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Victory Day in History Politics

Fundamental changes in Europe’s political map following the end of the Cold War have established a particular situation which has led to a competition of hegemonic interpretations of history and intentionally and politically used interpretations. This applies especially to the former socialist East European countries where there has been a strong demand for the establishment of a new state identity enabling the distancing of these countries from the socialist past. In the Russian discourse, the evolution of the metaphor of Victory Day and competition over interpretations of World War II and the role of Stalin are good examples of the significance of history politics.

Political change in Europe over the past twenty years has created an opportunity and a need to reinterpret the current (dominant) representations of history. Owing to the disintegration of the socialist bloc, the former socialist East European countries were compelled to reformulate their state identities and redefine their loyalties in the post-Cold War context. In Russia, the crucial questions here have been the country’s relationship with the USA, the EU and NATO.

While certain historical facts are knowable, the analyses and conclusions drawn from these facts can differ in remarkable ways. In fact, this difference in analyses is precisely what constitutes the difference between description based on empirical findings, on the one hand, and history as an academic discipline, on the other. Reinhart Koselleck has defined the essence of history, pointing out that history comprises eternally changing, temporal representations of the past written on a moving time line from the perspective of future expectations — the horizon of the future.

Public histories and collective memories have a crucial normative function in society, defining the correct and incorrect ways of speaking, and the normatively accepted interpretations of the past, present and future. There is hardly a more strongly expressed metaphor of Russian identity and patriotism than the representation of the Red Army and heroic Soviet citizens in the Great Patriotic War. Something similar can also be observed in other countries’ ceremonies, for example, Finland’s Independence Day. Remembering the Winter War and the Continuation War in the media and in the President’s Independence Day Reception have been in many ways both a visible and an emotionally essential part of Finnish Independence Day. The power of war narratives and their significance in keeping collective feelings and loyalty to the state alive can be seen in public histories, ‘holy places’ such as monuments to Unknown Soldiers, cemeteries, museums and other places of remembrance.

In Russia the representation of the Great Patriotic War expresses its relation to national identity explicitly. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Great Patriotic War was almost the only historical event which was generally accepted as grounds for national pride, the integrity of society and the continuation of Russia’s state identity as a successor state of the Soviet Union. For Russians the Great Patriotic War is a metaphor very similar to that of the Winter War for Finns. It represents the nation’s sufferings during the Nazi occupation, on the one hand; and on the other, it comprises a narrative on how the Fascist Army was defeated by the heroic Red Army with huge sacrifices.
The contest over the meanings of history is actually a contest over the relevance of history for future action. This is the major reason why Victory Day celebrations have always been prominent in the Soviet Union and Russia. This held true particularly during the 60th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War in 2005, which was celebrated ostentatiously in Moscow but disputed in most if not all of the countries of former Eastern Europe.

For our purposes, however, it is the significant differences between the representations of the 60th and 65th commemorations of Victory Day (in 2005 and 2010 respectively) that is of interest. One notable feature of the 60th Victory Day celebrations was the fundamental changes in time and space that had taken place since the previous event. Victory Day was now being celebrated for the first time after the whole political map of Europe had changed due to the Eastern enlargement of the European Union and NATO. In 2005 the Victory Day parade and discussions on the war did not reflect any deeper reassessments of the traditional Soviet-era interpretations of the war. In the former Eastern Europe, however, the situation was completely different. Here history politics were actively used to challenge the former Soviet-era interpretations, which still prevailed in Russia. The result was a heated public argument between Russia and several former Eastern European countries on the role of the Red Army and the Soviet Union in WWII. What was regarded as occupation by East Europeans was for Russians the liberation of Europe from fascism.

In this respect, time and space clearly differed by the time of the Victory Day celebrations in 2010. The new member states of the European Union and NATO had stabilized their positions as part of an enlarged Western Europe, and Russia had adapted its politics to this reality. Two messages by President Medvedev in May 2010 highlight a remarkable difference in history politics. The first one was his interview in Izvestiia (7 May 2010) on Stalin’s role in the Great Patriotic War; the second concerned the symbolism of the Victory Day parade. This time interpretations of history were utilized to promote Medvedev’s foreign policy, to bring Russia closer and make it acceptable to the West.