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Yulia Nikitina

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Past Memories, Future Memories: Race Against History

Yulia Nikitina

MGIMO University

Why should we talk about history, memory, and commemorations of the Second World War? The farther in the past, the less painful memories should be, but contrary to these expectations, every new anniversary of the Victory in the Second World War brings about new ‘memory wars’ instead of reconciliation and pacification. What makes leaders born after the conflict so moved and emotionally involved in these debates? The answer is that ‘memory wars’ are not about the past; they are about the present and, even more so, about the future. Thus when in 2020 Russian policy makers talk about 1945 or 1939, they actually mean 1991 or 2024, which definitely makes it personal.

Why is 1945 about 1991?

The current round of memory debates about the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and secret protocols started in the autumn of 2019 with the Pact’s 80th anniversary. Russia, Poland, and the Baltic states were the primary participants in this ‘True or False’ panel. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a wall-building game rather than an ice-breaking exercise. In the European Parliament resolution from 19 September 2019, entitled ‘On the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe’, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are blamed for having ‘paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War’.¹

This resolution was in a way a response to two publications by Russian policy makers in late August 2019 justifying the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The first, by the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service and the chair of the Russian Historic Society, Sergey Naryshkin, described the Pact as an act of self-defense and suggested that the blame should be shared with Great Britain and France for having failed to create an anti-Hitler coalition with the USSR prior to August 1939.² The second, by the then-chair of the Russian Military History Society and the minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, went a step further

CONTACT Yulia Nikitina ✉ y.nikitina@inno.mgimo.ru 📧 Center for the Post-Soviet Studies, MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia.

¹European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html.

²S. Naryshkin, ‘Inogo Vykhoda ne Bylo’, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 22 August 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/08/22/reshenie-sssr-zakliuchit-pakt-o-nenapadenii-s-germaniej-osnovyvalos-na-razvedke.html>.

and openly called the Pact ‘a Soviet diplomatic triumph’ (however, he recognized that his characterization was ‘on the verge of decency’).³ After the European Parliament resolution, Russia entered a race against time with the goal to find out the ultimate historic truth before the May 2020 World War II 75th anniversary celebrations.⁴

What is at stake in this race? For Russia, it is a seat at the table where the rules of the world order are elaborated. The Kremlin believes that in 1991 Russia was denied its rightful place — as successor of the Soviet Union — in the world hierarchy. In the eyes of the Russian political elites, the crisis in relations with the West started not in 2014 but as early as 1991, when the West proclaimed itself winner of the Cold War and thus the maker of the post-bipolar world order. The logic of international relations is that only established great powers have the right to be global norm makers (and, to be frank, norm breakers). How can you achieve the status of a great power? One way is to be recognized as such by other great powers, which is not an option for today’s Russia. If we try to measure some ‘objective’ parameters of ‘great powerness’, we will have to admit that Russian material capabilities and human capital are not in the best shape, with the exception of the nuclear status and the veto power at the UN Security Council, both inherited from the USSR.

Russia also sees history as a means to secure great power status, as the prestige of being a victor in great wars is believed to bestow such a status. Thus, it is vital for Russia to prove that the Soviet contribution to the victory over Nazism was crucial. In turn, it is essential to refute attempts by the Baltic and Eastern European states to taint the Soviet achievement by suggesting that the Second World War ‘was caused by the notorious Nazi-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression of 23 August 1939’. Thus if, in the eyes of the Western commentators, the USSR caused the war, in this logic, it has no moral right to be a norm maker after winning it (including the right for the division of the spheres of influence in Europe). As the legal successor of the USSR, modern Russia’s status as the primary victor in the Second World War would mean a pass to the club of great powers by default, with no need to support the status with economic capabilities or the recognition of other great powers.

Why is 1939 about 2024?

The 75th anniversary of the Victory in the Second World War is also about Russia’s future after 2024 when the presidential term of Vladimir Putin expires. No matter whether he stays in power or leaves, after so many years in politics, he cannot be indifferent to what future generations will think about his political and economic legacy. The major problem with remembering

³V. Medinsky, ‘Diplomaticeskyy Triumph SSSR’, *RIA Novosti*, 23 August 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190823/1557826932.html>.

⁴V. Putin, ‘The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II’, *The National Interest* 18 (2020).

people and epochs is the criteria that we use for our assessments. Should we assess the expediency of political decisions on the basis of historic norms accepted at that time or on the basis of present-day norms, which have evolved over time? Should we criticize the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, for being a slaveholder? The position of the Russian political elites seems to be that only historic standards and norms should be applied to the analysis of the events of 1939; Western elites insist on today's normative standards for the interpretation of the past.

Remembrance is not only time sensitive but also culture sensitive. The rising popularity of Stalin in Russia astonishes foreign commentators. At the same time, in the Russian public memory, Mikhail Gorbachev remains the person who brought a great country to its collapse, and Boris Yeltsin is mostly remembered for his vodka dancing. In the Western audiences, both politicians symbolize democratic reforms.

The temptation for all sides of the memory wars is to believe that there may be winners and losers in this race against historic time and that there is an 'ultimate truth' out there. Normative progress can be only the result of a dialogue where all the parties do not take the arguments at their face value but go beyond them to understand each other's motivation and to decipher historic enigmas and talk about the underlying concerns directly.

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Notes on contributor

Dr. Yulia Nikitina is a leading research fellow at the Center for Post-Soviet Studies, MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia.