

<https://doi.org/10.31861/mediaforum.2025.16.72-76>

УДК: 327 (323.2)

© Anke Hilbrenner¹

RUSSIAN HISTORY POLICY IN GERMANY 2020: MEMORY OF WORLD WAR II AS AN ARGUMENT

In this scientific thesis, the author examines the topic of Russification of Soviet military history as a trend in the context of the deployment of modern Russian propaganda. After all, it was historical memory that also became a constitutive element of special German-Russian relations in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, in recent years, Russian history policy can no longer be reconciled with the German understanding of historical truth and academic freedom. The article analyzes some aspects of V. Putin's 2020 narrative, which was dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. It paints a harmonious picture of the alliance between the three allies – the USA, Great Britain and the USSR – during the war and in the post-war period. The political intention of this text becomes clear: the 5 states with veto power in the UN Security Council should work together to shape the world order of the 21st century. However, the author draws a disappointing conclusion regarding Putin's politics of memory – Russia's current brutal aggressive war in Ukraine, as well as other long-term challenges such as climate change, migration, flight and pandemics that have arisen as a result, can hardly be controlled by two or three major powers. This requires the interaction of the entire world community, in which Europe and, of course, Ukraine must play an important role.

Keywords: Russian memory politics, World War II, V. Putin's narratives of 2020, Russian-Ukrainian war, long-term challenges of the 21st century.

Російська історична політика в Німеччині 2020: пам'ять про Другу світову війну як аргумент

У цій науковій тезі автор розглядає як тенденцію тему русифікації радянської воєнної історії у контексті розгортання сучасної російської пропаганди. Адже саме історична пам'ять також стала

¹ Professor, Doctor of Eastern European History at the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany, E-mail: anke.hilbrenner@hhu.de.

конститу тивним елементом особливих німецько-російських відносин у 90-і роки і на початку 2000 -них років. Однак останніми роками російська політика історії більше не може бути узгоджена з німецьким розумінням історичної правди та академічної свободи.

Проаналізовані деякі аспекти нарративу В.Путіна 2020 року, який був присвячений 75-річчю завершення Другої світової війни. Він змальовує гармонійну картину альянсу між трьома союзниками – США, Великою Британією та ССРСР – під час війни та у повоєнний період. Політичний намір цього тексту стає зрозумілим: 5 держав з правом вето у Раді Безпеки ООН мають працювати разом над формуванням світового порядку XXI століття. Однак автор матеріалу робить невтішний висновок щодо путінської політики пам'яті – сучасна жорстока агресивна війна Росії в Україні, а також інші довгострокові виклики як зміна клімату, міграція, втеча та пандемії, що виникли в результаті цього, навряд чи можуть взяти під контроль дві чи три великі держави. Це вимагає взаємодії всієї світової спільноти, в якій Європа й, звичайно, Україна повинні відігравати важливу роль.

Ключові слова: російська політика пам'яті, Друга світова війна, нарративу В.Путіна 2020 року, російська-українська війна, довготривалі виклики XXI століття.

In this context, I don't need to mention that Russian history politics is not only something that has an influence on Russian museums and school books, but that history politics in Russia has become and is becoming politics, violent politics and brutal war of aggression. In Germany, this sometimes still needs to be said, but here it is not necessary. However, my short presentation is supposed to be about Germany, and I would like to briefly sketch the long lines of Russian historical policy towards Germany and then look at a specific historical moment together with you.

In principle, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian and German memory policies were more or less in line. The Germans acknowledged their sole guilt and historical responsibility for the Second World War and, together with Russia, remembered the German crimes and the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. The russification of Soviet war history, that is, the idea that Soviet fighters and victims of the war were "Russians", was largely adopted in Germany without question. That is why this memory also became a constitutive element of a special German-Russian relationship that has lasted for a long time, despite the

caesuras of 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2014. By 2020, however, it had dawned on historians in Germany, too, that Russia's politics of history could no longer be reconciled with the German understanding of historical truth and academic freedom.

In 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the 75th anniversary of the end of the war for an unusual measure: he published a long text on the history of the war, which is obviously intended to serve as a historical-political guideline and the essence of his understanding of history on this topic, to be cited in the future. The article was first published in English on June 18 on the website of the conservative US magazine "The National Interest" and the following day in Russian on the Russian government platform kremlin.ru and in "Rossiyskaya gazeta", the government's official gazette.

74 — Putin's article had already had a certain impact when the Russian Embassy in Germany decided to send a German translation to historians of Eastern Europe at universities in Germany. Even without the embassy's intervention, many academics, especially those dealing with the memory of World War II, would have noticed the text. Politicians make policy, also with history. It is therefore not unusual for a head of state of any country to give a speech on a historical commemoration day or to publish an article in a newspaper.

But the sending of the text by the Russian embassy has nevertheless provoked opposition – for two reasons: Firstly, it was accompanied by the request to use it in the future "when preparing historical contributions". Secondly, both the embassy's letter and the text itself point out that Putin has for the first time used previously unknown documents and has thus come to completely new conclusions. The president is therefore claiming not to be pursuing historical policy, as befits his role, but is asserting that, on the basis of new sources, he is introducing new aspects into the historical study of the Second World War. This fundamentally contradicts the ideas of academic freedom as practised in Germany:

That is why German historians rejected the embassy's attempt to recommend Putin's article to us as a new interpretation of the history of the Second World War and called on diplomacy to accept the division of labor and the boundaries that exist between politics and science for good reason.

Because Putin is entering the field of historical scholarship in such a high-profile way, we scholars also feel called upon to comment on some

of the questions raised by the text. Putin points to the Munich Agreement, which he claims showed to Soviet leadership that “the Western countries would resolve security issues without regard to Soviet interests”. This is not really new, but has long been used as an argument for the isolation of the Soviet Union in international relations, which ultimately pushed it to sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. What was relatively new, however, is the central role that Putin assigns to Poland in this constellation. Poland, he says, “pursuing its interests, did everything it could to prevent the creation of a collective security system in Europe.” It is surprising that Poland was assigned such a decisive role in the Munich Agreement, since no Polish delegation was present at the negotiations of the agreement itself. Yes, on October 2, 1938, immediately after Germany’s military occupation of the Sudetenland, Poland occupied the Czech parts of the Teschen Olsa area and thus benefited from the “Munich conspiracy”. Nevertheless, the main responsibility for the destruction of the Czechoslovakian state lies with Germany. Putin’s statement that the “Polish tragedy” of the Second World War was “entirely the fault of the Polish leadership at the time” fails to recognize Germany’s desire for expansion and war, which is probably well known to Putin, as well as to European historiography on the Second World War.

75

Putin’s comments on the Baltic states must also be clearly contradicted. Following the Soviet narrative, he writes that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania voluntarily requested admission to the Soviet Union in 1940. In fact, the Soviet Union exerted military pressure on the three states and forced the corresponding referendums in the three countries. It was a textbook example of annexation, and the subsequent “Sovietization” was accompanied by terror and mass deportations. And in his narrative of the war Putin leaves out the Soviet Winter War against Finland altogether.

Putin’s text also fails to address the Soviet Union’s relationship with the Allies and the post-war order. Putin paints a harmonious picture of the alliance between the three Allies, the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, during the war and the post-war period. The political intention of his text becomes clear here, and it ends with an appeal that the five veto powers of the UN Security Council – the United States, Great Britain, France, China and Russia – should work together to shape the world order of the 21st century. Putin invokes the greatness of the world war past to secure Russia a place in the future world order. But the alliance of the three allies in World War II and especially in the immediate post-war

period was also marked by conflicts. The division of Germany under the sign of the Cold War made this very clear in 1948/49. Putin's vision of the big five reveals a nostalgia for the foreign policy of the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15 and Yalta in 1945 – conferences at which the great powers shaped the circumstances in Europe to their liking. Not only Putin, but also Donald Trump seem to have a return to this principle in mind. I don't need to explain to this group why these ideas of great power politics are dangerous. However, a return to a world of great powers is not desirable in the rule-based multilateralism of the globalized world of the 21st century. Current challenges such as Russia's brutal war of aggression and the global recession resulting from Trump's tariff policy, as well as long-term problems such as climate change, the resulting migration, flight and pandemics, are hardly something that two or three major powers can get under control. This requires the interaction of the entire global community, in which Europe and of course Ukraine must play an important role.

76

References:

1. Geschichtspolitik braucht Entspannungspolitik. Ein Beitrag von Martin Aust, Anke Hilbrenner und Julia Obertreis zu Präsident Putins Text über den Zweiten Weltkrieg. https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/geschichtspolitik_entspannungspolitik
2. Kappeler, Andreas. 2021. Revisionismus und Drohungen Vladimir Putins Text zur Einheit von Russen und Ukrainern. Osteuropa, 71. Jg., 7.2021, S. 67-76. <https://zeitchrift-osteuropa.de/site/assets/files/37313/oe210706.pdf>
3. Kim, Anna. 2022. Russlands Geschichtspolitik seit 2000. Zeitgeschichte aktuell. Nr. 9. <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/29391852/ZeitgeschichteAKTUELL+Russlands+Geschichtspolitik.pdf/9689c489-4a8b-6b06-cb34-e22a0bad27aa?version=1.1&t=1710755440782>