Modern Russian Memory of the Great War, 1914-1920

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
The Empire and Nationalism at War

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Speaking at the Council of the Russian Federation on 27 June 2012, recently re-elected President V.V. Putin claimed that Russia’s defeat in the First World War was “a result of the national betrayal by the Bolshevik leadership.” According to Putin, it was because they were afraid to admit that the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty had been a mistake that the Bolsheviks called the First World War “imperialist” and refrained from commemorating the heroism of the Russian Army. The president promised to allocate money for the maintenance of Europe’s largest burial site for those who fell in the Great War, in Belgrade, where 124 generals of the tsarist army and numerous rank-and-file Russian soldiers were buried.  

In December 2012, Putin approved making 1 August, the day when Russia entered the war in 1914, the official commemoration day of those who died in the Great War. The president criticized the absence of such state-sponsored commemorations to date as an unjust consequence of “certain political [and] ideological considerations.” The Kremlin’s endorsement of the public commemoration of a previously neglected historical event was one element in a broader government-led project of constructing a usable past for the purpose of national consolidation, an end vigorously pursued since Putin’s first presidency.

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1 *Interfax*, 27 June 2012. In May 2012, the United Russia party identified the maintenance of this cemetery as one of its patriotic projects. See [http://rs.gov.ru/node/31556](http://rs.gov.ru/node/31556) (accessed 29 June 2012).

The instrumental and selective utilization of the past for the purpose of addressing current societal or political issues, which was so strikingly evident throughout Eastern Europe in the first decade of the new millennium, is referred to in scholarly literature as the “politics of memory” and “politics of history.” Both terms, which are often used interchangeably, presuppose the understanding of collective memory as a social construct and a present-oriented system of discourses, symbols and social practices. Yet, whereas the term “politics of memory” tends to embrace activities undertaken by a wide range of actors with differing (and not necessarily immediately politically significant) interests in the historical past, the “politics of history” has from the outset referred more narrowly to activities aimed at promoting particular interpretations of the past, above all, by, or with the support of, the country’s political leadership. It seems that it is analytically useful to maintain this distinction. The examples of the construction of public narratives about the past discussed in this article allow us to consider how the effectiveness of the politics of history, or the historical myth-making managed by national political elites, relates to the existence (or lack of) various types of memory, including “mass personal memory”, as well as to works which are presented as historical research.


5 See, A. Miller, “Istoricheskaia politika v Vostochnoi Evrope nachala XXI v.”, in Istoricheskaia politika v XXI veke, ed. Miller and Lipman, 7, which notes that the term Geschichtspolitik (the politics of history) was coined in the 1980s as a condemnatory definition of the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s initiatives to encourage a revision of interpretations of Germany’s past. The term, coined by Kohl’s critics, was then revived in 2004 by right-wing historians and politicians in Poland, again in reference to state-sponsored initiatives to promote a particular interpretation of the past. For this group of politicians the expression ceased to have a negative connotation. For further discussion of the differing uses of the term “the politics of history,” see Martin O. Heisler, “Introduction: The Political Currency of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity,” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences 617, no.1 (2008): 16.

6 Timothy Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine,” in Memory and Power in Post-War Europe, ed. Mueller, 39 and 50 makes a useful distinction between two types
Until 2010, the Great War—if one adheres to its conventional dates of 1914-1918—was marginalized in the state-sponsored narratives of Russian national history. This marginalization, which began as soon as the war ended, has set Soviet and post-Soviet Russia apart from West European states, where the memory of the First World War has been widely cultivated, including at state level. At the same time, the Soviet/Russian approach to the memory of the Great War has been in line with its treatment in Eastern Europe. The roots of this East European distinctiveness are to be found in the specificity of the situation in the region at the time the war ended. In the east of Europe the Great War triggered imperial collapse, the emergence of nationalizing states, and the first successful communist revolution. But both nationalizing and communist states required new foundation myths of the kind the Great War was unable to provide. In those new states, it would be the post-war conflicts about the division of imperial space, the drawing of new state borders and, in the Soviet case, also the October Revolution of 1917 that the East European political elites would come to utilize for their myth-making. Soviet propaganda habitually called the Great War “illegitimate” and “imperialist,” as Putin pointed out in his 2012 statement. Later on, the importance of the Second World War for citizens of the Soviet Union and intensive state-sponsored commemoration projects around that war further overshadowed the Great War in public consciousness.

Even if we accept Karen Petrone’s argument that the marginalization of Great War memory in the Soviet state did not mean its complete absence, it is clear that by the time the USSR collapsed, the Great War did not feature in Russia’s collective memory. In this context, it of memory. One is mass personal memory, defined as “the recollection of a large number of individuals of events in which they took part”, and the other is national memory, understood as “the organizational principle, or set of myths by which nationally conscious individuals understand the past and its demands on the present”. See also Ewa Ochman, “Soviet War Memorials and the Reconstruction of National and Local Identities in Post-Communist Poland,” Nationalities Papers, 38, no. 4 (2010): 509-30.

8 Merridale, Night of Stone.
9 Petrone, The Great War in Russian Memory.
comes as no surprise to learn that for almost two decades after the collapse of the communist regime, only few politically significant efforts were made to revise the Soviet narrative about the war itself and that it continued to be criticized as “imperialist” in history textbooks. The period did, however, witness a change of narrative about the civil war and other post World War I conflicts. Positive representations of the Whites appeared and the Soviet-Polish War of 1919-1920 started to feature prominently in newly articulated historical narratives during the 1990s and particularly after Putin first became president. One particular episode from that war, the plight of Red Army soldiers who died in Polish detention camps, became a widely-used tool of the politics of history.

Yet, as we will see in this article, another turn in the politics of history occurred in 2010. In that year the Kremlin virtually stopped using the plight of the Red Army POWs as a major example of “Russian victimhood,” choosing instead the First World War as a symbol of Russia’s heroism and sacrifice in the early twentieth century. This specific turn in history politics has been connected not only with the approaching centennial of the Great War, but has been linked to a broader revision of the Kremlin-sponsored historical narrative about the Soviet regime, which took place at the end of the first decade of the new millennium in response to particular domestic and international developments.

These two, at first glance very different, projects of history politics have, in fact, been closely linked. Moscow-based nationalist think tank, the Historical Perspective Foundation articulated an interpretation tying together the Great War and the Soviet-Polish conflict. In its interpretation, the Great War concluded not in 1918, but in 1920, with the end of the Soviet-Polish War. Before this interpretation was put forward in 2010, the Foundation actively contributed to publicizing the plight of the Soviet POWs in Poland as an important example of “Russian victimhood”; and, moreover, the incorporation of the Soviet-Polish War in the Foundation’s representation of the Great War was made at a time when the exploitation of the
Soviet POW issue, as a separate, self-standing matter of major historical and current political importance, ceased to enjoy the Kremlin’s support.¹⁰

This article analyzes the ways that the state-sponsored narratives about the Soviet-Polish War and the Great War have been conceived and disseminated; it also accounts for the, at times distinct, role of non-state actors in the process. It considers what the fluctuations of history politics around the war and the post-war conflict tell us about Russian nation-building projects, ideology, the role of the public intellectual, and the balance between historical writings and other types of memory in Kremlin-sponsored memory projects.

The historical projects discussed here also allow us to explore the origins of the ‘memory wars’ that took place in Eastern Europe during the first decade of the new millennium. Putin’s policies, often described by his critics as neo-imperial, as well as his confrontational stance towards the West, are commonly seen as key reasons for the intensity of battles around the past between Russia, on the one hand, and other post-communist states, on the other.¹¹ In contrast, Aleksei Miller has emphasized the reactive aspect of Putin’s politics of history. In his account, the first decade of the new millennium was marked by steps taken by the Russian elites in response to various initiatives of East European neighbors, and within the context of the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the United States.¹² A close scrutiny of the two interlinked memory projects allows us to test the validity of these interpretations.

The article is structured chronologically, starting with the developments that took place between 1990 and 2009, when the narrative about the plight of the Red Army POWs was first articulated and then instrumentally used, during the first decade of the new millennium, to settle scores in the ‘memory war’ with Poland. It will then turn to analyzing the changes that

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¹¹ See, for instance, N. Koposov, Pamiat strogogo rezhima (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011), 229.
crystallized in 2010 when, in the context of the overall revision of the Kremlin-sponsored interpretation of twentieth-century Russian history, the First World War became the subject of a state-sponsored commemorative project.

**The Politics of History from 1990 to 2009: the Case of Red Army POWs of the Soviet-Polish War**

The Soviet-Polish War of 1919-1920 hardly featured in public consciousness during the Soviet period. The only time that the episode was utilized in Soviet propaganda was 1939, when it was evoked to justify the Red Army invasion of eastern Poland. Scholarly research into the Soviet-Polish War was not explicitly banned, but its neglect by Soviet historians was due to the absence of state-sponsored demand for such research. As for the plight of the Soviet POWs in Poland, in 1920-1921 it attracted the attention of the Russian émigré press, which cited extremely high mortality rates in Polish POW camps, labelling them “death camps.” Yet, no long-term memory tradition around this episode ever formed in “Russia abroad.”

Efforts to turn the plight of the Soviet POWs into a major historical episode and an important element of the memory of Russian/Soviet victimhood date back no further than 1990. This was a period when, within the context of dramatically increased opportunities for expressing differing opinions, the politics of history and of memory began in earnest in the USSR and it became apparent that both the politics of history and the politics of memory had the power to legitimize and delegitimize political actors and positions. The Kremlin’s acknowledgement that various atrocities had been committed by the Soviet regime contributed to the overall de-

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14 Currently, the most widely cited report is the one published in the Russian émigré Warsaw-based newspaper *Svoboda*, 19 October 1921.
legitimization of Communist Party rule. The impact of such acknowledgements on the USSR’s internal situation and international relations was, however, of concern to M.S. Gorbachev’s leadership. The myth surrounding the treatment of Red Army POWs was an attempt to deal with this impact. From the outset it was intended as a “replacement memory” project. It operated to counter the importance attributed in Poland to the Katyn massacre, in which, in 1940, on the order of the top Soviet political leadership, almost 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals were executed by the Soviet NKVD. Reportedly it was Gorbachev who, at the time of the Soviet government’s acknowledgement of Soviet responsibility for Katyn, in 1990, instructed

the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Office of the Prosecutor

General of the USSR, the USSR Ministry of Defence and the

USSR State Security Committee to conduct... research in order to

uncover archival material related to the history of the Soviet-

Polish bilateral relations which would demonstrate that damage

was inflicted on the Soviet side [by the Poles]. The uncovered

data should be used, if necessary, in the negotiations with the

Polish side...  

This is how and why the story about high death rates among Soviet POWs in Poland was “discovered” in Russia and suddenly endowed with nation-wide and international significance. However, the Soviet Union soon collapsed, and in the early post-communist period top political leaders did not promote the construction of a new, coherent narrative about the past, partly because it was impossible to reach a modicum of consensus about

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complex and painful historical issues and partly because community-building initiatives were neglected overall.

Retrospectively, it seems an oversight on the part of the first post-communist leadership, headed by President Boris Yeltsin, to have made little use of history and memory politics, and not to pay more attention to the sphere of post-communist nation-building, and identity formation more broadly, particularly given the extent to which public discussions about the past had demonstrated their political utility in the final years of the Soviet regime. The fact that the story about the Soviet POWs specifically failed to catch the attention of leading politicians in the early post-communist period is not surprising, however. At the time, Yeltsin’s position was resolutely anti-communist. The main government-led political exploitation of historical issues in that period was connected with the “Trial of the CPSU” conducted by the Russian Constitutional Court in 1992, during which the government was keen to publicize various crimes committed by the Communist regime, rather than to present East European governments with “counter claims” about their “historical guilt” vis-à-vis Russia. And so, during most of the 1990s, the plight of Soviet POWs in Poland was exploited largely by a small group of pro-communist military historians, who dramatized the episode. Negative responses to such publications also appeared in Russia; these criticized

17 Miller, “Istoricheskaia politika v Rossii,” 329 attributes this neglect to the fact that in the early 1990s Russian society was split in its attitude towards the communist past, thus making the articulation of a historical narrative, which could help consolidate society around the new government, very difficult.
I. V. Mikhutina, Polsko-sovetskaia voina 1991-1920 (Moscow: Slavianskaia letopis’, 1994), and I.V. Mikhutina, “Tak skol’ko zhe sovetskikh voennoplennykh pogiblo v Polshe v 1919-1921 gg.?” Novaia i noveishaia istoriia, no. 3 (1995): 64-9. A statement by the Russian Consul in Kraków to the effect that Marshal Piłsudski’s crimes were comparable to those of Stalin, because his “concentration camps” for the Soviet POWs allegedly claimed 60,000 lives, was most likely Shardakov’s initiative, rather than an action sanctioned by Moscow. In some of the Polish media, however, the Consul’s statement was interpreted as a manifestation of the Russian government-sponsored campaign aimed at neutralising the impact of the revelations about Katyn. See such an interpretation in A. V. Torkunov and A. D. Rotfeld, Belye piatna – chernye piatna. Slozhnye voprosy v rossiisko-polskih otnosheniakh (Moscow: Aspekt press, 2010), 68.
exaggerated claims about the mortality rate among the POWs and emphasized that the prisoners had tended to die of illnesses and the poor conditions which were generally prevalent in war-devastated Poland, rather than being killed on the order of the authorities.\textsuperscript{20}

A growing interest in identity politics on the part of the Russian political establishment and the accompanying use of history for political purposes marked only the final years of Yeltsin’s presidency, with its search for the so-called “Russian idea.” Indeed, as Miller argues, it was in the late 1990s that a particular narrative about the Soviet past, one which would be consistently promoted by the Kremlin under Putin, had begun to take shape.\textsuperscript{21} A 1998 letter from the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation to the State Procurator’s Office of Poland demanding that the Polish side conduct an investigation into the plight of the Red Army POWs confirms Miller’s claim that the roots of Putin’s history politics reach back to the late Yeltsin period. A number of articles about “the Polish Katyn for the Russians” simultaneously appeared in the Russian press.\textsuperscript{22}

What could be called a full-scale government-orchestrated media campaign around the issue of the Soviet POWs began in the spring of 2000, at the time of the 60th anniversary of the Katyn massacre. In 1999, Timothy Snyder argued that in the course of the first post-communist decade, East European elites, particularly in Poland, learned to put aside “the mental habit of treating international politics as a means of rectifying the national past.”\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{23} Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory”, 57.
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in the last years of the twentieth century there appeared signs of a nationalist turn in both Russian and Polish politics, giving a sense that Snyder’s optimism had been premature.24

The politics of history around Katyn in 2000 in Poland reflected deep divisions on the Polish political scene. On the one hand, the two chambers of the Polish Parliament, on the initiative of right-wing politicians who eventually became members of the Kaczyński brothers’ Law and Justice Party (PiS), adopted resolutions on Katyn that equated Nazi with communist “crimes of genocide” against Polish citizens and called for the identification and punishment of those perpetrators who were still alive. Vague references were made to “legal liability” (presumably of contemporary Russia) for Stalin’s crimes. Overall, the resolutions did not clearly distinguish between the Soviet Union and Russia. The extent to which Soviet culpability had been acknowledged by Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s governments was not fully spelled out in the documents.25 On the other hand, Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who during his election campaign promoted the view that the Poles should reject reckoning with the past, delivered a commemoration speech in Warsaw which stressed that the massacre had not been committed by the Russian people, but by the system of which Russians and other Soviet citizens were themselves victims: in fact, Poles and Russians shared in the “brotherhood of suffering.” In contrast to the parliament’s resolutions, Kwaśniewski did not call for any further investigation into Soviet culpability.26 As we will see, this plurality of views was not recognized in Russia.

The most vocal actors in the Russian “counter-Katyn” campaign were pro-communist middle-ranking politicians, as well as various authors of “alternative histories,” who have

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24 Already in 1998–1999, during the debates around the draft legislation regarding de-communisation in Poland, right-wing politicians instrumentally used history in order to achieve current politician goals. See Ewa Ochman, Post-Communist Poland—Contested Pasts and Future Identities (London: Routledge, 2013), 17–21, 161–64.
produced accounts which view historical events through the prism of conspiracy theories.  

There is little doubt, however, that the Kremlin had a hand in the orchestration of the campaign, as in June 2000 at a meeting of historians in the State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow it was announced that the government had allocated funding for a special commission that would study the plight of the Soviet POWs. Historians were told that Russian/Soviet history more broadly should be presented in a more positive light than had been the case in the 1990s. In December 2000, the directors of the State Archives of Poland and Russia signed an agreement on the conducting of joint research into the plight of the POWs.

A vigorous media campaign in 2000 around the Soviet POW issue, in which the Kremlin’s hand was detectable, could be regarded as the first episode in the memory war between Russia and Poland; this would greatly intensify between 2004 and 2009. The “debates” about the plight of the Soviet POWs broadcast by the Russian media as early as in 2000 shed light on the origins and the roles of different actors in the twenty-first century Eastern Europe memory wars. Looking at the period from the early 2000s onwards, and particularly at the period of Lech Kaczyński’s presidency in Poland, Miller notes the “reactive nature” of Putin’s “history politics” and argues that various moves by the Russian side were often taken in response to pronouncements about Russia and the Soviet past made in Eastern Europe.

The 2000 Russian campaign around the Soviet POWs indicates that, in its very origins, Putin’s “history politics” was indeed “reactive.” To some degree, the Russian campaign around the Soviet POWs, which started in April, was a response to the Katyn

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28 Nosov, “Poiski ‚Anti-Katyni.”

29 See, in particular, Miller and Lipman, eds., Istoricheskaia politika v XXI veke.

30 Miller, “Istoricheskaia politika v Rossii: novyi povorot?”
commemorations in Poland. However, the response was not to the actual dynamics of political developments in Poland, marked by pluralism of opinions. Instead, Russian politicians and the media had constructed a specific image of the situation in Poland, at which the Russian response was then aimed. In this construction, positions of right-wing politicians were depicted as reflecting the views of Poland’s entire political establishment.

At the same time, it is clear that the Russian media campaign also had roots in Russia’s domestic situation. The key point of reference for the Putin government decision on how to use history for political purposes does not seem to have been the situation in Poland, even though the Russian elites certainly took into account the ways in which other post-communist states framed discourses about their history and identity.

As early as his first programmatic article in December 1999, Putin depicted his goal as rectifying the problems created under the previous leadership. Here again, rather than addressing the full complexity of the developments in the 1990s, the Kremlin-sponsored narrative responded to a specific construction of Yeltsin’s legacy. In a highly selective reading of this legacy, a failure to build a sense of national community and common identity was highlighted as a major problem, which brought Russia to the verge of collapse. And so under Putin far more attention started to be paid to symbolic politics, which included the introduction of new national holidays, commemorative events, the state symbols and the national anthem, and the articulation of sharp responses to critical representations of Russia in neighbouring states. The political leadership began to pay more attention to the coverage of historical issues in the media and the teaching of history in schools. Unsurprisingly in this context, new officially-supported narratives of Russian/Soviet history included both

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31 V.V. Putin, “Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii”, Nezavisimaia gazeta, 30 December, 1999, 4
references to victorious achievements and examples of victimhood. These narratives have been constructed not only in response to trends common to Eastern Europe as a whole, but also to a particular reading by the Russian elites of the internal situation in their own country.

The role played by narratives of victimhood in consolidating community has been well documented by scholars, who have also noted a significant increase in the sheer number and impact of such narratives in Europe and North America since at least the 1970s. In Pierre Nora’s influential interpretation, this “upsurge of memory” was due to the failure of future-oriented ideological “master narratives” (e.g. about the triumph of Western civilization, the nation-state, or the vanguard role of the proletariat), which used to define what was supposed to be remembered in societies, where genuine local memories (often preserved by peasant communities) were no longer alive. This reading of the situation in Western Europe in the 1970s and the 1980s applies well to Eastern Europe in the new millennium. Significant sections of society have been disappointed with the initial post-communist future-oriented “master narratives,” national community consolidation has emerged as a high priority for elites in response to the deep social fragmentation of the 1990s and, for a number of East European states, there is a sense of erosion of national specificities within the EU structures. The Putin government’s decision to champion a particular story of “Russian suffering” should therefore be analyzed within a broader context of the production and circulation of narratives of victimhood in Europe as a whole and in former communist countries, in particular.

Significantly, there was also a perceived internal demand for such narratives at the time. According to Serguei Oushakine, the Putin government’s exploitation of Russian nationalist

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33 Maier, ‘A Surfeit of Memory?’ and Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse?’.
narratives was a result of a particular reading of the public mood. To some extent, the
government felt the need to articulate a response to personal experiences of loss and feeling
of victimhood among many people across Russia, following the demise of the USSR and
within the context of economic hardships of the 1990s.  

In fact, as they were responsible for vigorously intensifying history politics in the first decade
of the new millennium, Russian political elites encountered some problems with perceived
societal need to represent Russians as victims. The elevation of the memory of the Second
World War to the status of the foundation myth of Putin’s Russia helped promote the image
of Russians as victors, not victims. Simultaneously, narratives of Russian suffering under
Stalin were systematically marginalized. This very much narrowed the choice of powerful
historical narratives of Russian victimhood which politicians could champion. The eventual
selection of a story that had already been identified as such an example, at the twilight of the
Soviet period, but which Yeltsin’s government largely had refrained from exploiting, was
unsurprising.

There were two sites for the discussion of the Soviet POW issue in Russia – the internet and
the press, particularly the newspaper Nezavisimaia gazeta, by then a largely pro-Kremlin
outlet, yet with a title which asserted its independence from the government.  

Despite the occasional appearance of treating the issue in a balanced manner, for instance, by publishing
an article by the main Polish expert on the subject, Zbigniew Karpus, in the course of 2000,
Nezavisimaia gazeta tended to feature highly biased accounts, which put the death toll of the

36 Serguei Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University
Press, 2009).
37 One of the most active deniers of Soviet responsibility for Katyn and producer of narratives viewing history
through the prism of conspiracy theories, Vladislav Shved, also authored a number of publications on the case of
the Soviet POWs. (See for instance his “‘Anti-Katyn’. Proizvol ili vozmezdie?” http://gorod.tomsk.ru/index-
1270713741.php, accessed 2 February 2012). The POW case has been also extensively covered on the CPRF
web-site (see, for instance, kprf.ru/international/91396.html, accessed 2 February 2012); on web-sites of
extreme Russian nationalist groups and on the so-called “alternative history” sites. See, for instance,
http://alternatihistory.org.ua/istoriya-prestuplenii-protiv-chelovechnosti-v-polshe-20-40-e-goda-klkh-veka and
Soviet POWs at 80,000 (as opposed to Karpus’ estimation of 16-18 thousand). Revealing the main purpose of the campaign to be the promotion of a distinct narrative of Russian victimhood, the media claimed that the POWs were specifically targeted for abuse because they were Russians. These publications tended to portray the Soviet-Polish War as a result of Polish imperialism towards the regions populated by Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians, and of Polish nationalism, which was both anti-Russian and anti-Semitic. The representation of the plight of the Soviet POWs as “the Russian Katyn” permeated the coverage. At times the accounts were written in the name of the Russian nation, which, it was claimed, now expected the Polish side to admit its “responsibility for the crime.”

Some reports went as far as comparing the Polish POW camps with Auschwitz, a claim which Polish press reports erroneously attributed to Putin personally.

This campaign of 2000 displays all the main elements of the historical narrative which would come to dominate official Russian discourse during Putin’s first presidency and part of Medvedev’s tenure of presidential office. In this discourse, contemporary Russia was depicted as the heir to the Soviet state and the brutality of Stalin’s regime was relativized. “The West” was presented as Russia’s eternal enemy. (In relation to the Soviet-Polish War, it was argued that the Polish victory was only made possible by “the huge support of the Western powers”). Countering accusations against Russia for not taking responsibility for the impact of communist rule on Eastern Europe, the dominant narrative about the Soviet

38 See Nezavisimaia gazeta, April 26, 2000; August 1, 2000; October 6, 2000; November 3, 2000; January 13, 2001.
40 Miller, “Labirinty istoricheskoi politiki.”
41 Raiskii, Pol’sko-sovetskata voina 1919-1920 godov.
POWs juxtaposed Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s admission of Soviet responsibility for Katyn with what was described as Poland’s refusal to take responsibility for a “similar crime.”

Yet what was at times missed by Eastern European observers of the Russian scene was that in Russia the national political elites could no longer control the production of publicly disseminated historical narratives. In fact, as we will see, even under Putin, a considerable degree of pluralism has been evident in public discussions. Neither memory politics nor history politics in Russia have been immune from the global trend which scholars have termed the “cosmopolitanization of memory,” that is, the emergence of transnational and local memory projects that can effectively challenge the narratives and interpretations promoted by national elites.

The debate took a further sharp turn in a nationalistic direction when a new wave of publications about the Soviet POWs appeared in 2004-2005, at a time of a marked deterioration of the Russian-Polish relations in the context of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and amidst the struggle between ultimately incompatible historical narratives of the Second World War articulated in Russia and Eastern Europe on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the war. The election of Lech Kaczynski as President of Poland, and the accompanying escalation of history politics in Poland, based on the stepped-up mobilization of memories of victimhood alongside the representation of Russia as Poland’s main Other and as a threat to Europe, also intensified Russia’s propagandistic exploitation of the Soviet POW issue. By the time Kaczynski became president, Poland had already secured its

43 See for instance, Aleksander Szczyglo, Russian Historical Propaganda in 2004-2009 (Warsaw: Poland’s National Security Bureau, September 16, 2009), which seems to assume that all discussions of historical issues in the Russian media are fully controlled by the Kremlin.
44 Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider, “Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda,” The British Journal of Sociology 57, no.1 (2006): 1-23. One example of such a “cosmopolitan memory” project of relevance to the Soviet POW case may be seen in an issue of the Russian-language monthly Novaia Pol’sha published in 2000. This issue (no. 11, 2000) contained a range of articles by Russian and Polish authors who had joined forces to challenge the POW narrative dominating the Russian media at the time.
membership in the European Union, so EU “democratic conditionality” could no longer prevent an intensive political exploitation of historical issues, the avoidance of which by the East European elites in the 1990s Snyder had described as such a positive development.

Instead, post-2004, some influential politicians in the newly admitted EU-member states started to become very concerned about the potential erosion of national specificities within pan-European structures, and the instrumental use of complex historical issues, already apparent in 2000, intensified considerably. The way the Kremlin further developed its own history politics should be understood against this international background.

Yet, rather than being a significantly new development, this second Russian media campaign around the Soviet POW issue, in fact, added little to what had already been claimed in 2000. Attempts to represent the Katyn massacre as Stalin’s revenge for the deaths of Soviet POWs had already been made in 2000; now they became more systematic. The application of the term “genocide” to the death of the POWs continued a trend that had been already apparent in 2000, when the Polish POW camps had been compared with Nazi extermination camps. In the one balanced publication to appear during the second campaign, Red Army Soldiers in the Polish Captivity, 1919-1920 (Krasnoarmeitsy v pol’skom plenu, 1919-1920), a Polish-Russian collection of archival documents on the plight of the POWs, Polish and Russian contributors roughly agreed on the mortality rates and reasons for the deaths of the POWs. However, this remained largely unnoticed in wider media.

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46 Szczyglo, Russian Historical Propaganda in 2004-2009 depicted the new wave of publications in Russia about the Soviet POW case, which started in 2004, as a major new development.

47 For an example from 2000, see Petr Pokrovskii’s article in Parlamentskaia gazeta, no. 4 (April 2000). Some authors associated with the CPRF or producers of “alternative histories” began denying Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre altogether. At times, such authors represented not just Gorbachev and Yeltsin, but also Putin as being in cahoots with various Polish and Western forces in continuing “Goebbels’ propaganda” aimed at absolving the Nazis of responsibility for Katyn. (see, for instance, http://katyn.ru/index.php?go=Pages&in=view&id=947 and http://www.hrono.ru/libris/lib_sh/shwed00.php (accessed 5 May 2012).


49 See publications in Izvestiia, 10 and 22 December 2004; Rossiiskaia gazeta, 5 October 2005.
discussions in Russia; other attempts to challenge the dominant Russian media narrative about the POWs were also marginalized.\textsuperscript{50} Instead, the Russian press continued to demand that the Polish side disclose allegedly concealed evidence on the issue.\textsuperscript{51}

A third turn in the history politics around the POW issue started with Putin’s attendance at the commemoration of the 70\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the start of the Second World War, held at Westerplatte on 1 September 2009, and accompanied by the publication of an article of his in the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza. Whereas Putin’s article was well received by many Polish intellectuals and politicians (apart from the PiS party), the speech was widely criticized for its poorly veiled attack on Poland’s pre-war policies. In fact, both the article and the speech were arguably more moderate than could have been expected from the tone of the propaganda campaign in the Russian media on the eve of the anniversary.\textsuperscript{52} Yet Putin’s interpretations of historical events were still framed by attempts to relativize the atrocities of Stalin’s regime.\textsuperscript{53} And in what was Putin’s own first public pronouncement on the issue of the Soviet POWs, he reproduced the widely repeated argument that the deaths of the POWs

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\item \textsuperscript{50} Krasnoarmeitsy v pol’skom plenu, 1919-1922 gg. (Moscow-St. Petersburg; Letnii sad, 2004).
\item \textsuperscript{51} P. Pospelov, “Poliaki khotiat dobitsia ot nas pokaianiia za okkupatsiiu, a my zhdam ot nikh pokaianiia za Stalkov i Tuhol’,” Nezavimaia gazeta, 10 April 2009. For an attempt to challenge the dominant narrative, see L.K. Ostrovskii, “Pol’skie voennoplennye v Sibiri (1904-1920 gg.),” Istoriia, 10 April 2008 (http://sun.tsu.ru/nminfo/000063105/316/image/316-088.pdf, accessed 5 May 2012. In Poland, a particularly strong reaction was provoked by comments by the Moscow historian Aleksandr Danilov, who headed a group of authors responsible for the production of a controversial school textbook on Russian/Soviet history of the first half of the twentieth century. In his guidelines to teachers about how this historical period should be covered, Danilov suggested that the Katyn massacre should be interpreted as a historical revenge for “the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet POWs” in Poland in 1919-1920. See http://www.prosv.ru/umk/ist-obslu/info.aspx?ob_no=15378, accessed 13 September 2011.)
\item \textsuperscript{52} For the assessment of Putin’s position in 2009 see Miller, “Labirinty istoricheskoi politiki.” For a summary of the reaction to Putin’s article and speech in Poland, see http://wyborcza.pl/1.76842.6984515,Reakcje_na_list_Putina_do_Polakow.html (accessed 20 May 2013).
\item \textsuperscript{53} In an important indication of change, on 30 October 2009, President Medvedev unequivocally condemned Stalin’s repressions. See D. Medvedev, “Pamiat o natsionalnykh tragediiakh tak zhe sviashchenna, kak pamiat o pobedakh,” http://blog.kremlin.ru/post/35/frascript (accessed 3 January 2012).
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were directly comparable to Katyn, suggesting that both events “should become symbols of common sorrow and mutual forgiveness.”

In turn, President Kaczynski’s speech on the occasion to some extent mirrored the approach of members of the Russian political establishment with regard to how history could be put to current political use. Above all, Kaczynski’s position was based on the belief that only a single correct interpretation of historical events, however complex, was possible. In his words: “There is only one truth. We, Poles, have the right to know the truth about tragic issues for our nation and we can never leave them behind.” Echoing the way in which the Russian media had represented Poland’s policies in the aftermath of the First World War, Kaczynski argued that Soviet policies during the Soviet-Polish War, as well as in the 1940s, were both imperialist and informed by Russian chauvinism. Kaczynski’s speech reflected a belief common among Russians active in the debate in unchanging patterns of national behavior that determined the policies of a country in the international arena. A comparison between Soviet and contemporary Russia was implicitly drawn in Kaczynski’s statement that contemporary Europe should not yield to “neo-imperialistic tendencies” if it wanted to avoid the mistakes of the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, Kaczynski evoked another mythical linkage between the Soviet-Polish War and Katyn. He argued that “it was because of revenge... for the year 1920, for the fact that Poland managed to repulse the aggression then” that the Polish officers had been killed on Stalin’s order in 1940.

A comparison of Putin’s and Kaczynski’s speeches suggests that in the first decade of the new millennium in post-communist Europe we witnessed a collision of two state-sponsored memory projects that were in many ways similarly structured. Poland’s PiS party rejected the

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inevitability of contestation around memory in a democratic society. The Kremlin-endorsed approach not infrequently reflected a similar difficulty with accepting multiple readings of history. At the same time, in disputes over history with East European neighbors, the Russian side also manipulatively used the fact that complex historical events were open to contested interpretations; this was done to “normalize” Stalinism and relativize the atrocities of the Soviet regime (e.g. the equation of the Katyn massacre and the deaths of Soviet POWs).

In 2010, the signs of change in history politics in Russia became undeniable, particularly in the aftermath of Kaczynski’s tragic death in a plane crash en route to Russia, and against the backdrop of improved Russian relations with the United States and a number of other countries and Putin’s constructive relationship with his Polish counterpart Donald Tusk. Furthermore, influential forces within the Russian establishment began criticizing the Kremlin’s approach to Soviet history as damaging to Russia’s international image. Yet again, the treatment of the Soviet POW issue reflected broader dynamics of history politics in Russia, at the same time as it indicated that the changes of 2010 had their limits.

Putin’s speech at a commemorative ceremony in Katyn on 7 April 2010 marked a departure from the previous Kremlin-endorsed line of consistently relativizing Stalin’s terror. The Russian Prime Minister distanced contemporary Russia from Stalin’s Soviet Union; condemned Stalin’s policies more strongly than ever before; and compared Katyn not with the plight of the Soviet POWs, but with the sites of memory of Stalin’s terror against Soviet citizens. A number of articles in the Russian press published in the wake of Putin’s speech

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56 The Russian Presidential Commission against Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests, which existed between 2009 and 2012, was a prime example of the political elites’ unwillingness to accept different readings of history.


58 Some Russian sources directly linked the content of Putin’s speech in Katyn with Russia’s diminishing status as the main exporter of natural gas in Europe. For a balanced discussion of the reasons for the improvement in
spelled out what had been obscured during the previous campaigns, namely, that there was a profound difference between the Katyn massacre and the deaths of the Soviet POWs, as the latter mostly died of poor conditions and epidemics, rather than being executed on a government order. These publications also criticized earlier comparisons made in the Russian media between Polish POW camps and “Nazi death factories.” Yet, at a press conference on April 15, Putin again linked the issue of the Soviet POWs with Katyn by reiterating a claim that the latter was Stalin’s revenge for the POWs’ deaths.

A volume published in 2010 by the Russian-Polish Commission for Difficult [Historical] Issues, containing articles on the key episodes in twentieth century Polish-Russian/Soviet relations, included the coverage of the plight of the Soviet POWs. Without drawing any direct links with Katyn, the introduction by the Polish and Russian co-chairmen of the Commission urged that “commemorating services” be held at the burial sites of the Soviet POWs. The Polish-Russian War received substantial coverage in the volume, highlighting persisting differences in the Russian and Polish interpretations and demonstrating a substantial politicization of both narratives. The Russian contribution represented Marshal Piłsudski’s eastern policies as acts of Polish imperialism towards Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians. In contrast, Polish contributors interpreted the same policies as an “attempt to support the peoples, who, after being exploited by Russian tsarism, now strove for independence.”

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60 Putin’s press conference was reported by RIA Novosti, 7 April 2010. Russian members of the Commission in 2010 estimated the death toll among the Soviet POWs at 25,000-28,000. See Torkunov and Rotfeld, eds., Belye piatna – chernye piatna, 43.
61 Torkunov and Rotfeld, Belye piatna – chernye piatna, 12.
62 Ibid, 12.
63 Ibid, 27-34, 53. At the same time, Piłsudski’s “imperial ambitions” were implicitly acknowledged elsewhere in the volume by a Polish author, who also agreed that his eastern project would inevitably have led to war with Russia. (see pp. 56-7).
It would be erroneous to conclude that Putin’s public condemnation of the Katyn massacre could do anything to curb the efforts of those who denied Soviet responsibility for Katyn.\(^\text{64}\)

As for the plight of the Soviet POWs, the official line remained ambiguous. In fact, the Russian Parliament’s November 2010 resolution on Katyn, condemning the massacre as one of the most hideous crimes of Stalin’s regime, which was adopted despite its rejection by the CPRF faction, continued to imply the comparability of Katyn and the death of the Soviet POWs. The resolution continued to promote the portrayal of the Soviet POW case as a major example of twentieth century Russian/Soviet sacrifice and victimhood.\(^\text{65}\) At the same time, some of the champions of the plight of the Soviet POWs now turned their criticism onto the Kremlin, implying that the Soviet and Russian governments from Gorbachev to Putin and Medvedev had been involved in a conspiracy to prevent the investigation into the deaths of the POWs and of German responsibility for Katyn.\(^\text{66}\) Yet, overall, following Putin’s speech on Katyn, the attention of the mainstream media to the plight of the Soviet POWs decreased significantly.

Memory and history politics always entail both remembering and forgetting. In the case of the Russian campaign around the plight of the Soviet POWs, we see an example of an attempt at (mis)using one historical episode in order to achieve both goals simultaneously. In addition to attempts to realize a national-community-building goal through the articulation of

\(^{64}\) See Alexander Etkind, “Katyn in Russia,” arguing that “[i]n the spring of 2010 and with no visible reason, the Kremlin shut down the activity of the Katyn deniers, which it encouraged in 2009.” http://www.memoryatwar.org/pdf/Etkind%20Katyn%20in%20Russia%202010.pdf (accessed 2 February 2012).

\(^{65}\) During his visit to Poland in December 2010, President Medvedev also raised the issue of the Soviet POWs. See http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1353831.html#ixzz1Y87xBPnR (accessed 5 May 2012).

\(^{66}\) A. Shirokorad, “Katynskoe delo na vesakh istorii. V Smolenskih lesakh tysiachi zakhoronenii – pochemu pomniat lish ob odnom?,” Nezavisimaia gazeta, 21 May 2010. See also a similar position being expressed during debates in the Duma by the communist Deputy, Viktor Iliukhin (http://www.newsland.ru/news/detail/id/597763, accessed 5 May 2011). For other bitter attacks on Poland in connection with the POW case, see A. Rokossovskaiia in Rossiskaia gazeta, 17 May 2011; Argumenty nedeli, 18 May 2011; G. Zotov in Argumenty i fakty, 11 May 2011. On 24 May 2011, the main state-controlled Russian TV channel, Pervyi Kanal, featured in its evening news bulletin an item on the Soviet POWs, which while attempting to maintain a façade of impartiality, quoted Poland’s leading historian, Waldemar Rezmer’s critical remarks regarding the Russian media treatment of the Soviet POW issue. At the same time, the TV report attacked Poland’s past policies and current position on the issue. (http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/177234, accessed 13 January 2013.)
a narrative of victimhood (remembering), the POW story was also expected to perform the role of replacing the memory of the Katyn massacre (forgetting). This “replacement memory” is common in narratives of victimhood, as they tend to justify the avoidance of a critical assessment of one’s own past.67

History Politics since 2010: From the “Imperialist” to the Great War

Recognition that the approach to using history for political purposes turned out to be damaging for Russia’s international prestige occurred within the context of the Kremlin’s broader acknowledgement of Russia’s failure to realize its potential in exercising “soft power”68 in the international arena. “Soft power” is defined by the American political scientist Joseph Nye as the ability of states “to shape the preferences of others by the attraction” generated by cultural and other non-coercive resources.69 In the new millennium, China’s initiatives in this area began to attract the attention of the West, with Russian leaders following suit. One of the key target audiences of Russia’s intensified soft power projects, many of which are supported by the government, has been the communities of Russian speakers beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.70

These communities, defined as ‘compatriots (sootechestvenniki) abroad’, have been a focus of Russian government policy since the early 1990s. During this period the term “compatriots” started to be used by the Russian leadership to define a loose category of people who, while living outside the borders of the Russian Federation, could be viewed as having special ties with the Russian state because of their origin and/or knowledge of and interest in Russian culture and language. Whereas in the 1990s, the term sootechestvenniki

67 Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide.”
68 The Russian elites are now widely using the Russian translation of the term “miagkaia sila.”
was reserved largely for Russian speakers in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, in the new millennium the category has been broadened to include émigrés from Russia and the Soviet Union and their offspring, anywhere in the world. Among the several conflicting definitions of the Russian nation to have been promoted by Russian governments since the early 1990s, one conceives of the nation as including these “compatriots” irrespective of their place of residence and citizenship. Putin’s government sees the cultivation of close ties with the “compatriots” as an essential “soft power” tool, as it is believed that “compatriots” could be instrumental in projecting a favourable image of Russia on the international arena and advancing Russia’s interests in their own states.71 Consequently, the number, range, and geography of state-sponsored projects aimed at reaching out to the communities of “compatriots” have increased as compared to the 1990s.72

The cultivation of memory of the First World War has obvious potential as a soft-power project aimed at “compatriots.” Whereas under the Soviet regime memory of the war was systematically marginalized, its annual commemoration became a key feature in the tradition of myth-making among Russian émigrés in Europe, playing an important role in consolidating community identity in opposition to the Bolsheviks.73 By the final years of the Soviet period, as well as in the 1990s, local activists inside Russia had noticed that this aspect of Great War memory could invest it with political significance, as commemoration initiatives could become a site where émigré and internal Russian narratives about the past had a chance to converge. A commemorative complex in Moscow’s Memorial Park near the Sokol metro station, developed in the 1990s on the site of a 1915 cemetery for the fallen soldiers of the Great War, was one of the first significant attempts at memory integration.

However, two important occasions -- the opening of a memorial chapel in the park in 1998 and of a large memorial complex in 2004 -- were ignored by leading national politicians, who at the time did not regard the cultivation of Great War memory a worthy history politics project.\(^{74}\)

A distinct change in attitude, reflecting an emerging interest in commemorating the Great War at top state level, was signalled by a major international conference. Organized by the Russian World (Russkii mir) Foundation in December 2010, this was supported by the Russian Presidential Administration, the State Duma and the Council of Federation. The term “Russian world” was coined in 2007 to define an imagined world-wide community of people united by their love of Russian culture. The Foundation bearing this name was established in the same year by the Russian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education, with the aim of exercising Russia’s soft power through programmes that supported the teaching of the Russian language and publicized Russian culture abroad.\(^{75}\)

The December 2010 conference firmly positioned the Russian World Foundation at the forefront of championing the memory of the Great War. Opening the conference, the head of the Presidential Administration, S. E. Naryshkin, confirmed the potential of the war memory “to bring together two parts of the Russian world [at home and abroad],” whereas the executive director of the Russian World Foundation, V. A. Nikonov, dwelled on how the Great War should be reintegrated into “the national consciousness of Russian society in the twenty-first century.”\(^{76}\)

One particular individual from the leadership of the Russian World Foundation has played an especially noteworthy role in making the case for the Great War as a turning point in Russian


history and in attracting the attention of Russia’s political leaders to this historical event.\textsuperscript{77} This is N. A. Narochnitskaia, a nationalist public intellectual, former Duma deputy and, between 2009 and 2012, member of the notorious presidential Commission against Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests. Narochnitskaia also heads the Moscow-based Historical Perspective Foundation and a research centre, the Paris-based Institute for Democracy and Cooperation. While both institutions position themselves as independent public organizations, they are known to have close ties to the Kremlin, and see their aim as the articulation of a Russian counter-perspective to the US soft power agendas of the Carnegie Endowment and the Heritage Foundation.\textsuperscript{78} Finally, Narochnitskaia is closely involved with various Moscow Patriarchate outreach programs, and her interpretation of Russian history is informed by the perceived centrality of Orthodoxy and empire to Russia’s cultural and political development. While Narochnitskaia regards Russia as a European nation, she also claims that it profoundly differs from the Protestant Anglo-Saxon world, which she represents as inherently hostile towards Russia and morally inferior to it. Her public activities and numerous publications are informed by her conviction that the past always shapes the present. Even though she is not a professional historian by training, her publications are regularly concerned with historical issues, which are, however, invariably interpreted in accordance to their relevance to the present, as Narochnitskaia sees it.\textsuperscript{79} These broader premises of Narochnitskaia’s worldview inform her interpretation of the Great War.

As early as 2008, the Historical Perspective Foundation and the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation initiated a series of commemorative projects aimed at drawing the attention of

\textsuperscript{77} N. A. Narochnitskaia is member of the Russian World Foundation board of trustees. On Narochnitskaia, see Jardar Østbø, The New Third Rome. Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth (PhD, the University of Bergen, 2011), 162-90.


\textsuperscript{79} See, for instance, N.A. Narochnitskaia, Velikie voiny XX stoletiia (Moscow: AJRIS-Press, 2007); Narochnitskaia, Russkii mir (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2007) and her Rossiia i russkie v sovremennom mire (Moscow: Algoritum, 2009).
the Russian authorities and wider society to the memory of the First World War. These included the opening of memorials to “Russian heroes” of the Great War in Russia and in France and conferences, including one in November 2010, dedicated to the battle of Gumbinnen of 1914, which started the Russian offensive in East Prussia. According to Narochnitskaia’s interpretation, which would become the official position of the Russian World Foundation, this offensive was Russia’s sacrifice, undertaken to protect France from total destruction by Germany. This altruistic action of Russia has been largely forgotten by the world today, Narochnitskaia complains. Rather than being based on an analysis of historical sources, Narochnitskaia’s position seems to reflect a long-lasting popular template for interpreting Russia’s relations with the ‘West’. According to this template various events from the Mongol invasion of Rus to the Second World War are interpreted as Russia’s sacrificial act in defense of Europe from various destructive forces. It is argued that the ungrateful ‘West’ is unwilling to recognize Russia’s contribution.

The points about Russia’s sacrifice and altruism at the start of the First World War and a deliberate distortion by West Europeans of Russian contribution to the Entente’s victory were central to Narochnitskaia’s emotional presentation at the above-mentioned 2010 Russian World conference. In it she further argued for the importance of the war for Russian and European twentieth-century history. In turn, another representative of the Historical Perspective Foundation, Ia. Burlakov, proposed that the Great War be regarded as “the first act of the thirty-year patriotic war” that ended only in 1945. The status of the First World

81 See N. A. Narochnitskaia, “Osoznat’ sebia natsiei.”
War in Russian collective memory was thus to be enhanced by linking it to the myth of the Second World War, the foundation myth of Putin’s Russia.

Narochnitskaia’s own presentation developed another argument, which would become central to the revised Russian national historical narrative, supported by the Kremlin since 2010. In addition to criticizing the Bolsheviks and the West for obscuring Russian heroism during the war, she blamed the falsification of war memory on Russian liberals, as unpatriotic in the past as they were today. In her account, liberals contributed to bringing about the revolutions, the collapse of the state and the civil war by constantly criticizing the tsarist government and the army. She drew direct parallels between the events of 1917 and the activities of the liberal opposition to Putin’s regime in contemporary Russia.  

Narochnitskaia’s complaints about the distortions of war memory were echoed by a number of other speakers. Some of them insisted that society required a single historical narrative and that a plurality of opinions about the past was to be avoided. According to this position, it was up to the government to take charge of ensuring that the “Russian interpretation of the Great War” was protected from falsification. And yet, the conference’s very own proceedings were marked by a plurality of opinions. Rather than juxtaposing Russia to the West, other speakers saw the emerging interest in the Great War as a way of underscoring Russia’s European identity in the past, as well as today. The rehabilitation of the name “the Great War” in public discourse was a sign of Russia’s incipient reintegration into the pan-European commemorative space, it was noted.

At the conference the leaders of the Russian World Foundation agreed to launch a series of commemorative events and to set up an international Society for the [Preservation] of the

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
Memory of World War I. In most events that have subsequently taken place, Narochnitskaia’s Historical Perspective Foundation and the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation have also participated as co-organizers. These events, which have included commemorative ceremonies, the erection of monuments and the organisation of conferences and round-table discussions, have taken place across Europe, including in Belarus, Lithuania and Poland, on whose territories the Russian Army fought during the war, as well as in France, Latvia and Serbia.\(^6\)

The geography of the Foundation’s commemorative initiatives to a large extent has been determined by the current political priorities of the Russian state, and it somewhat contradicts the Foundation’s narrative about the role of the Great War in the contemporary collective memory of the imagined “Russian world” community. The Russian World’s claim that its Great War memory project helps unite two Russias – the Russian Federation and “Russia abroad,” where the memory of World War I has been part of a continuous living tradition since 1918 -- does not accurately reflect the nature of the foundation’s activities.\(^7\) Most of these activities target Russian speakers in the Baltic states (Latvia and Lithuania), the countries where Russia is keen to increase its soft power impact. The personal connections of these people to the region, in most cases, date from the post-1945 period, and any sense of belonging to “Russia abroad” would date from 1991. Great War memory has as little meaning for them as it does for the majority of the population within the Russian Federation.


So, the Russian World memory project constitutes an invention of a new tradition, rather than a continuation of an existing one, as it is claimed.

Alongside references to a living memory of the war in “Russia abroad,” participants in the Russian World’s commemorative events have articulated two other reasons why, they claim, the legacy of the Great War is still so important for the Baltic region. First, it is emphasized that it was during the time of the Great War that the primacy of ethnicity in national community building fully crystallized in the region, and that this development continues to inform the attitude towards minorities today, often with negative consequences. The second argument is related to the perception of the importance of the Baltic region to Russia’s relationship with the West. Narochnitskaia has elaborated this argument specifically with reference to the Great War in her two lectures titled “The Forgotten War and Betrayed Heroes: The Lessons of the First World War for the Past, Present and Future,” broadcast by the Russian television Channel “Kultura” in February 2011. Focusing on the relevance of the lessons of the Great War to the present, she talked about the allegedly unchanging geopolitical aims of Western powers, particularly Britain, in relation to Russia since the time of Peter the Great, the key being to deprive Russia of its control over the Baltic. In Narochnitskaia’s account, this was attempted during the Great War by both Germany and Britain, and then finally fully realized with the expansion of NATO into the region in 2004. Narochnitskaia claims to have uncovered through her study of international politics around the Baltic region a major pattern in the history of international relations, which, she argues, should be taken into account in the formation of Russian foreign policy today.

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In Narochnitskaia’s view, the foreign policies of the Western powers, particularly those of a state such as Britain, have been unfailingly immoral and self-serving. Russia’s position is contrasted to this immorality and both positions are explained by reference to what Narochnitskaia believes are the different moral values of Orthodox and Protestant “civilizations.” Overall, Narochnitskaia’s narrative about Russia’s involvement in the war has been informed by the view that a viable Russian national identity can be only framed by the imperial state, and that there is a close connection between Russia’s territorial size and its ability to control non-Russian imperial borderlands, on the one hand, and Russia’s status as a great power, on the other. The West understands this connection and thus, historically, including during the Great War, has targeted Russia’s imperial peripheries.

The interpretation of the Great War advanced by Narochnitskaia has become the basis of the official narrative about the event disseminated by the Russian World Foundation. A statement about the war placed on the Foundation’s website in connection with its 2011 proposal to commemorate war victims on 1 August, and issued in the name the Foundation by the head of its Analytic Department, in fact, reproduced, practically word for word, the key points of Narochnitskaia’s televised lectures. When instituting the day of commemoration, as suggested by the Foundation, Putin echoed Narochnitskaia’s representation of the Brest-Litovsk treaty as an unprecedented act of national treason committed by the Bolsheviks.90

One particular argument of Narrachnitskaia’s narrative has had an especially far-reaching impact. This is the argument that draws parallels between the behavior of “unpatriotic” liberals and revolutionaries during the Great War, on the one hand, and the activities of the anti-Putin opposition today, on the other. She warns that the collapse of the state and the civil war experienced by Russia in the early twentieth century could be repeated today if

90 In addition to the instances quoted above, see also Putin’s statement made at the founding congress of the Russian Military-Historical Society on 20 March 2013 http://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1035290-echo/ (accessed 23 March 2013).
opposition forces are not kept in check. Narochnitskaia is not the only proponent of this idea, but she is one of the most vocal. This line of argument was relentlessly pursued during the 2012 presidential election campaign by the two main state-controlled Russian television channels.\footnote{This conclusion is drawn on the basis of the daily monitoring of the programs of the two state-controlled Russian Television channels, Rossiia and Channel 1, within the framework of the project “Russian Television Coverage of Inter-Ethnic Cohesion Issues: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference,” which was funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council and directed by Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz at the University of Manchester, UK, in 2010-2013.} (It should be noted that in this campaign Narochnitskaia acted as Putin’s authorized representative (doverennoe litso) and proudly claimed that the main presidential candidate “found my views appealing.”\footnote{See a televised electoral debate in February 2012, with the participation of one of the presidential election candidates V.V. Zhirinovskii, in which Putin’s side was represented by Narochnitskaia. \url{http://www.ltv.ru/news/election/198450} (accessed 9 January 2013).})

At the same time, the positions of particular public intellectuals, however influential, cannot be equated with those of the Kremlin. Narochnitskaia, for instance, was opposed to the Kremlin’s 2012 decision to dissolve the Commission against the Falsification of History; she also continues to maintain that the evidence regarding the Soviet responsibility for Katyn is not conclusive, even though the Kremlin now explicitly acknowledges this responsibility.\footnote{\url{http://narochnitskaia.ru/commission-on-antifraud-stories/v-fevrale-2012-goda-ukazom-prezidenta-rossii-byla-prekrashhena-deyatelnost-komissii-po-protivodeystviyu-falsifikatsii-istorii-v-ushherb-interesam-rossii.html}; \url{http://www.kp.ru/daily/24350.3/538016/}; \url{http://narochnitskaia.ru/news/vyyna-za-velikuyu-otechestvennuyu.html?view=full} (accessed 9 January 2013).} In turn, statements by top state and government officials, including Putin’s, combine a range of concepts and interpretations advanced by various public intellectuals; and the choice of references and their combinations vary depending on the demands of the moment. Overall, during periods when the regime lacks firm ideological underpinnings, the Kremlin’s discourse is fragmented, eclectic and fluctuating.

On the surface, the new narrative of Russian history, which started to enjoy the Kremlin’s support in 2010, and in which the Great War, rather than the October Revolution, becomes the event determining Russian and world history in the twentieth century, differs substantially
from the earlier narrative, in which the deaths of Soviet POWs in Polish detention camps constituted a prominent example of “Russian victimhood.” Most importantly, this earlier narrative was informed by efforts to “normalize” Stalinism by relativizing the atrocities of the Soviet regime. The new narrative is explicitly critical of many Bolshevik policies, which are now represented as operating against the interests of the Russian people. The earlier narrative was informed by the equation of Russia and the Soviet Union, whereas the current one entails a clearer separation between the two. The new narrative is also clearer about Russia’s identity as part of Europe. In sum, at the end of the first decade of the new millennium we witnessed significant changes in the state-sponsored representation of Russian national history. And yet, there are also striking similarities between the two narratives, which are related to the fact that the set of broad ideological frameworks through which historical events are understood remains the same. Both narratives represent “the West” as a long-term foe of Russia, aiming to undermine it with the help of internal enemies and by targeting Russia’s borderland regions; this West is equated above all with the Anglo-Saxon world (Britain and the United States), and the separateness of the latter from “Europe” is maintained. In the new narrative, Russian identity continues to be closely linked to its imperial past, even if in this narrative tsarist Russia constitutes a more important point of reference in the construction of the historical pedigree of the contemporary Russian state than the Soviet Union.

Conclusions

During most of the 1990s top political leaders in Eastern Europe and Russia refrained from systematically exploiting history for political purposes. This proved to be only a temporary development; it was followed by vicious “memory wars” between Russia and its East European neighbors in the first decade of the new millennium. In this latter period, political elites in Russia and Eastern Europe came to the conclusion that history could and should be
used systematically to address current political issues, both domestic, in order to facilitate national consolidation of societies and to delegitimize political competitors, and in foreign policy, with the aim of achieving greater international recognition by virtue of their nations’ past suffering. Post-communist leaders were also not particularly keen to dwell on problematic pages in their nations’ histories; this tendency was particularly striking in the case of the treatment of Stalinism in Russia in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

First signs of a departure from the situation of the early post-communist period, when the instrumental use of history was not a particularly important tool of foreign and domestic policies, started to be visible already at the very end of the 1990s. Throughout Eastern Europe this shift reflected the elites’ perception of how domestic problems, including those of community- and identity-building, should be addressed in societies which had been experiencing far-reaching, and often traumatic, social and economic changes. Under the circumstances, negative images of the “Other” again appeared to be in demand. For the Russian side, this was “the West,” to which “ungrateful East European neighbors,” now joining Western political structures, were added. For East European states the role of the “Other” was played by Russia. In these representations of the “Other,” any distinctions between past and present often were suspended and deemed irrelevant for understanding the current situation.

The Russian campaign around Soviet POWs from 2000 onwards, while reflecting the elites’ perception of the internal public demand for historical narratives of victimhood, was also a response to the fact that right-wing politicians in Poland, who in 2001 founded the PiS party, already in the last years of the 1990s overtly began to use history for political purposes. The pluralism of opinion in Poland at the time was overlooked; instead the right-wing stance was represented as the dominant one by the Russian side.
With the start of Lech Kaczyński’s presidency, similarities in memory politics in Russia and Poland increased. Particularly radical pronouncements, including the exaggerated rhetoric of genocide on both sides, were interpreted in the media of each country as inevitably representing the views of the entire political establishment and society at large. Influential representatives of the political elites insisted that only a single interpretation of a historical event could be seen as reflecting the “truth.” Current political developments and events tended to determine the fluctuations of history politics around particular historical episodes. At the same time, both sides accused each other of acting according to the practices associated with the historical ills of modern Europe – imperialism and ethnic chauvinism.

The clash of the Russian and Polish memory projects was further exacerbated by the fact that the Russian political elites also referred to the complexity of the situation in Europe in the twentieth century in order to normalize Stalinism.

Recent attempts to “reclaim” the memory of the Great War, sponsored since 2010 by the very top of the Russian political establishment, display significant differences from the campaigns around the plight of the Soviet POWs, in which, it appears, the Kremlin lost interest at precisely that time. The abandonment of the POW issue reflected the Kremlin’s apparent recognition that crude attempts to replace the memory of Stalin’s terror with newly invented narratives of Russian suffering at the hands of foreign culprits could have a negative impact on Russia’s international image. The new state-sponsored Great War project aims instead to create a positive image of Russia on the European international scene, using soft power tools and strategies. The project aims to promote Russia’s image as a leading European power and to build bridges with various communities outside Russia’s borders. An integral element of the campaign is the dissociation of contemporary Russia from the Soviet Union; and so the Bolshevik regime is criticized for distorting the legacy of the war and acting against Russian national interests.
And yet the two Russian memory projects also have similarities, indicating that the changes in Russia’s history politics since 2010 have limits. Champions of Great War memory from the Russian World Foundation and some think tanks with ties to the Kremlin continue to depict “the West” as Russia’s historical adversary and see Russia’s “greatness” as inseparable from its legacy of imperial domination. In both projects history and “memory” are deliberately undifferentiated. Public intellectuals, whose narratives about the past the Kremlin and the state-controlled media promote, represent their “memory retrieving” activities as “objective” historical research. In these narratives temporality and space are collapsed; events from the past (related to tsarist and Soviet times) become part of the present, in which the nation, equated with the imagined “Russian world” around the globe, is, as ever, under threat.

Most importantly, both memory projects discussed here indicate that the Kremlin’s own position on history politics and on the role of historical narratives in the formation of collective identities has been shaped by a consistent overestimation of the potential impact of top-down campaigns and the power of a national government to shape collective memories. It is in fact hardly surprising that crude, overtly far-fetched campaigns around the plight of Soviet POWs, about which no continuity of national collective memory exists and about which “mass personal memory” is also absent, have failed to create a viable site of memory, as they have not solicited any wider public interest. This is also likely to be a problem with the project of making the memory of the Great War itself an important element not just of a Kremlin-supported politics of history, but also of a broader memory politics in Russia. At first glance, the project could be expected to appeal to those whom the Russian state calls “compatriots” abroad. Even here, however, the main target audience of current commemorative initiatives (Russian speakers in the Baltic states) does not possess a living memory of the war. It is hard to see these soft power efforts as likely to encourage effective politics of memory with wide-spread grassroots participation.