



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

CSIS ROUNDTABLE, 3 May 2005

HISTORY AS POLITICS: CENTRAL EUROPE AND RUSSIA'S 9th MAY ANNIVERSARY

The upcoming 9th May celebrations in Moscow, when over 50 world leaders, including President George W. Bush, will be present, call for a reexamination of the historical legacy of the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany and its continuing implications for the Central and East European states. In order to facilitate such a dialogue, the CSIS East Europe project, in cooperation with the New Atlantic Initiative of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), hosted a roundtable discussion, "History as Politics: Central Europe and Russia's 9th May Anniversary," on 3 May 2005. Guest speakers Radek Sikorski, AEI, and Richard Krickus, Mary Washington College, together with Janusz Bugajski, CSIS East Europe project director, and Ambassador Keith Smith, CSIS senior associate, presented their insights. Panelists agreed that Russia must recognize the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet regime during and after WWII and abandon its imperial ambitions in order to normalize relations with neighbors and make progress toward democracy.

Bugajski Introduction

On 9 May, over 50 world leaders will be celebrating an anniversary in Moscow that clearly has a different meaning in Russia than it does among Russia's western neighbors. And as we know, history is politics and interpretations of history impregnate political discourse and international relations. May 9 is important not just because of what it celebrates – the defeat of Nazi Germany – but also for what it fails to acknowledge – the enslavement of half of Europe for almost half a century by the Soviet Union.

In recent weeks, the Central Europeans have been subjected to a series of provocative statements by the Russian leadership that at best display insensitivity toward Moscow's neighbors and at worst, can be considered a form of genocide-denial. The statements seem intended to generate tension and conflict by in effect portraying Russia as an offspring of the Soviet Union and President Putin as an heir to Stalin.

For example, in his state of the Union address, President Putin described the collapse of the USSR as the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." Many Central Europeans would respond that it is a pity that he did not affirm that the creation of the Soviet Union was an even bigger geopolitical catastrophe. The Russian Foreign Ministry has tried to excel the Kremlin in its pronouncements by declaring that Poland (and presumably the rest of the region) should be grateful for the Yalta accords, which divided Europe for half a century.

Regarding the legacy of Communism and Sovietism, the Russian government wants it both ways – on the one hand, claiming that Russia was the biggest victim of the Soviet regime and at the same time presenting Russia as the biggest beneficiary of Soviet victories in World War Two. Instead of obscuring and validating the Soviet regime's war crimes against its own population and against its neighbors, the 9th May anniversary should serve to underscore that you cannot build a Europe whole and free by celebrating a state that fractured Europe and imprisoned half of its population.

The poor state of Russian-Central European relations also has an impact on the cohesion of the European Union. Indeed, divisions have appeared on how to approach Russia, with several West European capitals willing to overlook Kremlin pressures against fellow EU members, who in turn seem more committed to a unified EU foreign policy and are deeply concerned about Moscow's ambitions in the region. For the Central Europeans, the political uses of the 9th May anniversary indicate a hardening of Russian foreign policy and a continuous threat to their own security.

(Read Janusz Bugajski's recent commentary published in Financial Times: http://www.csis.org/EE/articles/050427_Russia.pdf)

Keith Smith

Russia's perceptions of historical issues were framed by its grieving over the loss of its empire. This has led to an inability to construct positive relationships with neighboring Baltic countries, which remember the repression and dominance associated with Russia's, at the time the USSR's, empire. Russia cannot claim that all of the Soviet deaths in World War II were Russians and ignoring the losses of the Baltic states is tantamount to genocide denial. While the casualties Russia incurred during the war were great, the facts need to be put straight. According to Norman Davies, a British historian, during WWII Germany lost 7.4 percent of its population, Russia 11.4, while Poland lost 18 percent.

A feeling of general malaise has become prevalent in the Baltic countries owing to the perceived denial of history. Russia has attempted to maintain influence in the Baltic nations through its energy policies, import duties, and periodic embargos. Furthermore, Russian corruption in business is a problem for the economic situation in the Baltics. In addition, border agreements have not been signed, while Russia tried to unilaterally demarcate the border with Latvia in 1994. Such policies indicate a post-imperial syndrome, which must be changed to respect the sovereignty of the Baltic states. The West needs to look more closely at the crimes of Russia and the Soviet Union while potential reconciliation will require a two-way, open and constructive dialogue between Russia and the Baltic states.

Richard Krickus

The Baltic leaders saw the invitation to the 9th May ceremonies as an attempt to denigrate and divide their countries. The leaders' reticence to appear in Moscow has led to a shower of invective from Moscow officials, some of whom have gone so far as to describe Baltic leadership as fascist. Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga will respond to these arguments by asking Putin to denounce the crimes that occurred under Stalin. Putin is attempting to identify modern Russia with the strong image of the USSR, a fantasy which denies Russia's current demographic and political problems. Russia hopes to gain some control of the Baltic nations' economies and media through the energy industry. The influence of Russian money on political campaigns in Latvia is an example of such developments. In modern society governments alone are incapable of controlling

the historical dialogue. NGOs are increasingly successful in promoting alternative viewpoints despite the attempts of the Russian government to downplay their significance. Western governments must engage Russia, but must do it on the basis of historical reality. Maybe some compromise could be achieved if the U.S. and Russia worked together to spread democracy in Belarus. (View link to full remarks by Professor Richard Krickus http://www.csis.org/ee/eenews/May_9.pdf).

Radek Sikorski

Russia was completely in its right to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany and to commemorate the unprecedented loss of life. The importance of the USSR in defeating Nazism should not be diminished, where 75-80 percent of German casualties occurred on the Eastern Front. At the same time, Russia is missing an opportunity to allow for a complete reading of history, a history that includes all aspects of the Soviet victory, one which includes the crimes of Stalinism. The Sovietization of history continues, where the figures traditionally given for the number of Russians killed are inaccurate because they included a great number of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, and other nations., many of whom died at Soviet hands. For example, documents show the execution of Polish POWs and the deportation of up to one million Polish citizens to the Gulag (<http://www.csis.org/ee/eenews/notkaBeriiEnglish.pdf> and <http://www.csis.org/ee/eenews/Kozieisk.pdf>).

To Poles and other peoples, 9th May 1945 is a painful day because it represents a second lost war. The next forty years were covered in lies. Gorbachev admitted to the killing of Polish POWs and Yeltsin released documents from the archives allowing research on this subject to begin. Putin, however, is closing and hiding the archives on Stalin's deportations and mass murders and this is worrisome. Western governments should not accept the Soviet version of World War II as it was not simply an anti-fascist war. Putin is attempting to identify Russia's image with that of the Soviet Union and this elicits the question: Does Russia want to go the path of Germany after World War II, to open its historical legacy to criticism, or to go the path of Germany after World War I, to wallow in the loss of its empire and disengage from its neighbors? Western leaders must make a gesture in Moscow to honor the millions of victims of Stalin during the 3 May celebration.