed by the state, and the "patriotic" business entities close to the Kremlin. Among them the Russian Historical Society led by Sergei Naryshkin, the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, and the Russian Military Historical Society, run by Vladimir Medinski, the president's assistant take pride of place. The Kremlin's standard toolkit of historical propaganda consists of legal regulations which penalise "unpatriotic" historical views, restrict access to the archives, and indoctrinate children and youth through school curricula aligned with the official dogma.

Historical propaganda that targets foreign audiences uses multilingual media (such as RT television or the Sputnik news agency), a network of pseudo-nongovernmental organisations (that is, government-organised non-governmental organisations: GONGO), part of foreign academia, agents of influence, popular culture, as well as trolls and bots operating in social media. The message is addressed at foreign decision-makers, broadly understood opinion-forming circles, and the general public. Falsifying history is an important technique that underpins Russian information warfare and the active measures used to manipulate the collective consciousness.

One of the key instruments used for the protection of the official version of history is the law. Art. 354.1 on the “rehabilitation of Nazism”, introduced into the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in May 2014, penalises “unpatriotic” statements. Under this law, deliberate public dissemination of “false information” about the activities of the USSR during World War II, as well as denying the facts established by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg are subject to fines, community service or imprisonment for up to five years. It should be pointed out that the interpretation of this provision is highly subjective. Not only does the article penalise the denial of acknowledged facts (as is the case of memory laws adopted in other countries that prohibit the denial of the Holocaust), but it also criminalises certain interpretations of historical events, which bears all the hallmarks of censorship. According to the available data, as of May 2018, 19 convictions were issued under this article. Although no one was sentenced to prison, there were no acquittals, either (*Istoriya pod zapretom* 2018). However, in subsequent years the number of investigated cases grew significantly (*V Rossii* 2021) and first verdicts of imprisonment were issued. In addition, other provisions, including Art. 282 of the Penal Code on combating extremism, have been used at court to penalise for debating history. Also the repressive law on “foreign agents” is instrumentally used, as in the case of the Memorial Society, which has been investigating Soviet repression for several decades. It ultimately led to the liquidation of this organisation by a Russian court in December 2021. Administrative pressure exerted on researchers, historians and ordinary citizens is frequent, too (*Istoriya stanovitsya* 2018).

The Kremlin's "memory wars" involve the archives as well. Selectively declassified documents are presented as "evidence" to support disinformation campaigns. In recent years, there has been a growing tendency to deny access to the archives and to make previously declassified materials secret again. A standard practice of the Ministry of Defence (generally coinciding with the anniversaries of important events) is to publish biased selection of documents concerning World War II to glorify the role of the Red Army in Central Europe and discredit Russia's contemporary opponents. One example is the publication of documents on the 1944 Warsaw Rising (*Varshava v ogne* 2020) or an exhibition devoted to the origins of World War II, which laid the blame for the outbreak of war on Great Britain and Poland (Domańska 2019b).

Archives are deemed an especially valuable political resource; as such, they are carefully protected. The authorities can fully control history publications as long as they deny the independent historians access to the documents. It is particularly problematic to examine records relating to the Stalinist terror, which is an inconvenient theme for today's "Chekists" (among them the FSB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) who explicitly build their professional ethos on the tradition of the Cheka, NKVD and KGB (*FSB rasstavlyayet* 2017). The legal provisions concerning state secrets are abused to cover up undesirable content. Indicative of this malpractice was a decree signed by Vladimir Putin in 2001. It dissolved the commission for the declassification of the CPSU documents, which had been established in 1994, and transferred its prerogatives to the inter-ministerial commission for the protection of state secrets. This new body included, among others, deputy heads of the FSB, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that is, the institutions interested in classifying rather than declassifying information (Melenberg 2008). In 2014, the commission decided to extend the declassification date of the archival collections of the Soviet security services from 1917–1991 for another 30 years—until 2044. It was justified by the "ongoing sensitivity" of these data and their importance for Russia's national security (for further details, see Petrov 2001; Evstifeyev 2016; *Istoriya stanovitsya* 2018). Another recent initiative, endorsed by Putin in January 2020, was the idea to



establish a separate archive for the World War II materials; it is supposed to “silence” those who try to “distort” and “falsify” history, and “belittle the role of the heroes who saved the world from the brown [i.e. Nazi] plague” (Putin 2020a; Putin 2020d).

The educational system is yet another channel that disseminates the official vision of history—through history curricula, school textbooks and patriotic education programmes. Vladimir Putin deliberately puts patriotic education of the youth in the context of international information warfare; he also frequently points to the “imposition of foreign values” as an element of inter-state rivalry (Putin 2012). The myth of the Great Patriotic War is the centrepiece of history teaching programmes. The official canon is secured by the “uniform education standard” of teaching history that was adopted in 2014 on Putin’s recommendation. School textbooks based on this standard include sections on the special role of Crimea and Sevastopol in the history of the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia; it is intended to provide rationale for the annexation of the peninsula in 2014 (Khapaeva 2016). In the context of the war against Ukraine, the battles fought by the Red Army in

Russian children disguised as Soviet soldiers from World War II sitting on the memorial with T-34 tank. May 9, 2016. Kaliningrad, Russia. © polyalya / Shutterstock

Crimea, including the defence of Sevastopol (October 30, 1941 to July 4, 1942), have acquired a special symbolic meaning that falls within the broader context of defending the empire. In July 2014, Putin said:

[...] we could not allow NATO forces to seize the Crimea and Sevastopol, the land of Russian military glory. Such fundamental shift in the balance of power in the Black Sea basin would mean giving up everything that Russia had fought for since the times of Peter the Great [...] (Putin 2014a).

The topics that students are supposed to learn throughout their school education include the glorification of the strong state power and territorial conquests as the determinant of the state might (Potapova 2018). The Concept of patriotic education adopted in 2003 is centred on the need to restore Russia's great power status (*Kontseptsiya* 2003; more: Khodzhaeva, Meyer 2017). At the same time the programme of education is militarised, which is demonstrated, among other things, by promotion of the membership in paramilitary organisations for children and young people. These entities are managed by secret services and law enforcement bodies. *Yunarmiya* (*Юнармия*, Young Army), established under the patronage of the Ministry of Defence, as well as cadet classes and schools (Khodzhaeva, Meyer 2017), distinguish themselves among other organisations of this kind. According to the official data, as of January 2022, one million members (children and youth, aged from 8 to 18) had joined *Yunarmiya*. Many have been enrolled at schools as the latter actively engage in the recruitment process. Many parents believe that membership in this organisation is a way to secure their children future careers in state administration. Additionally, there exist thousands of clubs and associations for children and youth that organise military and sports camps and festivals. Such events involve war reenactments, weapon training courses and classes on patriotism – all wrapped in ideological indoctrination that fuels the fear of war. According to Sergei Shoygu, the Minister of Defence, 1,660 summer patriotic (military and sports) camps for children and adolescents were organised in 2019 (Shoygu 2019). Patriotic competitions and military indoctrination are organised even in kindergartens (Radulova 2016).

## All the Kremlin's Wars



The sacred myth of the Great Patriotic War is, in a way, the archetype of all later “defensive” wars waged by the USSR and Russia (from the interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, through to Afghanistan in 1979, as well as the wars in Donbas and Syria, that have been waged since 2014 and 2015 respectively). Each time their goal was to fend off invented or deliberately exaggerated threats, including through operations carried out in remote areas—in line with the logic of forward defence.

The declared aim of the Russian intervention in Syria was a “forward defence” against Islamic terrorism while in fact it was nothing else but a proxy war against the US (meant to prevent another “colour revolution” and enable Russia to return to the geopolitical game in the Middle East). In May 2018, the first “Immortal Regiment” march was organised in Syria to commemorate the soldiers of the Great Patriotic War (such marches are organised each year in Russia and among the Russian diaspora abroad). During this celebration not only the portraits of Great Patriotic War soldiers but also photographs of those who were killed in the “fight against terrorism” were displayed (Lysenko, Balandina 2018). The myth of the eternal return of the “just war” enables Russia to modify the narrative and maintain the underlying templates unchanged. The assumed pattern is that a treacherous attack from the West, or even a risk of such an attack (including alleged attempts to overthrow the legitimate government), should trigger a heroic resistance of the community consolidated around its leader. The sense of moral mission should make people overcome the existential threats to the physical or spiritual survival of the nation. In order to justify the violation of other states’ sovereignty and territorial integrity, both in the past and today, Russia invokes extra-legal categories, such as the national interest, national security, the will of the nation, truth or justice, and hints at the historical imperial community (Menkiszak 2014).

In 2014, Russia exploited the myth of the Great Patriotic War to actually revive the Brezhnev doctrine. Like in the past,

it is supposed to justify military interventions in Russia's sphere of influence. The rationale behind it is the self-defence against the penetration by a hostile ideology (liberal democracy and "colour revolutions") that generates centrifugal tendencies in the territories of the former empire. To counterbalance that ideology, a project known as the "Russian world" (*russskiy mir*) has been conceived. This concept, based on common history and the brotherhood of arms in 1941–1945, hinges on the idea of a civilisational community that brings together ethnic Russians and representatives of other nations from the former Soviet Union who identify with the Russian language, Russian or Soviet culture, and often the Orthodox religion in its cultural dimension. Ukraine and Belarus, linked by "eternal" bonds with Russia and thus seen as not fully sovereign, play a significant role in this project. Yet, though Russia is determined to wield its influence in these countries, its efforts are often counterproductive (Domańska 2019b; Olszański 2017).

The lexicon of the Great Patriotic War, meant to legitimise the "Brezhnev-Putin" doctrine, found its practical application in the unprecedented, anti-Ukrainian smear campaign that accompanied Russia's armed attack on that country in 2014. This enterprise engaged all federal TV and radio channels, newspapers, Kremlin-controlled Internet media, and a host of diplomats, politicians, experts, academic and culture elites. Pro-European Ukrainians were called "fascists" or "Nazis". What was intended to have the strongest propaganda firepower in the international arena were accusations of an alleged revival of Ukrainian "anti-Semitism" and "pogroms". In this narrative, the European Union and the United States supported the "revival of Ukrainian Nazism" ("Banderism"), and tried to destabilise Russia by sparking another "colour revolution"—this time "a fascist" one—at its borders. In turn, NATO's alleged plans to militarise Crimea were brought into play as a justification of Russia's preventive military intervention. Fake news about alleged barbarous acts committed by Ukrainian "neo-Nazis" (alternatively called "terrorists" or "bandits") were supposed to dehumanise the proponents of Ukraine's integration with the West and to rekindle the idea of the eschatological fight against the "absolute evil".

The aggressive language was marked by hyperboles that lost any semblance of probability—for the goal was solely to confirm the cyclical trajectory of the myth in which “fascism” has not been uprooted, and the struggle against it is eternal. The portrait of archetypal evil was built from allegorical themes depicting the extreme cruelty of the Enemy, which was supposed to legitimise the use of violence in a “just war”. Shocking, yet spurious information on the alleged poisoning of water intakes by the “Banderites”, the crucifixion of children or building concentration camps near Donetsk was broadly disseminated. Russian officials compared the fire of the trade union building in Odessa, in May 2014, to “genocide” reminiscent of Nazi crimes of the World War II. Anti-terrorist operations of the Ukrainian army in Donbas were called “pacification actions” (another allusion to Nazi occupation). Putin compared one of those to the Nazi siege of Leningrad—a symbol of the Soviet people’s wartime ordeal. Although Russia played with similar accusations of “Nazism” during the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and the war with Georgia in 2008, their scale had never been as massive as during the Revolution of Dignity (NATO Analysis 2014; Poulsen 2014; Kuzio 2020).

Russian aggression, covered as a mission to liberate the Russian and the Russian-speaking population from the alleged “Nazi” threat, was nothing else but a quasi-Cold War “proxy war” against the West over the dominance in the Russian “traditional sphere of influence”. At the same time, the very idea of Ukrainian statehood was called into question. The arguments echoed those of the Soviet propaganda at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s, which had been meant to justify the military aggression against neighbouring countries, including Poland. In spring 2014, Putin suggested that Russia’s security guarantees for Ukraine, enshrined in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, may have expired due to the “interruption of the continuity of Ukrainian statehood” caused by the “revolution” (Putin 2014c).

To legitimise its great power ambitions, Moscow also idealises the military interventions that took place in the second half of the 20th century, mainly those in Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979–1989). Its harsh rhetoric mirrors the Kremlin’s domestic political concerns and interests. There is

a clear tendency to restore the official Soviet interpretations of those interventions and rehabilitate them, which has been expressed in several draft documents submitted to the parliament. Although these documents have not been approved by the authorities, they are compatible with the Kremlin's general attitude towards the Soviet legacy. Among other things, legal revision of the resolutions adopted in the late USSR has been proposed. In November 2018, a draft resolution was submitted to the Duma revising the position of the 1989 Congress of People's Deputies (which condemned the deployment of Soviet troops to Afghanistan). The 1989 resolution was claimed inconsistent with the "principles of historical justice" and "historical truth" (V Gosdume 2018). A proposal was also put forward to raise the status of Afghan war veterans to that enjoyed by the veterans of the Great Patriotic War. A similar demand was made with regard to the participants in the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia (Borisov 2019). In order to justify the latter case, the deputies of the KPRF stated in 2016 that the aim of the operation "Danube" [intervention in Czechoslovakia] was to "suppress an attempted coup and stabilise the situation in the CSRS". The alternative, as they claimed, was to "allow the potential enemy to forcibly change the political system and deploy its troops on the territory of the CSRS, and to revise the outcome of World War II". At that time, the project did not receive the support of the party of power—United Russia. Nevertheless, such ideas fall on fertile ground in Russian society. According to Lev Gudkov, the head of the independent Levada Center (a sociological research organisation), the Russians' viewpoint on the intervention in Czechoslovakia is based mainly on the state propaganda (Kara-Murza 2018).

Furthermore, the state media coverage of the 1956 Soviet intervention in Hungary (on its 60th anniversary, in October 2016) confirmed that historical narratives are subject to domestic political goals. In one of the major broadcasts, the Hungarian uprising was called "the first colour revolution in history" that allegedly involved Nazi military groups and was orchestrated by Western intelligence services who used "techniques of turning peaceful protest into bloody chaos". The violent suppression of the insurgency was presented as "restoration of the socialist rule of law" (Vesti nedeli 2016).

The Yalta-like perspective presented above, and the narrative praising the moral superiority of Russia—as Europe’s liberator from Nazism—has resulted in Moscow’s strong opposition to the de-Sovietisation of symbolic space in its neighbouring countries (the most radical example thereof is the decommunisation process in Ukraine implemented after the Revolution of Dignity—see: Olszański 2017). Cultivating the memory of the Soviet soldiers-liberators is officially claimed to be a matter of great moral and political importance (see, for example, the statement by the chairman of the Federation Council’s Committee for International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev: Golubkov 2019). Russia not only condemns any attempts to decommunise the public space abroad, but also uses threats and suggests it will implement its own laws beyond the country’s borders. When the monument of Marshal Ivan Koniev was pulled down in Prague in April 2020, the Russian Investigative Committee took steps to initiate the proceedings under Art. 354.1 of the Penal Code (countering the “rehabilitation of Nazism”). Vladimir Medinski, President Putin’s assistant, insisted that the “perpetrators” should be punished “with all the severity of the Russian law” (*V SK RF* 2020). The same month, Vladimir Putin put through the amendments to the Russian penal code that introduced penalties (including imprisonment of up to five years) for the destruction or damage of war memorials and military cemeteries, both inside and outside Russia (Federal Law 112-FZ 2020). Formerly, criminal liability had only been imposed for damaging historical and cultural monuments. The dispute over the interpretation of the “liberation” and the role of the Red Army in the post-war Eastern Europe came up again in September 2019 in the context of Russian-Bulgarian relations (*Evropu* 2019). In previous years, Russia launched, among other things, a disinformation campaign in response to the Polish decommunisation law of 2016. Before that, in 2007, it sparked riots in Tallinn and launched a massive cyber-attack on Estonia after the monument of the Soviet “soldiers-liberators” had been removed from the centre of the capital city. A recurring topic in propaganda broadcasts is the “ingratitude” of the liberated nations and their attempts to “revise the historical truth”. An interesting overview of the propaganda concepts referring to the USSR policies during the war, and in the pre-war and

post-war periods (including the role of the Soviet army abroad) was presented, among others, in “Война за память” (“War for Memory”)—a film by Aleksey Kondrashov, broadcast on the state channel *Россия 1* on May 8, 2020 (*Voyna za pamyat*, 2020).

In addition, Russia regularly criticises other European models of historical memory and the resolutions of international organisations that undermine the canonical Russian-Soviet version of the myth of victory and liberation. The criticism primarily targets two resolutions. First, it is the one adopted by the European Parliament in September 2019, which stated that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the direct cause of World War II. Second—the resolution by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly of 2009, which equated the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism. Moscow also regularly postulates that the UN General Assembly adopt a resolution adding the victory over Nazism and monuments to the soldiers-liberators to the World Heritage List. Formally, the goal of the initiative is to “prevent the resurgence of Nazism”, but the real reasons are different. Above all, Russia seeks to strengthen its bargaining position in international relations and promote the idea to reshape the global order. It also attempts to constrain the freedom of historical research abroad and neutralise claims against Moscow regarding the annexation of adjacent territories in 1939–1945. Last but not least, it claims the right to interfere with the internal affairs of other countries to safeguard the special status of monuments to Soviet soldiers as material tokens of Russia’s “privileged interests” in Central and Eastern Europe.

Eroding legitimacy of the Putin’s model of rule, which has intensified since 2020, bleak economic forecasts and the falling approval ratings of the president may enhance the temptation of further securitisation of history. The neo-Soviet rhetoric, revolving around the memory of the Great Patriotic War and Russia’s great-power ambitions, will most likely escalate. One can expect new draft laws rehabilitating the Soviet vision of history and imposing severe penalties for undermining it. In all likelihood, the anti-Western narratives will intensify, as well as propaganda campaigns exploiting the syndrome of the “besieged fortress” and Russia’s fight against enemies.

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