

Between nationalist propaganda and recognition of minority victims

The Russian interpretation of the Second World War

A conversation with *Sergey Lukashevsky*, director of the Sakharov Center in Moscow. Interviewer: *Kristina Smolijaninovaïté*

KRISTINA SMOLIJANINOVAÏTÉ: The Sakharov Center as we know deals with the history of Soviet totalitarianism as part of its mission to promote freedom, democracy and human rights. It once held the exhibition "Different Wars" by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, which concerned conflicting memories of the Second World War across different parts of Europe. That war often serves as a focal point for collective memory on fascism or imperialism and is therefore a key reference point for defining national and regional identities. It also helps to remind people of the ideals of peace and respect for human lives. So how relevant is the remembrance of the Second World War in your country today? One underlying question also concerns the choice of narrative,

with the specific ideals of the Great Patriotic War contrasting with the more general Second World War.

SERGEY LUKASHEVSKY: I do not think that there is generally any real remembrance of the Second World War, but rather of the Great Patriotic War. Basically, one can describe it in just four sentences: 1) The Great Patriotic War was fought by the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany; 2) this conflict was the bloodiest and most destructive episode of the Second World War; 3) the Soviet Union triumphed over Nazi Germany, in a war that left millions of people dead, wounded or crippled, with major destruction in all parts of the Soviet Union where the war took place; and

4) due to this, remembrance is considered relevant nationwide.

When we start talking about the war as a whole, in its early period the Soviet Union was practically an ally of Nazi Germany. This historical moment is certainly difficult for all Russians to grasp. It is not just that our country was not on its best behaviour, as the problem lies within the contradiction itself. How is it that we were allies with somebody who later came to be such a bloody, dreadful enemy of our country? This definitely does not mesh well with the nation's memory. On the one hand, the remembrance of the war – the Great Patriotic War – certainly is an important part of Russian national memory, simply on account of the horror and scale of this event. On the other hand, it is important to remember how guilty those generations felt, the ones who lived through and fought in the war. This is not simply the memory of shared horror, hardship, and victory, but also of terrifying events taking place after the previous awful decades of the civil war and repression. Following that, the now fragmented Russian society, which the communist government controlled through massive repression, terror and indoctrination, was finally somewhat united in a sense. Of course, to some extent in the Soviet Union friendship existed between peoples, with notable exceptions including the breakout of various bloody conflicts in the 1980s. During the war, this friendship was all based on frontline brotherhood. Initially, it was a

brotherhood of truly different nationalities and people who fought together: Tatars, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians and Ukrainians. This could include almost anyone in the country, with some understandable exceptions. Both the Soviet government and Russian authorities have used the memory of the Second World War as an ideological principle. I think the Soviet government did this intuitively and truly relied on the fact that it was a living memory shared and celebrated by living people. However, I think the current Russian government is doing it based on a concept first laid out by French theologian and philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Ultimately, Marion believed that a shared tragedy must occur in order to locate a nation's identity. It seems to me that this is a completely conscious political move in Russia. These ideas are not something based on empty values but rather real memories and events. I see this as a completely consistent activity. Subsequently, the problem with the remembrance of the Second World War, the Great Patriotic War in Russia, is that the government carefully guards this short, yet dominant narrative. It absolutely denies other narratives, even those that are not in direct contradiction, but only seeking to refine it in parts.

As you say, for the Russian government it is imperative to have a cult of victory for building the nation's identity. At the same time, I believe we need to remember that the Second World War was a very compli-

cated conflict with a lot of historical contradictions and experiences. Is there some hope for alternative narratives to prevail and encourage a more complex debate in Russia?

Inevitably, there are other alternative narratives. The Russian government dismisses these narratives because they are determined to make the remembrance of the conflict into a cult of war and victory. A cult as such perpetuates itself by an essentially religious adherence to precepts, not simply memories. It also does not tolerate any contradictions. A cult should have one singular voice, whereas any additional narratives would raise unnecessary questions. Those who are fixated on the particular importance of one narrative may end up shifting the subject from the victors and soldiers to the victims of the war.

It is interesting that among monuments, there were different types dedicated to the Second World War and Great Patriotic War in Soviet times. For example, in the village of Saltykovka – where I grew up – there was a monument installed in the 1980s that featured the figure of a crying woman. But now, all the monuments being installed are only of soldiers, who are always depicted as victorious. In Soviet times, it was different. There were monuments of sorrow, and then they somehow included soldiers among them as well. The monument I am talking about, with the central figure of a crying woman, also depicted soldiers running into combat. It is like there was this balance between

remembrance of sorrow and victory. In fact, the main official song of the Soviet times, which would mark the tearful celebration of “*Den Pobedi*” or “Victory Day”, also expressed this idea of these two themes. Today, since the remembrance of victory and war is being constituted into more of a cult, the sorrow narrative has been reduced. It may not be completely missing or absent, but it is now small.

So how would narratives of the war under such a cult accommodate perspectives of minority identities within Russia and beyond? When is it possible to have more open discussion about different views or interpretations of the war in your country?

By extension of our discussion, one might consider historical perspectives on the division of Poland by the Soviet Union and Germany, as well as other specific topics on Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, and so on. It is clear that there is a range of other different situations. In Chechnya, the memory of deportation is still preserved, though there was a recent story about how a historical monument dedicated to victims of deportation was moved to a new location, becoming smaller and less central than before. Nevertheless, national memory is respected there. If we look at the narrative of Crimean Tatars, we will see a much more complex and sad story, where myths are resurrected once again about them being collaborators with the Nazi occupiers as a means of justifying the deportation.

The most complex and troubled narrative concerns Soviet society during the period of the Great Patriotic War, especially in terms of the degree of anger towards the Soviet government. I am not talking about the Baltic ethnic groups or the western parts of Ukraine, which were annexed right before the war, but about a large part of the populations of Belarus, Ukraine and even parts of Russia. There was active or passive support for the occupiers during the period of the Great Patriotic War and naturally, for Vlasov's army too (Interviewer's note: this army was a collaborationist formation, primarily composed of Russians, that fought under German command during the war). These topics are an absolute taboo today and difficult to comprehend. Another theme related to this is repression, along with the crimes committed by the Soviet government and military personnel. These involved the army's barrier squads, the activities of SMERSH (counter-intelligence fighting "anti-Soviet elements" in the Red Army), and violence in the occupied territories of Germany and the satellite states. Just like the theme of collaborationism, this is also taboo for people in Russia today. The position of the central cult forces the government to consider these and other narratives unacceptable. As a result, these ideas are generally criminalised and cast aside. In the best case scenario, such ideas might be absorbed as part of the larger narrative. Generally, there is a great difficulty with regards to the theme of collaboration-



Photo courtesy of Sergey Lukashevsky

ism. Technically, you could talk about it in abstract terms, but asking any provocative questions is almost impossible. Certainly, you can still discuss the deportation of the peoples of the Caucasus, and probably the Crimean Tatars. Some time ago in the Sakharov Center, we opened an exhibition by an Ingush artist, who painted a series of paintings on this topic. Events dedicated to the memory of these deportations are not only happening in Moscow but in the actual regions themselves. The memory is kept alive there with events every year.

In Gdańsk, Poland, the Museum of the Second World War became a platform for the political radicalisation of history by the ruling party that was elected in 2015. In Germany, we see another pattern regarding how narratives in museums evolve. For example, the government and politicians enable commemoration culture but commemoration itself is designed by well-informed experts who understand the content and can implement it creatively. We observed this during recent debate surrounding the government's decision to erect a memorial in Berlin for Polish war victims. How is the war represented in the museums of Russia? Are perspectives of different minorities represented, or is the official narrative omnipresent in the museums?

In Moscow, there is a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. Naturally, its main exposition focuses on the history of Judaism and specifically Russian Judaism. A major part is also related to the history of the Holocaust. At the same time, however, there is a full-sized T-34 tank located in a special hall, a dedicated and fairly large space. The hall also offers information about battles in tribute to the governmental narrative when this is not exactly essential for such a museum. So even in museums dedicated to other aspects of the Second World War, remembrance of the war remains the official narrative. The museum itself is designed in a very modern way. It is not a collection of artefacts arranged to tell a story. Yet, you move from one narrative to another, from one space of memory to another. Stylistically, they

are also completely different. One concerns the innocent and non-combatant victims of the war, while the other involves war and victory.

How may one begin then to deal with conflicting perspectives in commemoration in the future?

I think that in Russia there is no real or serious conflict of remembrance. There are political conflicts that exist between people who are loyal to the idea that the government should play an important role in everything, and those who think that all decisions made by the government or individual state representatives are disappointing mistakes, sometimes even crimes. Yet if you were to ask these groups whether the Great Patriotic War was the bloodiest and most horrible war and whether the Soviet Union won it, the answer would always be the same. Observers have noted an increase in interest related to historical memories at the family level. It is fairly natural and normal that family memory concerns those who were killed or those who survived the frontline. The important part is that it is a private memory. I will draw a parallel here too, using results from a survey led by the Levada Center, which shows a gradual increase in the distance between the people and government. The government is increasingly becoming a separate entity that people are no longer relying on. Undoubtedly, the people and government's different projections of history constitute the most powerful aspect of this self-awareness.

I think that people feel more distant now from the actual past itself and the psychological trauma associated with various historical cataclysms such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. At some point in time, conversation about these events will certainly resume. At such a point, it will also be possible to talk openly and publicly about the government itself, with all its mistakes, abuse, and crimes. We will be able to come back to these discussions only when political issues become part of the normalised social process. In my opinion, it is conflict, which truly does not have deep roots. There are certainly other conflicts with opposing societal narratives: Russian and Ukrainian, Russian and Baltic, Russian and Polish... These are more complex conflicts because they involve a variety of issues that reach across borders. This includes the annexation of Crimea and the particular situations faced by different societies in Eastern and Central Europe. It is also difficult for them to discuss various topics and people associated with the history of the Second World War. In Poland, we can see how historical memory is also being manipulated and becoming increasingly a part of state politics.


There are societies like Ukraine, where internally, the process of constructing nationalism and a common national narrative is very difficult. Actually, I would say that clear fault lines or stress zones exist between the narratives of the Russian-speaking parts of Eastern Ukraine and Central Ukraine. This issue

existed in the past and it still exists today. To be truthful, I do not know in detail what is going on there lately, but it was clear during and after Euromaidan that these problems really existed. Russia provoked and escalated the conflict in Crimea and Donbas and without a doubt made use of this pre-existing tension. To be clear, the Russian government did not create these issues. They just used them for their own politics. Since these are clearly very painful issues, creating a dialogue will be difficult but generally required. This is not a very historical belief, but I think that growing up is required from all societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

You have mentioned the Levada survey poll. How shall we perceive these various social surveys, which show overwhelming support for the government, its practices, ideas and narratives?

Lately, in the intellectual circles of Russian society, there is heated debate on how to perceive these various social surveys that show support for the government. Many are talking about a spiral of silence, meaning that people recognise the repressive actions of the government and react to this unconsciously by simply supporting majority opinion. If all of this official propaganda disappeared and left a void, we might surprisingly discover that Russian society is not stagnant but open to a variety of thoughts. A few years ago, in the Sakharov Center, we hosted a discussion with the members of the "Free Histor-

ical Society”. A lot was said about how there are points of conflict in the public space regarding political repression, attitudes towards Stalin and revolution, and so on. It was really scary to see people willing to fight over the topic, given the freedom to do so. However, when we get to the level of the very root of re-

membrance – local memory – then we find that there really is no conflict. People are ready to listen to one another and peacefully reconcile different narratives. I think, in Russia, this is primarily the political challenge. The narratives are ultimately the heart of society. 

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