

"According to Putin, Russia is the guardian of European values," says political scientist Ilya Budraitskis

Sunday 8 December 2024, by [BĚLIČEK Ondřej](#), [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2024).

When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on February 24, 2022 the launch of a "special operation" aimed at neutralizing the Ukrainian government, he also argued that Ukraine had been taken over by the Nazis. Throughout the duration of the war in Ukraine, Putin has invoked the spirit of World War II, striking an emotional chord among Russians for whom the war is a nationally formative moment. When did World War II become a closely guarded myth? How was the war remembered during the Soviet Union? And is the Putin regime guided by pragmatic political decision-making, or is it guided by a conservative ideology that sees its country's future in the past?

I asked these questions to political scientist Ilya Budraitskis, currently at the University of California and author of [Dissidents Among Dissidents](#), about ideology, politics and the left in post-Soviet Russia.

How did the communist regime in the Soviet Union remember the Second World War and how did it use it on the ideological battlefield with the West during the Cold War? How did this remembrance change over time from the Stalin years to Brezhnev?

The politics of memory changed a lot during the Soviet period. It can be said that the cult of the Second World War as a key event in the history of the Soviet nation arose during the Brezhnev era. The memory of the Second World War was presented in the mentioned forms only in the late 1960s and 1970s, because of the real memory of the people who lived through the war. The Soviet Union lost about 25 million people during the war, and the experience was horrifying and bloody. Therefore, the Soviet cult of World War II was linked to peace. The message of the post-war years was that the Soviet Union would do everything in its power to avoid such terrible wars in the future.

I remember that on May 9, 2014, there were slogans all over Moscow basically saying that the Russians can defeat the West again like they did in World War II.

The Soviet experience of the war was unique. The war occupies a very special place in the history of the Soviet Union. It has founding significance in the sense that it united the Soviet nation. This concept was only discovered in the sixties. During the Stalin years, there was no concept of one super nation with any general historical experience.

How was the Second World War remembered just after its end in the 1950s?

It was remembered as the "Great Patriotic War." This is a very important concept, because this war began in the summer of 1941. This means that the beginning of the war is not dated to the

occupation of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union, but to German aggression against the Soviet Union. Therefore, according to the official narrative, the Second World War, in the Soviet era, reproduced the same line of conflict that existed historically between Russia and the West. This idea first took hold under Stalin.

Even during the war, Soviet troops were portrayed as the successors of some ancient Russian warriors who fought against the Crusaders in the Middle Ages. Eisenstein's famous 1938 film Alexander Nevsky was made on this topic and played an important role in Soviet war propaganda.

How did this narrative change during perestroika and glasnost under Gorbachev? Because as we know, at this time there were many revisions of the historical narratives that were created especially under Stalin.

I would say that this narrative has been challenged in some ways. When discussions began to emerge in the public space in the Soviet Union, big historical questions about World War II immediately arose. The sixties were a time of liberalization of the Soviet regime, and the first public debate about World War II and whether the Soviet Union was sufficiently prepared for war with Germany emerged. Questions were also been raised about the role of Stalin's repression of Red Army leaders in the late 1930s and whether this played any negative role in the development of the war. These debates began in the 1960s primarily among intellectuals and then resurfaced during perestroika with much greater public interest. One of the questions asked was about the start of the war, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Nazis and the Soviet Union. For a long time, the official position completely denied the existence of the secret part of this pact, which essentially consisted in the division of Poland between Hitler and Stalin. The Soviet parliament officially condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact only in 1989 and apologized for the violation of international law.

How did this discussion of the Second World War and its commemoration continue in the 1990s under the Yeltsin regime and the anti-communist approach of his government?

The first thing the new Yeltsin government realized was that the shared memory of World War II could be an important unifying basis for a new civic identity in post-communist Russia. That's why in the nineties there were all those military parades on May 9 to celebrate the end of the war.

On the other hand, there were also historians who brought up the role of Soviet troops who joined the Nazis during the Second World War - the so-called Russian Liberation Army, which was made up of former Russian soldiers and generals and which sided with Hitler. Some historians have argued that although they were traitors, some of them had good intentions and were mostly Russian patriots who were anti-communist. But the dominant narrative on the subject of World War II was, of course, about the heroic Soviet army.

If we now focus on Putin and his first years in power, how important was World War II to him?

Putin has made the memory of the Second World War one of the key elements of the new state ideology. In his speeches, he mentions the heroic experience of the Soviet people many times, and May 9 became a truly significant event in Russia - it is the main national holiday. Another difference in commemoration of the Second World War under Putin and during the Soviet period is that the people who actually fought in the war are mostly no longer alive. The Second World War became a myth and began to be completely manipulated by the state.

In 2012, large-scale anti-Putin demonstrations took place in Russia. It was one of the most significant moments in the history of modern Russia. Academics talk of a conservative

turn, precisely in response to these demonstrations. How important was this moment in the further development of Russia and its politics?

These demonstrations have been portrayed as a repeat of the pattern of relations between Russia and the West. The participants in the protests were described as an instrument of Western influence. That is why the presidential elections in March 2012 were also described as a kind of battlefield between the West and Russia — represented by Putin. The Second World War again occupied more space in the propaganda narrative in 2014 in connection with the annexation of Crimea and the war with Ukraine.

Yes, we can move to 2014, because as we know, Putin is using many narratives associated with World War II against the background of the war with Ukraine. Did these comparisons start back in 2014?

Yes, because the new government in Kiev has been branded a Nazi regime by Putin's propaganda. It was depicted as a direct successor of the Ukrainian nationalists who sided with Hitler during the war. It was told as a rerun of World War II. Also important was the idea that the Russians could repeat this war and win again.

I remember that on May 9, 2014, there were slogans all over Moscow basically saying that the Russians can defeat the West again like they did in World War II. And these slogans were everywhere and many people even put them on their cars. It was portrayed as a war with the West. Hitler was not just a fascist who represented an exception in European history, but he also reproduced a recurring pattern, whether in the form of Napoleon or the medieval crusaders. Ukraine was thus just another chapter in the same never-ending story of Western aggression against Russia.

I can imagine it was very effective in 2014, but today after so many years of repetition? Does this kind of propaganda still work?

Yes, I think it's still quite effective, especially as it touches on family stories. Most Russians, including myself, had some relatives who were Red Army soldiers during the war, and this is of course one of the few memories of the Soviet period that you can undoubtedly be proud of. That's why it resonates so much.

It is interesting that Putin's propaganda portrays the West using two opposing narratives. One is that the West is basically fascist, and the other narrative is that the West is degenerate, controlled by LGBT ideology, and that they are fragile snowflakes. How do these two narratives work together?

Propaganda does not have to be coherent. It is quite possible that there are some contradictions in it. You may indeed ask how the West can carry on Hitler's legacy while promoting the values of LGBT equality when you know that LGBT people were in concentration camps under Hitler. Propaganda does not have to be logical, but it must touch emotions.

Speaking of Putin and ideology, there is also an interesting debate among academics on this topic. Some scientists point out that Putin has no ideology and that his power is based more or less on pragmatic political decisions. Others believe that Putin and his allies are actually pursuing an ideology that includes nationalism, the restoration of Russia as a great power, an anti-Western stance and political conservatism that is supported by the church. What is your opinion? Does Putin have an ideology and how does it work in Russia?

This is a very tricky question because it concerns our understanding of ideology. Ideology is very much connected to our material experience. For example, it can be said that Putin was extremely cynical from the very beginning of his rule, and even earlier in the 1990s, when he worked in the government in St. Petersburg, which was then called the “gangster capital of Russia.” I think the experience of these years convinced Putin that all people are basically animals. They fight only for power and money, and this is the main rule of life. And you can apply this rule to international relations as well. I think these ideas are cynical and ideological at the same time, because if you use a cynical framework for a general view of life, then you are already using some kind of ideological approach.

What happened in the zero years when he became president convinced him that he was the strongest and most powerful person in the country, not limited by law or institutions. He began to think that he had some special historical mission. I think at that time the intellectual ideas of conservative thinkers became more important not only to Putin, but also to the people who worked in the Kremlin. Since this “conservative turn” in 2012, we can observe how these two ideological planes intersect. They apply an ideological vision of the world that is cynical and conservative at the same time.

It also contains a rejection of the Western political project. The vision of the future is located in the past in the form of a rejection of neoliberalism, the Western way of life and thinking, and “Western Values”...

Yes, but it is very interesting that this whole construct of the anti-Western framework is actually taken from Western conservative thinking. What is its main idea? The West is declining because it has betrayed its own values, its own past — Christianity and traditional morality. In this sense, Putin’s Russia says that they are the true West, the true Europe. He says he is the true guardian of Christian European values, betrayed by the West itself.

Putin has adopted some Western conservative culture war narratives, according to which liberal elites are trying to impose leftist cultural values on society. They want to abandon Christian family values and replace Europeans with migrants. It is interesting that the ideas of the so-called “great replacement” are directly used by Putin’s propaganda when describing the problem of migrants in Europe and especially in Germany.

Isn’t this also for the reason that Putin’s Russia wants to become the leading country of this global conservative movement?

Yes, and I think they rely heavily on various far-right and conservative forces, especially in Europe. Putin believes that he is in a coalition with people like Le Pen or the leaders of Germany’s AfD.

Now coming back to the question of remembering the Second World War, I was wondering if you could give us an example of how this historical event is taught in Russian schools?

I have already described part of this narrative. Its basis is that the war was another form of Western expansion that sought to destroy Russia. Hitler’s original goal was to enslave the Russians, because the Western idea of the superiority of the Aryan race was a largely anti-Slavic idea. Therefore, it was an existential war not only for the Soviet Union, but also for the entire Russian civilization. Stalin was a great leader who understood this and stopped the anti-Christian and anti-religious policies in the Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox Church was restored during this period. Stalin appealed to the patriotic feelings of Russians and changed the rhetoric. It became a great patriotic war and although it was painful because many people died, it was a truly magnificent event. Everyone should remember this moment of military glory of the Russian army, which is forever invincible. This is the

main story of World War II that is taught in schools.

If you are a teacher in Russia, can you teach your students differently or are you bound to follow the official historical narrative?

As a teacher, you have an obligation to follow the official narrative. Just a year ago, a new history textbook was introduced as compulsory for all Russian schools. Before, you could choose from three or four different textbooks suggested by the Ministry of Education. Now you only have one. The author of this textbook is Vladimir Medinsky, who is Putin's current adviser on history. Medinsky is now one of the most influential people in Russia. If you started talking about World War II in a different way in class, you could face very unpleasant consequences.

This just shows how important history is to the current Putin regime...

Yes, and if you offend Russian patriotism, there is a real article of the criminal code, for which you can go to jail. In Russia, there are a number of repressive laws to defend World War II monuments. For example, if you compare the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in any context, that is also criminal. If you talk about World War II in Russia, you should be very careful.

Ondřej Bělíček

Ilya Budraitskis

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

*Alarm

<https://denikalarm.cz/2024/10/podle-putina-je-rusko-strazcem-evropskych-hodnot-rika-politolog-ilja-budraitskis/>

Translated from Czech by AN