

Three directions of the memorial politics: heroization, victimization, and criminalization as a tool of post-Soviet identity in Russia

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Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

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Introduction: History, memory, and trauma in the construction of post-Soviet identity

In the aftermath of numerous atrocities in the 20th century, many countries criminalized the denial of past crimes. To protect the memory of victims of genocides, the European countries created memorial legislation. These memorial laws have played a crucial role to structure the theatre of history: who and what we should celebrate, what we should remember, and who are heroes and victims. There have been two parallel and simultaneously developing narratives, that of heroization and that of victimization (Khelvnjuk, 2021).

As Igor Torbakov aptly suggested “The politicizing and instrumentalizing of history usually pursues two main objectives: first is the construction of a maximally cohesive national identity and rallying the society around the powers that be; second is eschewing the problem of guilt” (Torbakov, 2011, 210).

This article seeks to demonstrate the important role that the historical narratives played in the construction of post-Soviet identity in Russia. The juxtaposing and competing memories of the GULAG, Second World War, and “collaborators” are very important in the discussion of post-Soviet identities, where this endeavor meet the competitive identities with the different attitudes to the same historical events, particularly the Great Patriotic War. Technics of instrumentalizing and politicizing the history includes different manipulations with the trauma (Great Loss), which is related with victims, with the national

pride (Great Victory), linked to the heroes, and with the criminal or /and symbolic punishment, required for criminals and criminalizing those, who are challenging official narratives on Great Victory and Great Loss.

This article is intended to survey the memorial laws and official political narrative in Russia (1991-2020) in the frame of memorial politics, which is completed from the perspective of this article, from the heroization, victimization, and blaming, building on the work of other researchers who studied the subject (Miller 2010, Etkind 2013, Kopusov 2017, Khapaeva 2016). The article deconstructs the narrative of the "patriotic history" through the prism of the theory of securitization, trying to show how the "right history" has been constructed in the official narrative, legal documents, as well as criminal litigation (for example, on the article 354.1).

Narrative construction: heroization, victimization, and criminalization in the Great Patriotic War

Heroization

In post-war Europe, these historical narratives have been actively contested. Three main narratives of war and dictatorship exist in regards to Europe: the Western European story, a Soviet/Russian story, and an Eastern European story (Torbakov, 2011, 214).

The term "Second World War" was not commonly used in the Soviet Union, where already in 1942, the term Great Patriotic War emerged, linked Hitler's invasion with Napoleon war 1812. Stalin has started to exploit the myth of resistance by all, taken from Russian empire historiography. That was the reason why the human losses have never been counted after the war, as well as "the memory of *war*, with all its unbearable everyday hardships, untold number of victims, millions of POWs, chaos of evacuation, etc., had been replaced by the memory of *victory*" (Wolf, 2006, 249). That started the competition between two narratives – narrative of the Great Victory, day of the heroes and veterans, which has to be celebrated as a day of national glory and pride, and Great Loss, which has manipulated the idea of "birth of the Soviet people in the crucible of the total war (Hosking, 2006, 210). Therefore, the heroization of the soldiers and officers of

the Soviet army made the special cult of the Great Victory (Tumarkin, 2003), which has started to be the bases for new Soviet identity «we are the (Soviet) people who were defeated Nazis».

The heroization has its active implication in literature, monuments, movies, and all kinds of such ideological implications. The collaboration with Nazis considered as main crime against Soviet people, and true Soviets could not collaborate with Nazis (what explain the later repressions against POW's). The most actively prosecuted group was Russian Liberation Army under commanding of Gen Vlasov, who were portrayed as

Scholars suggested that heroization came together with oppressed memory on the Stalin's Purge (Khapaeva, 2016) and together with common formulae: Soviet people sacrificed their lives for whole world and safe the planet from Nazism.

Other identity struggle was connected with the Soviet nationalities. The tensions between Soviet identity and nationalities began immediately: the anti-Semitism, Russo-centric narrative of Stalin, directly challenged the official line the Soviet people as main Victorians (Egorov and Kantariya were appointed as holder of the Victory Flag to demonstrate People Friendship of the USSR). But not all peoples deserved such a family membership – some of them were declared imposters and immediately repressed: number of ethnic groups, from Germans to Chechens and Crimea Tartars have been repressed under accusation of collaboration with Nazis. This memory did not count as relevant to the Great Patriotic War, and therefore the members of these communities cannot be considered as a trustful members of the Soviet people family.

Additional part of this memory was the memory of the nations, which were forcibly annexed to Russia before WWII (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). Like Ukraine in the war, these countries had its independent groups, and the memory of independency and difficult question of collaboration with Nazi occupation forces had stored under the pressure of the common ideology of the Soviet Union.

After the collapse of Soviet Union official narratives has been challenged dramatically. The truth on the catastrophe on the first years of the war, millions of meaningless fatalities, opened archives – and explosion of the interest to the history, which was coincide with the

search of new post-Soviet identity. Soviet Union collapse has created the number of new concocted national histories and historical narratives, where Soviet Union ceased as a only one commemorative agent: now war of memories on the post-Soviet space includes the different commemoration and contested narratives about history, and all agent of commemoration seeks to establish the “historical truth” through the different institutes and practices of historical politics (see Commission against falsification of Russian history under auspice of President Medvedev, Institute of Memory in Ukraine and Poland, etc). The concept of “wrong heroization”, or “heroization of Nazism”, taken from the Soviet propaganda, allowed to use the Nuremberg process as power tool in the dispute on the history of WW II (Kuzio, 2016); the discussion on Roman Schukhevich, especially after he was granted the title the National hero of the Ukraine, and discussion on “glorification of Nazism” in Ukraine and Latvia (Kazytyrski, 2016, 2019) made this process of “negative identity construction” even more blistering.

The Putin’s politics of heroization of Great Patriotic War (Nelson, 2019) was not only possible politics of national cohesion, but also – after Russia turned to the mature authoritarianism – the “usable past”, where “memory of Great Fatherland War’ heroes has to be protected from Fascism and vandalism”. The current memorial wars are combined with the geopolitical stance of the contested agents of commemoration, and the struggle is especially visible in the «war of monuments»: crises with the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn (Hackman& Lehti, 2008), demolition of the Great Patriotic War monument in Kutaisi (Gabovitch, 2018), recent Marchall Konev monument removal in Prague. Of course, whose who are moving or destroying the Soviet memorials, Russian official have are blamed as the “fascists”.

Symbolic politics of heroization traditionally include not only monumentalizing, but also denomination (heroes’ names are distributed through the cities, battle ships, et cetera), and new practices of heroization of the cities – in addition to the title “City-Hero” the new “City of the Military Glory” have been introduced (Brown, 2017).

Thus, narrative of heroization is strictly depends on the contested memories: heroes in the one narrative could be perpetrators in the different one; also heroization is the preferable path for historical politics in Russia, in contrary with the trauma and discussion of the Great Loss (Gaufman, 2017).

Victimization

The concept of the Great Loss wasn't very popular at the Soviet time, and mostly as inalienable part of the formula "The Victory was won at a heavy price". The sacral number – 20 mln lives of Soviet Union losses in the Great Patriotic war seems to fail to be accurate, but it was the 'sacrifice', which is granting the moral base to deny all critical judgements and, of course, alternative versions of the history. Important to say, that Holocaust on the USSR territory has never been recognized by Soviet authorities and never been designates. Even the monuments in the places of the mass execution – like Babiy Yar – in the Soviet time was designated as a place where Nazis executed Soviet people.

The narrative of the Great Loss was, at the same time, wage and blurry. «Though the Soviet state publicized the victory, little was said or written about the dreadful first year of the war, a time of retreat and incriminations, as well as what looked like wholesale desertions and chaos in the newly annexed western borderlands» (Marples, 2012, 286). Also, as it was noted above, there was no such victim, as Jew – it was only «Soviet citizens of different nationalities».

Important feature of this memory was its unification. Attempts to separately produce the story of Leningrad Siege was totally exterminated, Museum of the Siege in Leningrad was destroyed, and "local nationalism", which was allegedly created on the bases of common trauma, was oppressed (Kirshenbaum, 2006). The Great Loss has to be commemorating in abstract, without details and stories (compare popularity of Immortal Regiment).

Criminalization

There are two types of legal acts devoted to memorial politics in current Europe. The first category is just legal declarations, which prescribe the need to remember victims and blame Nazis' crimes and atrocities, and carry no penalties for violators. The second is the criminal punishment for justification of crimes against humanity, which, in the most cases, is the Holocaust denial. Despite the fact that Soviet regime committed the atrocities of the same level, it had never stood to the international trial, unlike the Nazis regime with the Nurnberg

trial. The current nerve of the historical politics is focused on this fact: Russia and its allies are busy insisting that Soviet Union cannot be judged on the same level as Nazis regime, accusing European politicians of the "justification of Nazism". At the same time, European politicians seem to be slowly warming to the fact that USSR atrocities have to be investigated and blamed as any other type of genocide. For example, the Kononov case was the first example of the former Soviet partisan to be tried for the murder of unarmed combatants in occupied Latvia. Most of the legal scholars in Russia consider the Kononov case (Kononov vs Latvia) in European court of Human Rights, where Russian Federation was intervened as the third party, as an example of "politicization of ECHR " as well as a violation of the basic principles of Nurnberg process.

The historical politics in authoritarian Russia successfully combined this European tradition exemplified by Nurnberg trials, restricting any criticism of the government and whitewashing the crimes of Stalin's regime in Europe under the pretext of "fighting against Nazism and protecting the Nurnberg legacy". All attempts to equalize the Soviet and Nazi regime are identified in Russia as the "blackening" of Soviet victory undermining the legacy of Nuremberg process (Malksoo, 2017). Additional difficulty is supplied by the fact of criminalizing the communist regime in Europe on the same bases as Nazi (Malksoo, 2014).

To protect the "patriotic version of the history" and "positive view" on the USSR history, Russia has adopted the National Doctrine of State Security, where Russian and Soviet history is considered as one of the traditional values under special protection of the Russian state (du Quenoy, Dubrovskiy, 2018). Already in 2014 it modified the Article 354.1 of the Russian Criminal Code, pretending to 'fight against glorification of Nazism" and "dissemination of the falsified history of the Great Patriotic War". Thus, article 354.1 have to be investigated through the prism of the memory politics in Russia. At the same time, the implementation of such article and other restrictions of the freedom of history in Russia are also important as examples of curtailing academic rights and freedoms (mostly in the field of historical sciences). The active participation of other historians in this process arises the question of professional ethics and highlights the dilemma *academic freedoms vs criminalization of the past*. At the same time, the court venue could be considered in current Russia as a public space for alternative politics at the time when the real politics, including free debates and discussions on the historical controversies, is almost impossible.

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