

// ...THE PHRASE THAT
» HISTORY
DOES NOT MATTER
TO THE PRESENT DAY«
WAS NEVER MORE DECEPTIVE
THAN IT IS NOW //

THE NARRATIVE OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR IN THE HISTORIANS' ASSESSMENT (Editors' Debate)

Warsaw, July 16, 2021

DOI: 10.48261/INRR210302

Anna Karolina Piekarska [AKP]:

On behalf of the editors of the *Institute of National Remembrance Review*, I would like to open this discussion on propaganda and facts in the Great Patriotic War by welcoming our esteemed debaters: Prof. Marek Kornat from the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw; Prof. Filip Musiał, a professor

at the Ignatianum Academy in Cracow, the director of the IPN Branch in Cracow and the director of Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic; Prof. Daniel Boćkowski, also from the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and an lecturer at the University of Białystok; Witold Wasilewski PhD from the Archives of the

Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw; Łukasz Jasina PhD, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw and spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland; and my colleague, Franciszek Dąbrowski PhD from Institute of National Remembrance.

When it comes to the subject of today's discussion about the Great Patriotic War, it is worth noting that everything that is known to my generation, born in the late 1970s, has penetrated through the osmosis of knowledge from the general propaganda messaging (albeit with varying intensity) during the Communist dictatorship, and was a permanent feature of the landscape in which we grew up. In our conversation, we will try to review this propaganda message and direct our conclusions to an audience of a world governed by different laws and experiences, who hear this story with a sense of luxury, grateful that they did not experience this dramatic part of history. For this reason, I would like us to remember during the course of our discussions that when we talk about things that sometimes seem obvious, sometimes almost trivial to us, we must bear the clarity of our message in mind.

Why are we talking about the Great Patriotic War now, in 2021? It would be possible to close this topic away—like any other—in the sphere of academic discussion, in the circle of historians and those interested in history, and not to go outside it. Indeed, until the mid-2000s there was no major need to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, since then, the myth of the Great Patriotic War, which was shaped much earlier and is still being constantly developed, has become something more than just a historical event. From that moment, celebrating this event

has become the most important axis of the Kremlin's politics of history: not only in the sphere of memory, but also abroad; in terms of propaganda, socially and informationally, and even as a kind of “export good”. This narrative—both directed outside of Russia as a message to the world, and within the state itself, for the consolidation of the Russian nation—long ago exceeded the limits of simply promoting politics of history, and has become nothing more nor less than an element of information warfare. In this war, the aim is to impose a certain paradigm of history created by the Kremlin on Western countries. There are certain methods of struggle in war; none of the parties to the conflict is limited to one form of manipulation, but each one falsifies history, constantly creates new “fake news”, exaggerates or diminishes certain elements, manipulates the cause-and-effect relationships, assigns its own faults to a current or historical opponent, emphasises the cruelty of the invader; all these elements dominate the propaganda message. Also important are the references to Russia's identity heritage, as synthesised for example in the concept of the *russskiy mir*, and to the imperial myth expressed, *inter alia*, in the belief that the authoritarian or illiberal model of government is the best thing that could have happened to Russia. This propaganda image, or the war of interpretation over the image of history, is influenced by short-term political goals, the implementation of which is institutionally and politically supported.

The desire to recognise the mechanisms of this information war was the inspiration for our editorial office, so much so that the articles we have collected will provide

material for two issues of the magazine. In the first one, we will deal with contemporary propaganda, dealing with both today's events and the past; and in the second, we want to focus on those elements of facts that have been distorted or even concealed in the official message. Speaking more colloquially, it should be said that this question is simply being "sold" to the audience in the Western world in a completely different package. Attempts to break through the narrative established in the West with the critical results of research by historians—be they Russian or Central European—have in most cases been simply reactive, derivative, and such an approach has no chance in information warfare. We should also be aware that what is obvious to us is not necessarily obvious in the West. Nevertheless, I would like to ask our audience to treat our suggestions as points of orientation in the discussion, as an introduction to further issues, so as not to impede the freedom of conversation. Firstly I would like to ask for an introduction from Prof. Musiał: How do you, Professor, perceive this aforementioned information war in the light of your research?

Professor Filip Musiał [FM]: I would like to start with a rather idealistic proposal (although I know it probably will not meet with widespread enthusiasm); however, for some time I have been an advocate of distinguishing what we would call politics of history from what we should outright call historical propaganda. This distinction would be based on the fact that, in my opinion, politics of history retains a link to historical truth: within the framework of politics of history, we choose those elements from the past of our community, those figures, those events, those phenomena that we consider

beneficial for us, which we want to emphasise and publicise. Historical propaganda – and this is what we are dealing with in today's Russia – remains to a great extent in conflict with the historical truth: it is ahistorical or even anti-historical. I think that's the main element of what we could call "the myth of the Great Patriotic War" or simply "the lie of the Great Patriotic War". I will try to outline an initial conception of this phenomenon, although probably not everything that I say will be comprehensible to the reader from the Western world. However, I assume that we will explain some of these issues more precisely in our following statements.

My point of view is to present Russian historical propaganda as a set of false messages that support or reinforce each other. The axis for their construction is the myth of the Great Patriotic War; I would consider those messages concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet aggression against Poland on September 17, 1939 and finally (itself a very important separate propaganda undertaking) the myth of the liberation of Europe in 1944–5 as supplementary myths. Somewhere

Historical propaganda (...) is ahistorical or even anti-historical. (...) My point of view is to present Russian historical propaganda as a set of false messages that support or reinforce each other. The axis for their construction is the myth of the Great Patriotic War; I would consider those messages concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet aggression against Poland on September 17, 1939 and finally (...) the myth of the liberation of Europe in 1944–5 as supplementary myths.

Prof. Filip Musiał

in the background of these very important principal messages we can see the supporting myths, the minor ones relating to seemingly individual events, but which serve to reinforce this main lie. These include, for example: the question of the fate of the Bolshevik prisoners during the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920 and the search for the so-called anti-Katyn on the one hand, and the annexation of Cieszyn Silesia in 1938 by Poland at the expense of Czechoslovakia on the other. Returning to the main plot—what is this historical falsity of the “myth of the Great Patriotic War”? First of all, it is the attempt to convince audiences that the Soviet Union’s involvement in World War II begins in June 1941. In 2019, the All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research

So what is this myth supposed to be based on? First of all, it is based on the conviction that in the case of Russia we are dealing with victims of unprovoked German aggression, who—thanks to their own heroism—defeated the evil that was the Third Reich, and moreover, freed Europe, or implicitly the whole world, from this evil.

Prof. Filip Musiał

conducted a social survey, which shows that 52% of Russians believe that that the Soviet involvement in World War II began precisely at this point. How reliable this research is, is hard to say. However, it seems that a significant part of Russian public opinion does believe in the myth of the Great Patriotic War. So what is this myth supposed to be based on? First of all, it is based on the conviction that in the case of Russia we are dealing with victims of unprovoked German aggression, who—thanks to their own heroism—defeated the evil that was the Third Reich, and moreover, freed Europe, or implicitly the

whole world, from this evil. What are the benefits of such a narrative?

To begin with, we are dealing with an omission of the Soviets’ complicity in triggering a global conflict, an evasion from the fact of German-Soviet cooperation in the interwar period, and from everything that flowed from the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact as a consequence. Another profit is the concealment—which we often forget today—of the enormous Soviet support for the Third Reich in 1939–41. Here I am principally referring to the economic or raw-material support which was crucial for the German army. Without Russian oil and raw materials, the Third Reich’s activities would have had no chance of success. Thanks to this presentation of the history of World War II, the issue of the Soviet Union’s seizure of half the territory of the Second Polish Republic, the lands of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and part of Romania is omitted. There is also no discussion of the aggression against Finland. The Communist crimes committed by the Soviets against the nations conquered in 1939–41 disappear, and these crimes do not include the one which became a symbol of aggression and repression—the Katyn Massacre, the Katyn genocide. It is also worth noting that Stalin originally used the concept of the Great Patriotic War as a myth to mobilise Soviet society to fight the German invader. Today it can be said that this myth is serving to redefine or—to put it bluntly—to falsify the Soviets’ role in World War II, which Russia tries to present only as a powerful ally of the anti-Nazi coalition. This is where the complementary myth appears, namely the reinterpretation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The official Russian narrative assumes a view of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact wherein the German-Soviet

cooperation in the interwar period is irrelevant. It points out, however, that successive inept attempts—as they can probably be called—by the West to prevent the outbreak of World War II (including, in particular, the Munich conference) are portrayed as part of the Western states' alleged cooperation and support for totalitarian Germany. In other words: in this narrative, what the Soviets really did is projected in a distorted way onto the countries of Western Europe.

And yet the totalitarian Soviets' consistent cooperation with democratic and then totalitarian Germany in the interwar period is beyond doubt. Clear evidence of this is found in the Rapallo agreement or the later agreements on friendship and neutrality, while this cooperation culminated in the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, which not only led to the division of Europe into spheres of influence and gave an impulse to Hitler's final decision to attack Poland, but was also linked with economic cooperation. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact is not only a question of political and military cooperation, but also of economic cooperation, thanks to which the Third Reich was able to conduct its imperialist and offensive activities in the early years of the war. The consequence of falsifying the history of the interwar period, including the history of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the causes and consequences of its agreement, is the narrative concerning September 17, 1939, which recreates the Stalinist one from the beginning of the war. It was based on the claim that the Soviet Union's aggression against Poland on September 17, 1939 was an attempt to protect the Ruthenian, Ukrainian and other national communities that inhabited the Polish borderlands—which is an obvious historical falsehood. Putin

even stated that the Red Army entered the territory of the Republic of Poland only when it became clear that the Poles would not be helped by the French or the British—so the explanation is simple: there was no other way to save the people living in the borderlands. This narrative thus removes the entire context of the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the subsequent German-Soviet border treaty, which altered the lines of demarcation in the Pact in line with the outcome of the hostilities. It is this aspect that is lost in the whole story.

Therefore, if we are talking about the current propaganda attempt to distort history around the myth of the Great Patriotic War, we can largely view this phenomenon as a kind of special operation. At this point in my presentation, if you will allow me, I will digress to the path that is closest to me in terms of research:

this activity resembles that of secret services which use methods of disinformation. Disinformation is a method of operative work that consists in transmitting false information in order to influence the recipient, his perception of reality, etc. In this case, we can talk in a way of semi-skimmed disinformation, in which some of the information is true, and some not.

The mechanism is simple: the real elements are meant to authenticate what is not real in the narrative. In the case of disinformation in the historical sphere, commonly known historical events are used as the true element,

Therefore, if we are talking about the current propaganda attempt to distort history around the myth of the Great Patriotic War, we can largely view this phenomenon as a kind of special operation.

Prof. Filip Musiał

and detailed issues related to interpretation or factography are manipulated. Such actions are successful because, while it is quite commonly known that the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was agreed, there is much less knowledge about the content of this agreement, and few people really know how to interpret the pact's agreement in a geopolitical context. Thus, a historical fact universally acknowledged is used to add all possible false logical constructions to it, which creates a new, distorted historical narrative, a new, distorted history of Europe.

A historical fact universally acknowledged is used to add all possible false logical constructions to it, which creates a new, distorted historical narrative, a new, distorted history of Europe.

Prof. Filip Musiał

of the ruling class of today's Russia, precisely on the basis of the symbolism of the heroic superpower during World War II. This is because the war has a very strong presence in the collective memory. When we realise that the Soviets lost 20 million people during this war, and if we include the wounded or those otherwise affected by the war, the obvious conclusion is that there are actually no families in Russia today, no communities, no circles that do not have any dramatic, traumatic memories of this great crisis in their

Who is this tale intended for? It seems to me that, of course, that you are right when you speak about a message directed both domestically and externally, but I have an increasingly well-founded conviction that the domestic audience is more important here. This re-Stalinisation of memory—because I think we can call it that—is primarily being implemented to strengthen the legitimacy

individual remembrances. This war trauma in individual and community memory is an element around which a myth that binds the nation can be built.

That is why I believe that this propaganda is aimed primarily at the Russian people, because it is supposed to build a sense of community, to justify and explain—with lies, but nevertheless—the Soviet actions—according to the narrative visible in some texts from beyond the eastern border, in these terms: “We beat the Germans and no one will take this victory from us; it will not weaken our pride in defeating fascism. It cannot be done even by revealing our own crimes or the process that resulted in the enslavement of half of Europe.” And so it seems to me that the myth of the Great Patriotic War, which has been intensively explored over the last dozen or so years, is an element of the return to the Russian state's community's focus on heroic symbolism. Its task is to build a sense of uniqueness and conviction regarding the special achievements of the Soviet nations. This myth is additionally reinforced by the conviction of the Russian people (among its somewhat more historically conscious circles) of the far-reaching injustice consisting in the fact that all Soviet crimes are attributed to the Russians, and that the other national communities of the Soviet Union are lost somewhere in all of this. In this way, Soviet crimes are in fact equated with Russian crimes, with Russianness. It is this aspect that is worth emphasising, as the counterbalance that strengthens this narrative.

On the other hand, when it comes to propaganda for an external audience, my feelings are mixed in this regard: on the one hand, I am convinced that—speaking very colloquially—this lie has been sewn

with such thick threads that the conscious elite in the Western countries simply does not believe it. However, we are dealing with another problem—that of the low historical awareness of the Western publics. This applies not only to their own history, but also—and perhaps especially—to those countries which until 1989/1991 constituted the then collapsing Eastern bloc. And from this point of view, and the perception of history, the purpose of propagating the myth of the Great Patriotic War (and all the other myths which strengthen, support, supplement that view) is undoubtedly an attempt to break the Soviet Union out of the space of totalitarian states, to whitewash their responsibility for their crimes under the slogan of “Thanks to us, the Third Reich collapsed, we were the ones who liberated Europe.”

We will probably talk about the myth of liberation later, so I will not focus on it now, but I will recall two more things here. Why does this narrative prove effective among the Western circles that are less historically aware? Why is it necessary to recall the real history of World War II? It should be remembered all the time that the West is unfamiliar with the experiences of the nations subjugated by the Soviets in 1939–41 and those that were subjected to Soviet domination after 1944 or 1945. If we do not speak about these things, they will not reach the general consciousness.

Another important element which I believe helps the Russian narrative is the imbalance between the assessment of the Communists' and the Nazis' crimes. An argument that comes back very often in discussions, including in our circles, is the statement that Communism did not have its Nuremberg, which has resulted in the fact that Communist crimes are treated complete-

ly differently than the Nazi ones. And this helps to build the Russian narrative, to take responsibility away from the Soviets both for the crimes of 1939–41 and for what happened after 1944.

AKP: Thank you, Professor, for this statement, and especially for the part in which you break down the myth into its basic elements and explains why it is so popular, why it is so fascinating. As far as the West is concerned, many factors are responsible for the reaction to this myth, to its fascination.

One of them is the relatively small number of hours of history teaching in schools. I happen to know that only a few hours of history are taught weekly in UK schools, and they are focused on carefully selected events and processes which are relevant on the global level. There is no room there to enter into the nuances of the situation, for example behind the Iron Curtain after 1945.

Because Prof. Musiał has touched upon many topics, ranging from diplomatic issues, I would now like to ask Prof. Kornat to outline the Soviet's strategic goals. What were their diplomatic contexts (including during the war)? And—I apologise in advance for suggesting a thesis to answer this question—why do these attempts seem to constitute a coherent whole?

Prof. Marek Kornat [MK]: The topic is so wide that it could easily cover a series of lectures, and not the few minutes we have at our disposal, so I will try to present this

The purpose of propagating the myth of the Great Patriotic War (...) is undoubtedly an attempt to break the Soviet Union out of the space of totalitarian states, to whitewash their responsibility for their crimes.

Prof. Filip Musiał

The Versailles order was created without Russia and against Germany, and thus resulted in the formation of two anti-system or non-system powers.

Prof. Marek Kornat

big problem in a nutshell. In my comments, I will also try to briefly refer to the words of Prof. Musiał. I would like to point out right away that I agree with him to a great extent, although I will add a few more observations. At this point in the discussion, one should start from the banal, commonly known observation that the Versailles order was created without Russia and against Germany, and thus resulted in the formation of two anti-system or non-system powers. We can also use a better term, introduced in the

title of his book by the late German diplomatic historian Andreas Hillgruber—“degraded power” (*die gescheiterte Grossmacht*). After a certain, exceedingly short time, the two moved closer to each other. So we were then dealing with a tactical agreement between two

degraded extra-system powers—this is how the Rapallo system was established. In my opinion, we can and should talk about the Rapallo system, although the Berlin Treaty of Neutrality and Non-Aggression of 1926 was more important than the agreement of 1922, and more stable from the point of view of the interests of both countries; however, it did not last long, only until 1933. Although the Soviet Union in the 1920s was—after all—a non-priority state in international relations (there is no doubt about that), it was able to pursue its interests very effectively, conduct efficient diplomacy, and in the new (Weimar) Germany it found a partner not only politically, but most of all economically, about which a great deal has also been written. (I should just mention

the work of Prof. Bogdan Musiał here, “To the West over the corpse of Poland” [*Na zachód po trupie Polski*]). In the 1920s, a scenario of future development in international relations emerged very clearly: sooner or later there would be a “Second Imperialist War”. Let us mention that this concept of “Imperialist War II” is extremely important; it comes from Lenin, and was introduced as early as 1915, that is, during “Imperialist War I”. In 1915 Lenin wrote the pamphlet “Socialism and War” in which he uses this term, probably for the first time. Starting in 1924, Stalin, as he increasingly moved to become the sole ruler of the Bolshevik empire, spoke of the need for the USSR to act in such a way that the quarrelling imperialist states would enter into a long-lasting conflict, and Bolshevik Russia would participate in it as a third force. This idea is very clear. Stalin says this in secret, of course, while Soviet propaganda speaks only of peace. The theme of peace appears clearly in Soviet policy when the Briand-Kellogg Pact came into effect in the summer of 1928. It can be said that then, for the first time, the ideas of exploiting the pacifism of Western societies in a way which suits the Kremlin appear in Moscow. The idea was to win over the United States, so to acquire modern technologies for the industrialisation of the country. Stalin’s exceptional secret statement of 1925, which cannot be ignored, speaks very clearly about the division among the capitalist states, their quarrels and the inevitable war: in short, he notes that the Locarno system will not guarantee peace, but is only a short-term fix. It should be noted that all of this later turned out to be largely true. I am not saying that Stalin was a far-sighted genius who was right in his judgments, but in this particular case he was right. In any case,

the historian has sufficient data to conclude that in the period between 1921 (the peace with Poland) and 1939 (the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact), the Soviet Union was not interested in working for peace, but was rather waiting out the temporary difficulties to take advantage of the split between the capitalist states. This aspect of the Soviet strategy and tactics is very important and should always be emphasised, because today's Russian historiography—following the Soviet one, of course—discreetly ignores all sources of this type (such as Stalin's aforementioned reflections), or at least it does so in the public discourse. (Russian diplomatic historians know the sources rather well, of course.) It is thus essential to emphasise the distinction between *academic historiography* and *history in the public discourse*, which occurs in every country, including Russia; however, in Russia today there are specific conditions for studying and practicing history. I would like to say that it is undoubtedly not a free country, although it is far from the state of things which prevailed in the Stalin era.

Another point I would like to mention is the policy of “collective security”, which remains one of the themes best mastered by Russian historical propaganda, and which justifies the alleged “pro-peace” policy of the Soviet Union—as ruled by Stalin. Let us first note that after Hitler came to power, ideas appeared in the West, and especially in Paris, to create a bloc in Europe that would allow it to oppose Germany in the reality of a possible war. A draft plan for such a bloc was presented—after consultation with Moscow—by the French government in the summer of 1934 (it was named after the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Louis Barthou). Thereafter there were negotiations for an

Eastern Pact, to which Poland, the Soviet Union, the Baltic states including Finland, and Czechoslovakia (but not Romania) were invited. The concept was rejected after eighteen months of consultations—admittedly not directly, but after the Polish government raised various objections. We must note what the establishment of this bloc would have meant: the need to permit the Red Army to enter Polish territory before starting the hostilities. There would simply have been no other ways to implement such a system as the Eastern Pact. Those two states—the Soviet Union and Germany—had no borders with each other. Any establishment of combat contact between the troops of the USSR and the German army would have been a condition of this. The Soviets, incidentally, were in no rush to go to war with Germany, but—as 1939 showed—they tried to obtain the right to “march” their troops before war broke out. Piłsudski and Beck had the foresight not to follow through on that idea in 1934. And we know what happened when the Baltic states let the Red Army onto their territory in 1939: their fate was sealed. The Polish government's consent to the concept of the Eastern Pact would have been a suicidal step, although this is still denied by Western historiography (something I would like to strongly emphasise). Its general point of view does not coincide with

Starting in 1924, Stalin, as he increasingly moved to become the sole ruler of the Bolshevik empire, spoke of the need for the USSR to act in such a way that the quarrelling imperialist states would enter into a long-lasting conflict, and Bolshevik Russia would participate in it as a third force.

Prof. Marek Kornat

Polish historiography. (Of course, I do not want to allow myself to generalize unnecessarily, because there is a pluralism of views among historians and they often correct each other. But I am talking here about the prevailing or dominant trend.) Well, in the matter of “collective security” there is basically no point in common between Polish and Western historiography—especially the French, but also the Anglo-axon, which uses the argument that it was Poland which prevented the establishment and shaping of the anti-German configuration which the Soviet Union allegedly wished to enter. The Soviet Union had no such intention, but it tactically agreed to negotiate the Eastern Pact, while at the same time – as early as 1935 – proposing a non-aggression pact to Hitler’s Germany. This fact is reflected in the documents of German diplomacy, for example in the *Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik* from that period. The issue of so-called “collective security” immediately raises the question of why Moscow needed it. It was not about fighting Germany in the interests of an Europe based on the Versailles order. The truth is different. Poland’s accession to the Eastern Pact would have meant the establishment—by peaceful means—of a special sphere of influence for the Soviet Union in Central and Eastern Europe. After all, the signatories of the pact would have been countries which were much weaker than the USSR, and France would have been the formal guarantor of the pact, even though it would have *de facto* withdrawn from the region. On the other hand, the pact would have operated in such a way that Moscow would have been the protector of the Central European states, that are Poland and Czechoslovakia—not to mention the Baltic states.

The third and final element mentioned by Prof. Musiał is the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. I have no doubt that when speaking about the events of 1939, we must talk about the parallel negotiations (between Moscow & the Western powers, and Moscow & Berlin), and the unequivocal decision was taken before August 1939. All the historians’ stories—that Stalin allegedly hesitated, that he had to convince his colleagues from the Politburo—these are nonsense. Such events did not take place at all. In this system—Stalin’s totalitarian regime—nobody had to convince anyone, they all had one view—on everything. This is what totalitarianism is all about. The parallel negotiations only served to allow Moscow to “retain its face” and tell the world that the Soviet government had been forced to conclude a tactical pact with Germany; that the Western powers were to blame because they had not made it possible to conclude an anti-German pact; and Poland had played

In the matter of “collective security” there is basically no point in common between Polish and Western historiography—especially the French, but also the Anglo-Saxon, which uses the argument that it was Poland which prevented the establishment and shaping of the anti-German configuration which the Soviet Union allegedly wished to enter. The Soviet Union had no such intention, but it tactically agreed to negotiate the Eastern Pact, while at the same time – as early as 1935 – proposing a non-aggression pact to Hitler’s Germany.

Prof. Marek Kornat

an important role in this by again refusing to consent to the Red Army marching onto its territory. Let us recall the sequence of events: On August 16, 1939 Voroshilov demanded permission for the Soviet army to march through Poland, and the Polish government rejected this request two days later, on August 18. The Moscow-Berlin talks—secret, of course—were already well advanced. A secret protocol was being prepared, the demand of which had been submitted by Molotov.

There is no doubt that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the crowning achievement of the Stalinist concept of foreign policy. I would like this to be clearly articulated. There is evidence of this in the form of historical sources, of course. A document published not so long ago (which I have seen in French—the Bulgarian original is most likely not available in libraries in Poland) says a lot and is extremely clear. So Dimitrov, the head of Comintern, talked to Stalin on September 7, 1939; Stalin, for his part, said—as I have quoted many times: “What would be so bad if the Polish state collapsed?” Then the dictator replies to himself that there would be one “capitalist state” less and that socialism would extend “to new territories and nations”. This is very clearly stated – the nature of his statement is not in doubt. Another example is the statement the Soviet dictator made in December 1941, when the British Foreign Minister Eden arrived in Moscow and had his first meeting with Stalin. During this conversation, the Soviet leader spoke very frankly (although personally I do not know whether this man could ever have been honest, but it looks sincere). He said, among other things, that the Soviet Union and Great Britain could not come to an understanding

before the war because their goals were drastically different. Britain defended the “old balance”, that is, the old balance of power, and the Soviet Union was fighting it. Therefore, only now could the two countries reach an agreement because there was no doubt that “a new order will emerge after World War II”. This is an extremely emphatic statement, revealing Stalin’s real intentions—far from what is being said in Moscow today, at least in the public discourse. So the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact made it possible for the Soviet Union to make an easy territorial profit; that is, it made it possible to remain in the war from the very first moment (as Stalin spoke about in 1925). The Soviets did not promise Germany military aid against Poland, but did secure significant territorial benefits for themselves. This is in a situation of apparent neutrality. In 1939–41, the Soviet Union simulated neutrality; and by the way, Russian historians have even used the term “special kind of neutrality” (coined by academician Alexander Chubarian). In this way the Soviet Union, which had *de facto* swallowed up half of Poland, the Baltic states and Bessarabia, was apparently conducting a policy based on this principle of the “special kind of neutrality”, which even sounds ridiculous. Thus we are dealing with the crowning achievement of Soviet concepts of international order: an unforced pact. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was not forced by the situation. The narrative of extortion was created later. The pact was negotiated and concluded with the agreement which Soviet power coveted. From Stalin’s perspective,

There is no doubt that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the crowning achievement of the Stalinist concept of foreign policy.

Prof. Marek Kornat

Hitler was a perfect partner for him: he takes the decisions, he is the first to start the war, and allows the strategic interests to be delineated in specific regions. And let us add: the concept of spheres of interest or spheres of influence is familiar to nineteenth-century colonial policy (the objects of this international policy of “zones of interest” included China, Afghanistan and the Belgian Congo). Nevertheless, let us stress emphatically—what was euphemistically written in the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact about spheres of interest meant much

From the moment of repelling the German aggression (...) a clear Soviet concept for a broad entry into Central & Eastern Europe and the creation of a system of states dependent on Moscow—which would be, at best, payment for the Soviet Union's participation in World War II—emerges.

Prof. Marek Kornat

riography for a relatively long time, although nowadays they are often removed from view in international discussions about the causes of World War II.

more: behind it is the idea of an extermination policy, veiled by euphemisms, carried out by two totalitarian states. Another German historian, Martin Broszat, has said that Hitler found in Stalin a partner who was very similar to him in terms of his strategic thinking, in disposing the fate of entire nations lightly, including resettlement, extermination and mass executions. In short, it was about creating an *irreversible state*. The Polish state was sentenced to death, and was never to be re-established. These are known things, they are not a discovery, but they have remained in the circulation of histo-

The last point I want to talk about: from the moment of repelling the German aggression (I am skipping the topic at the moment as to whether the aggression of June 22, 1941 was a preventive action or not, because it is a separate topic and we cannot explore it here) by stopping the *Blitzkrieg* near Moscow, and then the victory which Stalingrad seals, a clear Soviet concept for a broad entry into Central & Eastern Europe and the creation of a system of states dependent on Moscow—which would be, at best, payment for the Soviet Union's participation in World War II—emerges. The outline of this idea is already clearly visible in the years 1942–3. Quite a few documents have also been published on this subject, but—I think—there are still materials in the Russian archives that can illustrate this concept better. It's not true that the actions of the Soviet side were *ad hoc* or simply a reaction to the moves of its Western partners. No! There was—and this needs to be emphasised—a clear plan for the Sovietisation of Central and Eastern Europe. Of course, this would happen in several steps and not just through a one-off act. This plan is outlined in documents such as Maysky's 1943 memorandum. Let me remind you: Maysky was the Soviet ambassador to Great Britain, who signed an agreement with General Sikorski in 1941; he was later recalled to Moscow and entrusted with the position of chairman of the commission which prepared the terms of the future peace, with the idea that there might be a peace conference after World War II, something which was difficult to predict in 1943. The clear plan for the Sovietisation of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, by force of course, was to be brought to fruition in, I believe, three ways: (1) to create a fiction of a “national front” in

each of the conquered countries; (2) rigging elections, should they have to be held; (3) breaking up the non-Communist political parties. Poland was a real test case here. The rigging of the elections in 1947 (in terms of scale) was a phenomenon, a quite unique event, which is rather poorly remembered in the West.

Referring also to Prof. Musiał's statements about politics of history, I would say this: I believe that today's politics of history, in the understanding of the Russian authorities' public discourse, is certainly targeted at their own society, but also to foreign countries, something which sometimes escapes our view. One should distinguish between the issues of the target audience of a given historical message: if a narrative is conveyed that Poland was "liberated", then every rational person from the West will refuse to accept it or will raise some doubts (if he has any historical knowledge). But when we are talking about the 1939 Allied-Soviet negotiations, the situation becomes different; likewise when comparing National Socialism and the Third Reich with the Soviet Union. In Western societies, in both the liberal and left-wing parties, there is a clear resistance to the thesis that Soviet diplomacy conducted mock negotiations with both the Western powers and Germany in parallel. There is comparable resistance to comparing the totalitarian realities of the Third Reich with the equally totalitarian Soviet state. I will give two examples. When Prof. Stéphane Courtois published the famous *Black Book of Communism*, the then French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said in public: «au moment où l'Allemagne nazie était notre adversaire, l'Union soviétique était, quoi qu'on pense sur la nature de son régime, notre alliée...» ("At a time when Nazi Germany was

our enemy, the Soviet Union, no matter what anyone thought about nature of its system, was our ally."). Another example: Sergio Romano, an Italian historian, known mainly for his popular journalistic activity, and at the same time a former ambassador to Moscow, wrote an article recently in which he argued that Poland was responsible for breaking off the negotiations with Moscow because it did not agree to Soviet forces marching through its territory. In an article published in the daily *Corriere della Sera*, he said seven years ago that it would have been possible to form a grand coalition and shorten the war, but the Poles did not want to let the Red Army pass. While saying this, though, Romano did not ask himself whether the Soviet Union wanted to push for Berlin at all, and this is the key question. He also probably did not hear about the theory of "Imperialist War II" that I mentioned. Yet another example comes from the Israeli historian Gabriel Gorodetsky, who recently issued an abridged version of the diaries of Ivan Maysky as Ambassador to London. The biased introduction he included in this study speaks for itself. In this narrative, Maysky plays the role of a would-be saviour of peace. Finally, there is the question of comparing National Socialism and Bolshevism. Well, Germany, in a very characteristic tendency for public discourse about the past in this country, clearly resists

The clear plan for the Sovietisation of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, by force of course, was to be brought to fruition in, I believe, three ways: (1) to create a fiction of a "national front" in each of the conquered countries; (2) rigging elections, should they have to be held; (3) breaking up the non-Communist political parties.

Prof. Marek Kornat

the notion of totalitarianism. The concept of abandoning the concept of totalitarianism is repeated more and more clearly, so that the uniqueness of the Nazi regime is not softened, and the thesis about the uniqueness (*Einzigartigkeit*) of Nazism is upheld. Instead, there is talk of dictatorships. Thus, the main narrative about the systemic transformations in interwar Europe is a reflection on dictatorship; in Poland (Piłsudski), Portugal (Salazar), Turkey (Kemal), the USSR (Stalin), Germany (Hitler). We just have a “school” of dictators (Curzio Malaparte’s term), or models of different dictatorships. We throw out the term “totalitarianism” as obsolete. However, abandoning the concept of totalitarianism—de-

However, abandoning the concept of totalitarianism—departing from it—wrecks havoc on sound historical knowledge. Who could normally (that is, realistically) look at the reality of the situation and dare to compare Horthy’s Hungary or Piłsudski’s Poland, or even Charles II’s Romania after February 1938, with the states of Hitler or Stalin?

Prof. Marek Kornat

parting from it—wrecks havoc on sound historical knowledge. Who could normally (that is, realistically) look at the reality of the situation and dare to compare Horthy’s Hungary or Piłsudski’s Poland, or even Charles II’s Romania after February 1938, with the states of Hitler or Stalin? And although it is absurd, such treatments are employed even by academic historians in the West. In my opinion, it would be worth writing a separate dissertation on this subject.

I would also like to add that the theme of the Nuremberg trial is of great importance in contemporary Russia’s public

discourse on the past, especially World War II. A Soviet judge was present there, and Soviet prosecutors participated. And so the following narrative has appeared in Moscow, which is probably new: “Stalin and his regime must not be judged, because it was in Nuremberg that World War II was judged.” The Soviets were not blamed for anything. There can be no appeal against the Nuremberg verdict. And thus, the theme of Nuremberg was introduced into Russian historical propaganda as being very important.

Another matter is the subject of Yalta as an excellent model for creating peace: “perfect

© Wojciech Domińczak, 2021



peacemaking”, as one might say in English. By the way, thanks to this propaganda message, Stalin was restored to his pedestal in Russia. From what I have noticed (and I could be wrong, because I have not been in Russia much lately), Stalin has not been restored there of his own accord. He was dethroned by Khrushchev, thrown out at Khrushchev’s orders from the Lenin Mausoleum after the 22nd Congress of the CPSU; but he has returned through the bronze-hewn statue of the Big Three of Yalta, together with Roosevelt and Churchill as partners of the Anti-Fascist Coalition (as it is still called in Russia).

The so-called Great Patriotic War is certainly a phenomenon which prevents the Russians from finally burying Stalinism and settling accounts with this terrible phase in their history. The Russians, as a nation attached to the idea of an empire, cannot come to terms with calling Stalin “a criminal, a murderer, full stop, Amen”. A criminal—yes, but also the builder of a great power. And this ambivalence still continues. How will it end? I am not a prophet, but I do not believe that anything good will come of it.

AKP: Thank you very much for this clear and detailed picture of the road to the Sovietisation of Europe in the diplomatic space, and the synthesis of foreign policy up to the mention of the Yalta conference. Would anyone else like to refer to both statements?

Łukasz Jasina [ŁJ]: I would like to add just a few words in a supplementary-political form, because Prof. Musiał started our discussion by making a distinction—in my opinion an important one—between politics of history and historical propaganda, and raised the issue of the contemporary understanding of history and how it is exploited. This magazine should be our way of presenting the Polish version of history, a version that needs to be presented. We are living in a very

The so-called Great Patriotic War is certainly a phenomenon which prevents the Russians from finally burying Stalinism and settling accounts with this terrible phase in their history. The Russians, as a nation attached to the idea of an empire, cannot come to terms with calling Stalin “a criminal, a murderer, full stop, Amen”. A criminal—yes, but also the builder of a great power. And this ambivalence still continues.

Prof. Marek Kornat



difficult period. The moment has come where we are seeing the purely physical end of the witnesses of history, whom we had a chance to refer to, and who in many cases sustained Poland and the truth of this version of history, which is so important to us. Soon we will only have written sources, and these can be manipulated in various ways. Prof. Kornat has shown us how coherent the Russian way of dealing with history is. Coherent, so to speak, as Richard Pipes thought: it is quite a powerful continuation of all the Russias that has existed. Russia pursued a policy

It is unfortunately very difficult for Poles to balance between the Soviet and German totalitarianisms due to the well-established belief that Russia made mistakes, but was nevertheless a state on the right side of history.

Lukasz Jasina PhD

Holocaust was carried out, but not much as anything else. On the one hand, World War II turned into a war against the Jews, which greatly diminishes the totalitarian crimes against citizens of non-Jewish origin, including Poles. We also have to deal with the above-mentioned inability to compare the Communist and Nazi crimes, as visible in the statement by Prime Minister Jospin. It is unfortunately very difficult for Poles to balance between the Soviet and German totalitarianisms due to the well-established belief that Russia made mistakes, but was

based on these principles as early as the 17th and 18th centuries. We are in a terrible trap here, because we have a very strong definition of World War II, formulated over the last 40 years, in which Poland was basically absent, in which Poland appears as the place where the war began, and then the place where the

nevertheless a state on the right side of history—to make some travesty of the recent statement by Georgette Mosbacher, the former US ambassador to Poland. Finally, we also have the German politics of history,

which we are no longer afraid to talk about; that is, we have ceased to tiptoe around the subject due to the rising political position of our country. We have many problems, and Poland finds itself in a very difficult situation: we are now a country justifying itself for the Holocaust, not the Germans or the Austrians. In addition, our politics of history is in conflict with most of the neighbouring countries' established politics of history. This is a very sad situation, which means that every undertaking in the field of politics of history becomes a way to stand in opposition to the above-mentioned circumstances. Almost every Polish initiative, no matter who is doing it, what kind of environment it is (I'm not just thinking about the Institute of National Remembrance; the same brush is also used to tar many more left-oriented circles), is stigmatised. So this is a very serious matter, but also very important in terms of contemporary politics, because history plays an important role in it right now. Russia's use of the same brush to tar others is being exploited in contemporary politics; and making Poles complicit in the Holocaust also detracts from many of our contemporary political efforts. The phrase that "history does not matter to the present day" was never more deceptive than it is now, in 2021.

The phrase that "history does not matter to the present day" was never more deceptive than it is now, in 2021.

Lukasz Jasina PhD

Witold Wasilewski PhD [WW]: An important moment in the evaluation of the Great Patriotic War is the reference to the definition of “politics of history”, a fresh, but already well-established formulation. I understand the distinction between politics of history and historical propaganda, but I would not shy away from using the term “politics of history”. Politics of history serves the realisation of political goals, not building or expanding knowledge, like academic history. In general, we also believe that a politics of history is implemented by the state, although here a question can of course be raised—undoubtedly, it is not only the state itself which does so. In the case of Russia, we are dealing with a situation where state institutions merge with enormous organisations that are usually perceived in the West as institutions of social life. Classic examples are the Russian Military Historical Society and the Russian Historical Society. These are, in fact, state-dependent, parastatal, state-created institutions: one is headed by the former minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, and the other is headed by the head of the Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin. The fact is that they serve state policy and conduct politics of history.

In my opinion, the essence of the matter—and this, I believe, was Prof. Musiał’s intention when he introduced this distinction—is the following: politics of history may be more or less consistent with academic history, that is with the findings of knowledge resulting from the historian’s study (acquiring and reaching sources, critically analysing them and establishing what the facts are). In Russia, meanwhile, it is an essential feature of politics of history that at many key moments it is completely inconsistent with academic

history. A classic example is the above-mentioned denial of the aggressive nature of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact—but also, the consent to include in public discourse issues which are offensive to the foundations of learning, such as the attribution of the Soviet crime at Katyn to Germany. We know that in the 1990s, the Soviet (and later, Russian) governments admitted that the crime had been perpetrated by the Soviet authorities; this knowledge has been clearly established around the world, and has not been formally rejected as a whole by the authorities. On the other hand, in a number of activities, for example by the Russian Historical Society or the Russian Military Historical Society, we can see the Russian media, and even some segments of public authority, if not promoting a false version, then at least denying that it is clear who committed this crime or who specifically fell victim to it. And this is precisely a classic example of politics of history that defies the truth, and which is an essential feature of Russian politics of history.

Undoubtedly, the story of the Great Patriotic War is a central element of this discourse in Russia, and this story has been aptly presented by Prof. Musiał. Throughout the Soviet period, as well as the post-Soviet period, it assumed the identification of World War II with the Great Patriotic War, that is the period that began with the attack by Germany on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and the exclusion of the events of 1939–41 from this narrative. At present, the transition to the assimilation of the 1939–1941 period also is a characteristic of Russian politics of history or historical propaganda. Here begins a different emphasis: the period 1939–41 and the cooperation of the USSR with Germany are no longer being pushed

out of consciousness, but in fact are being justified by the diplomatic game, the nature of geopolitics—these are the elements of historical events that Prof. Kornat spoke of. They are presented precisely as a justification for the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact and for many acts of Soviet aggression—because, let us remind you, these were aggressions both against Poland in 1939 and later against the Baltic states, including taking Bessarabia from Romania. These actions are currently being justified by a general geopolitical game at which Soviet Russia simply turned out to

The period 1939–41 and the cooperation of the USSR with Germany are no longer being pushed out of consciousness, but in fact are being justified by the diplomatic game, the nature of geopolitics.

Witold Wasilewski PhD

be more effective. All the countries were supposed to play this game—as perfectly presented by Prof. Kornat—except, not all the participants had aggressive goals, and not all were of the same size as the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. But in the present Russian narrative, it is said that all states participated equally in the game, and the Soviet state simply won it: “We, the Soviets, have won this game, we, the Russians, have won it, we cannot be judged for our victory, because we were simply the better players.” This narrative, of course, ignores many other threads and elements of historical reality. A number of additional moments appear here, such as the statement that the Soviet entry into Poland on September 17, 1939 was a “situational reaction.” This entry, that was simply an act of aggression against the territory of Poland, was allegedly a reaction to the failure by France and Great Britain to help Poland, which had

already been defeated (which was not entirely true). In fact, we know that earlier, in August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had been concluded with a secret protocol providing for the division of the territory of Poland, so it was not a spontaneous “situational reaction” to events in the immediate geopolitical game, but a planned implementation of the Soviets’ aggressive intentions.

Undoubtedly, the Great Patriotic War was a central element of the previous Soviet (and now Russian) historical narrative, but this myth can certainly be placed in the context of all Russian politics of history, as inscribed in the activities of contemporary politics. Its basic feature is the integration of all periods of Russian history: the Old Russian, the imperial, the Soviet and the present day, while excluding periods such as the decline of the Romanov empire, the brief existence of the republic in 1917, the decline of the Soviet Union and the 1990s (which is treated as a time of downfall). Everything apart from that has been put together into a coherent whole. Elements of the country’s success are presented, measured by the power of authority, the extent of its territorial influence or its sphere of influence, its global authority, and finally, its military force. Here, of course, the choice of the Great Patriotic War as an example becomes clear, because in the end it was a victorious war for the Soviet Union. I would not fully agree that the war in Russia (and other countries of the former USSR) has the rank of the most important social experience which cannot be exploited in politics of history; although it is true that for many Russians it is a very important and vivid experience, due to the scale of the events and its undeniable closeness. Of course this is true, but there were periods in Soviet history when

this myth was much less exposed. This was the case in the Khrushchev era. This narrative was revisited, and consistently incorporated into the Soviet (and later Russian) politics of history during the Brezhnev era. Immediately after the end of the war, during the Stalinist period, the victory itself was celebrated. The choice of this narrative is conscious nowadays; it is part of an entire sequence of politics of history which exposes all those elements of Ruthenian, Russian and Soviet history that can be considered as determinants of success and victory. The statues of Stalin are returning (Prof. Wojciech Materski has listed the erections of a dozen such monuments during 2015–17), but at the same time other monuments are being unveiled. The Russian Military Historical Society has erected a monument to Ivan III the Great (not to be confused with Ivan IV); there are also monuments to many other rulers. We also know that Vladimir Putin himself—because we are talking about the political connotation here, we are talking about the model, not about its implementers—appreciates and exposes Peter the Great, Catherine the Great.

The choice of the above narratives and historical figures is therefore clearly not accidental. There is a certain sequence of narratives which creates the context for removing the Great Patriotic War from it and making it the focal point of politics of history as the greatest and closest contemporary victory—the closest, because later came the “geopolitical catastrophe” of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The subsequent successes were smaller, although—as we know—they did appear (such as the victory in the second Chechen war in 2000). This was a very important topic, played out for a long time, which entered at least into popular film, for

example, and into Russian culture in general, undoubtedly at the conscious inspiration of the state. It can be said that the narrative of the victory in the second Chechen war was a necessary requirement, so that reference could freely be made to the successes of entire previous centuries without being ridiculed at the same time. If Russia's weaknesses in the 1990s (for example the defeat in Grozny at the turn of 1995) had been juxtaposed with the historic successes that the Kremlin's rulers would like to endorse, that could have been a potential source of such ridiculousness.

Currently, for example, the annexation of Crimea is being highlighted as a success, regardless of whether this development of events in Ukraine is assessed as an objective success for Russian policy or not. This is the context of the Great Patriotic War, which is central to the political narratives, but is only one element of them. There are many such examples of the integration of historical themes, often very anecdotal (such as the simultaneous veneration of Lenin and Kolchak).

In 2014, in front of the Belarusian Station in Moscow (I have not been there since then), a monument to *Прощание славянки* (Farewell of a Slav woman) was erected, obviously referring to the march and the Russian song (composer Vasily Agapkin) in 1912 in connection with the Balkan war, which is very important to Russian history. The monument shows a Russian woman

There were periods in Soviet history when this myth was much less exposed. This was the case in the Khrushchev era. This narrative was revisited, and consistently incorporated into the Soviet (and later Russian) politics of history during the Brezhnev era.

Witold Wasilewski PhD

saying goodbye to a soldier—it is not really clear to the viewer whether it is a soldier going to the war of 1912 or to the Great Patriotic War. It is an example of a pattern of history with which the Russians are supposed to identify. This is a story of victories and wars that connects the entire Russian and Soviet tradition.

I agree that this policy is largely externally targeted—referring to Prof. Kornat—while in the domestic, Russian market, the narrative about the war is one element of a very broad build-up of pride in the state, by showing its role as a superpower, a great power—not the achievements or wealth of its citizens, but the superpower successes of Russia, the Soviet Union and again Russia.

Franciszek Dąbrowski [FD]: I see. I would like to ask Prof. Kornat about just one detail about the Soviet diplomatic and military plans, to wit: All kinds of plans with such a wide spectrum, such a wide range, carry a serious risk. Hitler's policy has long been said to be turbulent, risky. In turn, powers such as the Soviet Union of Stalin had enormous resources and opportunities, and Stalin's pre-war domestic policy cannot be called moderate either—it was extreme in relation to its own citizens. One can therefore understand that the ease and flexibility of taking decisions were something natural for the Soviet leadership. So, has any account of the risks been made? Are there any signs of this?

MK: The answer to this question is difficult, because it would require a completely free examination of the archives, of the files in the Soviet archives. To what extent did Stalin, or the Soviet leadership more broadly speaking, consider the risk factor, and to what extent did they not? I think that when it comes to 1939, the matter is extremely simple, because

the conflict broke out—for Moscow, as I said, that was the dream situation—between two groups of powers, on the one hand the Italian-German alliance, the “Pact of Steel”, and the Western powers, which had granted Poland a guarantee. There was hardly any risk here. Stalin played out his concept almost perfectly, but he also had strong advantages: Berlin, London, and Paris were all striving for his support. If he sensed any risk, it was, in my opinion, during the time of the failures on the Winter War front with Finland.

This refers to the period from the end of 1939, because in January 1940, rumours clearly began to circulate through diplomatic offices that a British-French expeditionary force would be sent to Finland. This is the reason why Finland survived. We must also be aware that the Mannerheim Line would have broken one day anyway (those great frosts would eventually have thawed). And for a criminal like Stalin—I have no hesitation in saying—the sacrifice of another half a million or a million people just to conquer Finland would not have been any cost at all. Anyway, it probably would not have been necessary in such dimensions. In connection with the above, the risk factor only probably arose then, as it started

The Soviet Union had a hierarchy of external enemies. In the first place was Great Britain, considered enemy number one. (...) After the creation of the Third Reich, Hitler overtook England, and Germany took first place in the hierarchy of enemies (...) Poland and Romania were also very high in this hierarchy.

Prof. Marek Kornat

to look like Western aid would come to Finland. Speaking of the interwar period, it is worth mentioning that the Soviet Union had a hierarchy of external enemies. In the first place was Great Britain, considered enemy number one; that remained the case throughout the 1920s, despite trade relations based on the 1921 agreement. The situation only begins to change around 1934–5, when Great Britain supported the negotiations on the Eastern Pact and gave France diplomatic help in this matter; Minister Eden went to Moscow and met Stalin (in April 1935), and so on. Japan was second in the ranking. After the creation of the Third Reich, Hitler overtook England, and Germany took first place in the hierarchy of enemies—at least on the propaganda plane. Poland and Romania were also very high in this hierarchy. Turkey was not on the list of the USSR's enemies because Lenin and Kemal had arranged their relationship well, they had already divided up Armenia, and so on.

Generally speaking, there probably was a risk factor in Soviet diplomacy, although

In general, whenever Western states formed some kind of agreement (Locarno, the Four-Power Pact), Moscow reacted extremely nervously to it, because it saw a threat to itself.

Prof. Marek Kornat

it is impossible to say too much about it in detail, as one would have to go into the sources of the decision-making process at the key moments. And this will not be easy, due to our limited access to the sources. I think that this factor was related to concerns about the formation of a bloc of capitalist states—that is, a configuration similar to the Four-Power

Pact (France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy). We should note how nervously and disproportionately Moscow reacted to this project, despite its professional diplomacy, and even though the interests of the USSR were not directly affected. In general, whenever Western states formed some kind of agreement (Locarno, the Four-Power Pact), Moscow reacted extremely nervously to it, because it saw a threat to itself.

I would like to say two more words about politics of history—the term, of course, is German, from the word *Geschichtspolitik*, that is a term of Adenauer's era. Let us start by saying that every country conducts politics of history, but not every country does it in the same way. Everyone does it the best way they can. For example: on the hundredth anniversaries of the outbreak, and then the end of World War I, in which France wrote a very important chapter, the efforts of French cultural diplomacy were visible even in Warsaw. At a meeting of my Department at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, I hosted Colonel Frédéric Guelton (the former head of the Vincennes Military Archives), a well-known military historian. The French wanted to emphasise the importance of World War I (for them, the Great War) for Europe. Of course, the French do not boast about World War II, because they have nothing to boast about. Their defeat in 1940 was not without a sense of disgrace. It is remembered, but it cannot be used to build up any positive narrative. In the case of each country, we are dealing with exposing some events at the expense of others, in order to create our own specific message—addressed both to foreign countries and to our own societies, of course placing the emphasis on one or the other.

In any case, this is an example of a positive politics of history, based on showing one's own merits—real or perceived. However, a negative politics of history can also be pursued—and this is based on removing the achievements of other societies or nations in the fight or endeavours for a common goal from the field of view, or on levelling moral accusations against them.

Russia is also fighting for its “truth”, which is not surprising. It does this offensively. It does not shy away from gross falsehood and manipulation. This is certainly a negative politics of history—negative because it consists in silence and defamation. When necessary, it reaches back to certain episodes to elevate them to the rank of great events. We have examples of this. It is worth remembering

Putin is trying—and I do not know whether he will succeed—to reach the circles of the Western right with his own message, of course falsified—and here I mean both the systemic and anti-systemic elements, such as the former Front National in France or the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany.

Prof. Marek Kornat

that in all the speeches made by the head of the Russian state on Victory Day in Moscow, the Polish nation or Poland are not even mentioned because of their participation in the anti-German coalition, regardless of the assessment of their contribution to the victory. There are phrases about French, Italian and even German “anti-fascists” who deserve the gratitude of their descendants. But there are no Poles. Putin, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, published a notorious article in the conservative American magazine *The National Interest*. There, he made

accusations against [Polish] Ambassador Józef Lipski, who allegedly wanted to murder the Jews together with Hitler. Politics of history can be practiced in various ways—as can be seen from the examples above—and we must be aware of this. Putin is trying—and I do not know whether he will succeed—to reach the circles of the Western right with his own message, of course falsified—and here I mean both the systemic and anti-systemic elements, such as the former Front National in France or the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany. He wants to reach these people with his message, because the liberal and left-wing circles more or less share the views expressed by Lionel Jospin and Sergio Romano. This is still worth noting.

FD: Thank you very much professor. This time, let me ask Prof. Boćkowski a question. Professor, there remains a very important issue regarding the perception of the effects of war and whether we can talk about its so-called “homeland” character (I understand that this is a figure or term that refers to how this war was seen in Soviet propaganda; it refers to the patriotic war against Napoleon of 1812, of course): to what extent was the Soviet Union a homeland for those who were fighting in its name? And there are two questions here: first, how did the Soviets legitimise their conquests from September 1939 onwards, and second, how did they Sovietise these territories? what tools did they use to fortify their rule? (although of course, in general, you could say they were violent social engineering tools). It is not hard to see that the way in which the Soviets governed those territories between September 1939 and the outbreak of the Soviet-German war in 1941—and here we are not just referring to the territory taken from Poland, Romania or

Finland, but also the annexed Baltic states—in a certain sense legitimised their subsequent territorial demands and their own perception of the war.

Prof. Daniel Boćkowski (DB): It is maddeningly difficult to conclude that the Russians—or the Soviet Union—in any way hoped that the conquered territories would be an area with which they could win people over to join in a potential war with Germany. Rather, they were conquered so there would not be any battles on their land. And from the very beginning it was assumed that this area would become some form of *terra nullius*. Hence all the purges, the liquidation of any groups that could potentially have interfered (to put it mildly) with the Soviet troops during the hostilities (although the Soviets probably did not anticipate what those would have looked like in June 1941). Therefore, the Soviet policy in the territories they occupied in 1939–40 was primarily aimed at cleansing the outskirts of any potential conflict area as much as possible. On the other hand, it was supposed to build an image of the Soviet Union in these areas which was much more fictional than we think. When we look at the policy of the Soviet Union in the border areas with Germany from 1939–40—the whole policy!—it is clear that its aim was to show the Germans that things were completely different there than in the depths of the USSR, hence the many Soviet actions (and omissions)—not only propaganda, but also formal—regarding the potential fight against the peasantry, industry, trade, and so on, were not as drastic as expected. This restraint was somewhat targeted towards Germany and related to the intelligence service's reconnaissance of the border (in fact, we know nothing about this great operation of reconnaissance by

one side of the other, about who crossed the border, when, where and why, and what the results of this reconnaissance were, how it was done). By the way, the Soviets carried out some of these actions with the use of some local communities; for example, they set the Poles against the Belarusians, the Jews, and so on. This antagonising, this “divide and rule” policy, had exactly the same goal as the purges: that is, simply to secure the territory. Recruitment from these areas into the army was very moderate, that is, most of the conscripts were registered, but a really small number did end up in the Red Army during conscription. It is difficult to speak of a clear and transparent policy here. I don't think anyone had a clear policy there. The Russians seized these areas, probably precisely because they expected a German strike to the East, and did everything to move its point of origin to the West (or at least that is what Russian politics of history now holds). This is important because today's politics of history, such as that of Belarus, takes all this Russian propaganda seriously, even more than the Russians themselves, and has constructed this message effectively. There is also the question of the target audience of this information and the language he uses: let's assume that he speaks not only English, but also Russian. For example, the Russian diaspora, which is dispersed not only in the

The Soviets carried out some of these actions with the use of some local communities; for example, they set the Poles against the Belarusians, the Jews, and so on. This antagonising, this “divide and rule” policy, had exactly the same goal as the purges: that is, simply to secure the territory.

Prof. Daniel Boćkowski

US and the European Union, but also in Israel, uses mainly Russian news channels and social media, not those in the English language. In order to resist the slogan that the Great Patriotic War only liberated what had long been Soviet, one must act in two directions. I doubt whether we will convince the West of some of these theses in English, but we should also work to give ourselves the possibility of counter-propaganda. If we are to oppose the Russian and Belarusian-Russian propaganda, we also need sources and studies that are in the appropriate languages. It is necessary

The principle was simple: wherever the foot of a Soviet soldier falls, Soviet power is to remain there forever.

Prof. Daniel Boćkowski

not only to show that this is disinformation, but also to create appropriate materials that can be used to support our arguments by showing the lies. This can be seen, for example, in the analysis of the general awareness of what the historical realities in the territories occupied by the Soviets in 1939–40 looked like: we are losing there not because we are arguing that before 1939 the inhabitants were bad or good, but because we are not presenting any information at all. The dissemination of false information reaches frankly absurd levels; for example it is said that in the Republic of Poland in the 1930s Belarusian insurgent units fought against genocide (allegedly being committed by Poles), and that there was a strong Belarusian insurgent movement in Poland, proof of which apparently consists of the internment camp at Bereza Kartuska.

FD: I understand. You have presented an interpretation of the history of this area, between the borders established under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the former

Soviet border before 1939, as some kind of police operation; you refer to the purges in this area as a prelude to war, which could apparently have been expected. It is easy for us to look at it this way *ex post factum*, but it cannot be denied that some elements of Sovietisation had already appeared there at that time. We may conclude that the liquidation of the elite, the subordination of the local armed forces, as was the case in the Baltic states, and their cleansing of “uncertain elements” were successive stages of preparation for war. Indeed, these were also actions aimed at introducing these territories and their people into the Soviet system. The most drastic of these actions, of course, were the deportations of various populations; one of these actions—the one which covered most people of Jewish origin—was the one that was intended to remove the “dangerous element” from the border zone (mainly refugees from territories occupied by the Germans). Here, too, there was a double effect—creating a security zone and, at the same time, a Sovietised zone. From the point of view of subsequent events—that is, the German-Soviet war and its consequences—the issue of the Soviets’ legitimisation and organisation on these territories is important. As you know, the British and Americans did not recognise the occupation and subsequent annexation of the Baltic states, but in the case of the eastern territories of the Polish Republic, the situation later looked completely different.

DB: Of course, the preparation for military operations did not mean that the process of Sovietisation was not being carried out. The principle was simple: wherever the foot of a Soviet soldier falls, Soviet power is to remain there forever. The Soviet “sphere of influence”, according to the provisions of the

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was supposed to extend much further to the West, as far as Warsaw, although in 1939 it did not succeed tactically. The entire concept of Sovietisation of the borderlands of the Polish Republic, or the entire area in general, from Lithuania to Bessarabia, originally differed from what the population of these territories had to deal with in 1944. The Soviet actions in the borderlands in 1939–41 naturally consisted of introducing Soviet administration, in fact the entire infrastructure of the Soviet state and its rules; but at the same time, they did not initiate a ruthless crackdown on the Church, on the peasants, on private trade or many other non-Communist elements of social life. A certain infrastructure of power was maintained, in a way very different from that of the pre-war Soviet state: here, I believe, the goals were completely different. I assume that the Soviets' aim, first of all, was to take control of the territory, to introduce certain structures of power to subjugate the population sufficiently, but not to alienate it completely, because then that would have required much greater forces and resources, and the Soviets apparently did not have such resources and means at their disposal. Moreover, if this was to be the front line, there would have been no point in investing in the area, as in 1944, when it was already certain that Germany was broken and that, as with those territories that were already Soviet, you could do what you wanted with them. Hence the differences in the implementation of the Soviet order; anyway, these activities, including purging the uncertain or hostile elements, were pretty multifaceted. Of course, what counts here is the deportation to Siberia and Central Asia of refugees from the German occupation, primarily Jews;

but let us remember that the largest and, in fact, the most complicated operation was the deportation in 1941, because then everything, entire regions, from Estonia as far as Bessarabia, were purged and significant numbers of people were deported. It was an enormous logistical operation concerning the entirety of the captured territories and requiring their in-depth analysis by the Soviet secret police. I can use the example of my grandfather, who was hospitalised in Vilnius because he was wounded; the NKVD discovered him, and in 1941 he was put on the list for deportation, but they did not find him in the end, because he had moved out of his place of residence three days before the secret date given for his arrest. I have a complete set of NKVD documents relating to him. So this was not a precedent, this was a normal operation. Why? Because the Russians took over the complete documentation of the Lithuanian authorities from before June 1940 regarding requests for permission to return to the area occupied by the Germans. So these operations had different bases as well. The largest deportation operation was the one from 1941, although for Poles the most important are of course those from 1940, with the most tragic consequences. All these deportations had a clear goal, that is, to get rid of people who were inconvenient or dangerous to the Soviet authorities, to get rid of people who could handle weapons, to get rid of the families of people murdered in Katyń and various other places, to cleanse them from the occupied territories, something that what the Russians often referred to by the term *обезглавление* (in Ukrainian *обезголовлення*), literally “decapitation”. It was this which was the crucial step, and not the absolute Sovietisation of the society and

economy—because that did not happen. In all the documents we study, we find indications that the process of Sovietisation was implemented quite mildly in relation to what the Soviets could and would have liked to do. Compare this, for example, with the experience of 1944, when there was no longer any doubt as to what was whose.

AKP: Thank you very much, Professor. My question to Dr. Jasina: the Great Patriotic War in mass culture, including cinema...

LJ: Two thoughts to start with. First of all, we do not realise how the action on history in popular culture is related to historians' supply of ammunition. Huge modifications in German or Russian politics of history have been possible thanks to the work of historians. Some other things are just as important—but without referring to history books, even bad ones, there wouldn't be as much as a Wikipedia entry that could build a sense of knowledge in people who do not read. The second thing, which is also related to popular culture—thanks to its capabilities, Russia provides us with an example of conducting specific policies of history concerning certain areas: on the Polish question, which is a policy that convinces many people, on questions regarding Asia, America, Germany, and so on. This is very important: it is a policy that adjusts to knowledge, to possibilities,

to the image of Russia which exists in the target countries, and finally to the complexes towards the Russian state which those countries have—in Europe, this mainly concerns the French and the Germans, two nations that suffered their greatest defeats in their clashes with

the Russian military. But when it comes to popular culture, the Great Patriotic War is an element that was designed from the very beginning. In few countries when the war was at such a stage as in July, August and September 1941, or during the later fights

of 1942, were monuments constructed, two factories built which were dedicated to constructing victory monuments, and films made to commemorate these battles. This happened in completely different circumstances than, for example, in British or American cinema. A politics of history (or rather, a policy of war propaganda) was also already being constructed by Moscow's agents there during the Second World War, when films such as *Mission to Moscow* (1943) and *North Star* (1943) were made. *Mission to Moscow* is an adaptation of the false memoirs of the US ambassador to the USSR in 1936–38, Joseph E. Davies (published in 1941), and *North Star* is a story about an ideal kolkhoz in Ukraine which is destroyed by the Nazis in 1941. This is really a question of slogans: first of all, film, cinematography and popular culture (all kinds of books, comics, TV series) in Russia prove that propaganda in popular culture is always made for both foreign and domestic consumption. As for domestic consumption, so far, about 50–55% of serials and fictional films made in Russia every year are films about the period between 1941 and 1945. For comparison: about the great purge of 1937–8, only five or six series have been made in the last 30 years. The Great Purge, of course, appears as an element in biographical

About 50–55% of serials and fictional films made in Russia every year are films about the period between 1941 and 1945.

Lukasz Jasina PhD

We do not realise how the action on history in popular culture is related to historians' supply of ammunition.

Lukasz Jasina PhD

films, although of course properly adjusted—otherwise it would have to be portrayed one way in Brezhnev's biography, another in Khrushchev's biography, another in Furtseva's, another in Zhukov's, and another in Stalin's. But Russian films are also very much focused on foreign incidents; they include series co-produced with Belarusians, focused on the years 1939–41 and on what happened before 1939; and there is even a continuation of what Aleksander Dovzhenko and other directors did at the turn of the 1940s. The same themes reoccur, stating that the Polish *Sanacja* regime took part in genocide on an equal or even larger scale than in the USSR. These productions were also targeted at the American and German markets. So the game is worth its gain, as it does have a real impact on others. Cinema—as we know from the films about the Holocaust—is a factor that strongly influences the view of the past, which we in Poland began to notice only a few years ago, I think twenty years too late—and we had previously created one of the best historical cinemas after World War II.

WW: I would also like to point out that during our discussion some components of the Russian story of the Great Patriotic War have been somewhat overlooked, and perhaps it would be worth pointing out what this story consists of. Its dominant feature is that the Soviet Union was the main victor of the war, and carried the burden of its course on itself. This is related to the well-established notion, already accepted in multinational historiography, of the “second front”. It has become established that, of course, this front originated in Normandy—so this term “second front” is used to suggest that the “first front” was the Soviet-German front. We know that it was chronologically not the

first, but even without taking into account the chronological criterion, we know that there were other fronts in the fight against Germany. That is to say, in 1943–5 there was the Italian front, and when the German attack opened the front in the East in 1941, there was also the front of the Allied struggle against the Axis countries, in which, alongside the Italians, the Germans also participated, that is, the African front. The opening of the second front in Normandy was a narrative consciously chosen by the Soviets, and propagated and sold very successfully to the Western Allies during the war. We know that at that time there existed [i.e. in 1944] the Italian front, on which the Germans fought on the one hand, and the Americans, the British and Poles on the other; we also know, of course, that the Western Allies were very much involved in air and sea battles—something which is consciously overlooked in the Soviet narrative. The scope of the Western allies' material assistance to the USSR is also ignored—or at least not emphasised. This strategy is part of the myth that says that “we won this war all by ourselves, and after the disasters of 1941 we lifted ourselves up completely by our own efforts” (if we may put such words into the mouths of the Soviets or Russians). It is known, from historical reality, that the Allied aid was of great importance. The fact that it was possible to produce so many tanks in the USSR during the war was due to, among other things, the supply of many trucks, and so on. These factors are ignored in the Russian narrative, and of course, this procedure serves to present the Soviet Union as the main, independent victor of the World War II. The issue of the losses they suffered is not exposed either, although there has been some discourse about it in

Russia: books were published that denied the official version, showing the scale of the losses suffered. It is only emphasised that the nations of the Soviet Union suffered the greatest losses. Indeed, they did suffer enormous losses, but so did other nations. The use of absolute numbers is here an element of conscious action. Anyone who wants to dispute the matter is immediately shut off with the fact that the Soviet losses and the scale of the destruction were, after all, enormous—and this was undoubtedly the case, especially in Belarus and Ukraine

The scale of the Soviet losses was therefore colossal—but to say that it was the largest in every respect is not entirely true.

Witold Wasilewski PhD

as far as the Soviet Union is concerned, but also in Russia itself. The scale of the Soviet losses was therefore colossal—but to say that it was the largest in every respect is not entirely true. Of course, global comparisons can be made, comparing the Soviet's Patriotic War with, for example, China's losses—such reflection is obviously lacking, and instead we hear about the greatest merit of the Soviets and their greatest losses. Nor is there—and this is another deliberate omission—any emphasis on the Soviets' territorial annexations in the myth of "Central Europe's liberation". These annexations are hard to miss, when it comes to the Baltic states, or the annexations at the expense of Poland, Finland and Romania, Czechoslovakia (or Hungary, depending on the point of view). In general, the enormous enlargement of Soviet territory is not emphasised here (which, as we know, was also carried out at the expense of Germany, part of the former East Prussia, that is the present Kaliningrad oblast). In turn, the

(obviously mythical) liberation of a large part of Europe is emphasised, which in reality was the *de facto* imposition of a new oppressive system of power and the subjugation of these areas to the Soviet Union, and the construction of a Soviet sphere of influence with simultaneous territorial annexations. There are many more such elements of mythologising. Recently, the claim that the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was enforced from beginning to end by the policies of Western countries and Poland – especially Poland – has been exposed as false. This myth has become the centre of Russia's politics of history, and the core of it is that "we achieved a gigantic victory on a global scale, and we should be proud of it as Russians." This speaks to public awareness, especially saying that the Soviet Union was the victor in this war. The fact that it managed to fit so many of the fruits of this victory into its pockets is, of course, another matter. Certainly, it was simply due to mistakes in politics and the naivety of the Allies—but the victory is a fact, and according to this general guideline of politics of history, this success is portrayed and displayed, the historical mentality is built around it, and the nation is consolidated.

AKP: Thank you for such an insightful summary of the discussion, professor. You have touched on very important elements, including a deconstruction of the slogan "liberation", which is being misused as the main element of the language of propaganda. Anyway, this slogan has a special emotional charge, and it is used without connection with the basic meaning—even recently, in a loose discussion with the editor Mr. Dąbrowski, we came to the conclusion that the word "liberation" means a return to the state of affairs before enslavement,

the restitution of lost values; whereas here, the word “liberation” means the consistent management of everything that has been destroyed by war: all the structures, whether social, political or cultural, have been taken over by a new, violent system, and to a large extent that was what this “liberation” really meant.

FD: In fact, I wanted to ask Dr. Jasina if there were any phases or stages of shaping the propaganda regarding the Patriotic War, both in the Soviet Union itself and also in the Soviet bloc countries? Today’s Russian and Belarusian politics of history benefit from the achievements of Soviet propaganda, of course, by emphasising the appropriate accents—well, it would be strange if they did not—but the bracket linking them back to our times seems very broad.

ŁJ: I think that here we can distinguish a kind of state-national specialisation—of course, with the assumption that it was a bit different until 1956. But then under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, with this most familiar stage of the mythologisation of the Great Patriotic War, Soviet propaganda in cinema was the most specialised in terms of relations with individual countries. Here, Poland occupied a prominent place. Most Soviet films about the Great Patriotic War take place partly on Polish territory, but after all, between 1945 and 1989 Poland was an ally of the Soviet Union, so it was also a beneficiary of this image. During that time Poles did not appear as negative figures, but as the Soviet Union’s main allied army. This happened in the 1950s and the 1970s–1980s, when Yuri Ozerov made two big series of television and cinema films, firstly *Освобождение* (Liberation, 1968–1971), and then *Солдаты свободы* (Soldiers of Freedom, 1977), in

which Poland had a really important place. In those days, even Catholic priests in the Polish borderlands were positive characters in Soviet cinema. After 1989, it ended, of course, because Poland ceased to be an ally, and this proves that the current relations of Russia or its various forms of state with any given country affect both the inspiration of the artists and on whether the [Polish] white eagle is associated with good or bad. This tendency can also be seen in the example of the Germans, who in the 1940s and 1950s very rarely appeared as positive characters, but in the 1970s we see a very important issue of separating German society from the Nazi elite. The seizure of Berlin is not yet called “liberation”, there is no talk about the Nazis, or only about “Hitlerites” or fascists, but the ordinary Germans dying in Berlin in April and May 1945 are just like everyone else.

Actually, the Czechs had the easiest situation, because they always appeared as positive heroes in Soviet historical filmography. It is very different with the Western countries: Italians are always presented positively, one almost always sees the moment of Mussolini’s fall; the French are also positively presented—this was certainly very much related to the social support for Communists in France and Italy, and the fact that it was not necessary to provoke these countries. In Soviet cinema, we do not see negative portraits of French and Italians. We

Soviet propaganda in cinema was the most specialised in terms of relations with individual countries.

Łukasz Jasina PhD

In Soviet cinema, we do not see negative portraits of French and Italians. We do see negative British characters.

Łukasz Jasina PhD

do see negative British characters; all the films about the Big Three show Winston Churchill as a negative figure, and I think this traditional aversion to Great Britain—Prof. Kornat indicated that there were trade relations between Britain and the Soviet Union, but there was a reluctance—does exist. The British are negative characters in films about the October Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. America appears to be a society of good people, with an idealistic president, although in the end there is the Dulles brothers' conspiracy, and all the British hate the Soviets. The British also hate Russians in Soviet films, because in Russian cinematography we are dealing with a mixture of all historical motives. There are many such stereotypical representations and it is only now changing, apart from a few cases. One change in the past seven years in historical series is the emphasis on the role of Bandera's followers and the Ukrainian nationalist underground, which is related to the change in policy towards Ukraine after 2013–14. Of course we Poles have been negative characters for a whole generation, although that also changes from time to time. The Polish actor Paweł Deląg, who made a career in Russia, sometimes plays positive Polish intellectual characters (who would have thought!). I think that the Russians have numerous professional forces that will be ready to cast a positive image of Poland on the screen should they need it, as they did during the reset of Polish-Russian relations after April 10, 2010. But they must want to, and as we all know, in Russia one person (or the Politburo in Soviet times) has to want it—and this one person doesn't want to yet, as it still pays to show Poland in popular culture as Russia's enemy in many contexts.

AKP: Thank you very much, it's a fascinating topic. However, due to the time, we have to slowly move towards the end.

FM: So I will very briefly add just one point to what has been said about "liberation." Let us pay attention to the fact that the essence of the Communist system was effective—and, it seems, long-lasting—hypocrisy. In fact, there is nothing to discuss; it is enough to take a dictionary and read that "liberation" is the same as "regaining independence", and "liberating" is the same as "restoring freedom and independence". These definitions do not describe what happened in Poland in the years 1944–5. However, there is another term that describes it perfectly, that is, "conquest", that is, the capture of other people's territories in armed struggle and the imposition of power on the people living in these territories. This is what our ancestors fell victim to nearly 80 years ago, in fact the occupation of Poland by the Red Army was nothing other than conquest. The victims of this conquest were the constitutional Polish authorities and the Polish underground army, the Home Army, whose soldiers were first sent to camps built *ad hoc* in the territories occupied by the Soviets, and then sent deep into the Soviet Union. And if in literature we do not call things by their names, and we submit to linguistic calques such as "liberation"—because, as you can see, it still occurs, but now we put quotation marks on it, we look at it askance and say that this is not the point—we will not free ourselves from these lies at the linguistic level. We just need to use concepts that adequately describe the historical phenomena we have dealt with.

AKP: Thank you very much for this observation.

WW: In light of what we have said, we can change this "liberation" or "extension of

spheres of influence” into “conquest”—I agree completely. I would add one more sentence to the statement by Prof. Boćkowski that this “decapitation” was obviously a means to the Sovietisation, but also to the de-Polonisation of these territories—so that the image of 1939–41 does not look too sweet. However, far-reaching changes, including social changes, have been made. This is probably a topic for a different discussion, but it is significant that no attempts were made to create a Polish Soviet Republic in these areas. When it comes to approaching the myth of the Great Patriotic War and the losses suffered during it, the civilian losses are emphasised, while one avoids emphasising the military losses resulting from the negligence of the high command.

DB: I agree completely with that because it cannot be explained so simply; the entire Soviet policy of that period was two-track, it looked one way behind the border line as established by the Riga Treaty in 1921, and completely different on the other side. And—interestingly—the farther west, the stranger it was, because the situation in these districts and those regions that were, let’s say, the former “borderlands” of the Polish Republic was different, and looked completely different in the Białystok region, in Łomża, in Lviv, and in a few other places where the Germans were standing face to face with the Russians. I have the impression that the Russians were acting a certain political spectacle there—knowing that they are being watched—but that cannot be fully proven. It is known that they were aware that the Germans were watching very closely what was happening on the other side, so it was a game based on intelligence reports, on relations, on the effectiveness of propaganda, and that was

what politics in the territories annexed in 1939–41 was subordinated to. Of course, the Sovietisation continued, and if it had not been for the outbreak of war, probably in the next two or three years after 1939–40, there would have been “an increase in the class struggle”, or maybe the Soviet steamroller would have simply moved further west. As for whether they were aware of their situation in the annexed territories, I can add some impressions from my own research: I looked carefully at the Soviet clerical files from 1941 and it contained the exact procedure for evacuating officials, which in June 1941 was basically carried out in its entirety. So all the Soviet officials—confirming the process through high frequency telephone lines, in an organised manner, from the regional level to the highest levels—withdrew completely to the East, and thereafter prepared to return, in a more efficient way than the Red Army did, which was completely surprised by the whole affair.

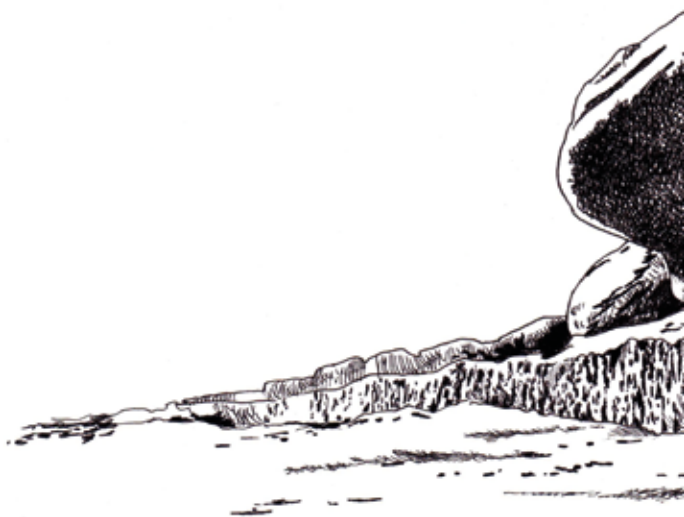
FD: The concept of “liberation” is extremely capacious, so much so that it influences the way we look at the German-Soviet war and the subsequent events of 1944 and 1945 in Central Europe. On the one hand, we know very well that in 1941, and later, the German authorities used the slogan of “liberation” in relation to the inhabitants of the conquered territories that were under Soviet administration or were previously

When it comes to approaching the myth of the Great Patriotic War and the losses suffered during it, the civilian losses are emphasised, while one avoids emphasising the military losses resulting from the negligence of the high command.

Witold Wasilewski PhD

Soviet (we are all familiar, for example, with the *Гитлер освободитель* [Hitler the liberator] propaganda poster). This fact, and the willingness of some circles in Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian societies, as well as some elements of German policy in these territories, made this term more popular. Nevertheless the genocidal policy of Germany (which cannot be narrowed down to the Holocaust alone) meant that these words remained nothing more than a very cynical slogan. On the other hand, we have the Soviet concept of “liberation”. Let us agree: the Soviet troops entering the territory of Poland were not, in principle, the occupying forces, because according to the principles

of international law these were not enemy forces, and there was no notified state of war between these countries. On the other hand, it is difficult to speak of “liberation” in the sense of restoring previous freedoms; it is known that war changes almost everything, but the restitution of the elements of the previous system and the freedoms that can be restored was only fragmentary. It was not a liberation for the Baltic states, as their independent existence was not restored. In Poland, “liberation” consisted in the abolition of the cruellest elements of the German occupation system. However this was not a political liberation, but the imposition in the country of an illegitimate political system,



a dictatorship. In short, when we try to argue with the slogan of “liberation”, we really have to resort to formal arguments, such as whether the order introduced by the advancement of the Soviet Army was legitimised. As we well know, they were legitimised only partially (and *ex post facto*, by the provisions of the

Yalta and Potsdam Conferences) or were not legitimised at all.

AKP: On behalf of the editorial staff, I would like to thank all the respected participants in our debate, while still feeling that we could have discussed so much more...

