

“The Politics of History and Its Variations in Post-Socialist Countries” March 5-6, 2010

On March 5-6, 2010 in Kazan, the Carnegie Moscow Center and the Shigabuddin Mardzhani Institute of History of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences held a seminar titled “The Politics of History and Its Variations in Post-Socialist Countries.” The seminar continued a discussion begun in the journal *Pro et Contra*, #3-4, 2009 (“The Politics of History”).

Disputes about identity and historical memory are a relatively new phenomenon for the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The fall of the socialist system freed the newly sovereign states from their official history, which had been written to serve communist ideologues. At the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, interest was growing throughout the region in national histories cleansed of the ideological interpretations of the communist era. This interest played an enormous role in public debate on the post-socialist future, which, as it seemed at the time, should be built on powerful traditions of national history. But in the process of reform and in the formation of new economic and political realities, wide-scale interest in history gradually began to decline.

The new upturn in interest began in the mid 2000s and continues today. It is driven by serious political changes in the countries of the region, including the intensification of etatist sentiment and approaches in Russian foreign and domestic policy, and by the revitalization of conservative, anti-European and nationalist movements in the states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). One of the themes that has occupied an important place in the agendas of Russia and the CEE consists of the idea that in the course of reforms, no true departure from the communist past was achieved. Under these circumstances, a new appeal to history became an important factor in a more precise understanding of today’s realities.

The surge of interest in history was also promoted by symbolic dates, in particular by the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, which could be used, among other things, to mark the conclusion of the preceding stage of development. Yet another important circumstance is superimposed on these factors: politically, the problems of the CEE countries connected with the pre-war period, the war, and the consolidation of the new post-war order, were never resolved and periodically flare up into conflict between the governments of Eastern Europe and Russia.

By the middle of the 2000s, a powerful demand for a new politicization of history and for its use in the interest of well defined political forces had formed as the result of multiple initial impulses. This demand also relied on strong endorsement from substantial grass-roots constituencies, which were disappointed by the reforms. The time of the *politics of history* had arrived. The state and/or party contract is becoming a key instrument in this game. Financial

resources are divided in favor of those researchers whose positions are more sympathetic to and advantageous for the “client.” The receipt of grants for publishing textbooks, the realization of research on one or another subject, and access to unique archival data place scholars in unequal conditions. History, as a result, is used in a political battle and is transformed into the politics of history. Various personalities and important dates and places are removed from their context and turned into an object not of historical professional analysis, but of political conflict and bargaining.

Taking into account the factors discussed above, the theme of the seminar emphasized the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but at the same time the organizers also tried to consider the experience of their Western European colleagues, as well as of Israel. Jutta Scherrer’s presentation about the current state and role of history in present-day France and Germany gave an opportunity to analyze the academic discourse of these countries. For many Eastern European states, they represent examples to be imitated. Scherrer showed in detail how these dominant European countries experienced a reevaluation of their histories in the 20th century. Furthermore, the presenter underscored that the most important role in these processes was played not only by the government, but also by civil society in both countries and by widespread public discussions on the problems of history.

The participation of scholars from Kazan in the project presented an opportunity to evaluate the significance of the regional aspect of the politics of history. Their presentations noted the heterogeneity of historical discourse in Russia, as well as serious differences between federal and local understandings of shared history and the ambiguity of interpretations of the past.

The presentations of specialists from Poland, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, and Israel allowed comparison of the situations in these countries. Participants identified significant commonalities, including the fact that differences in the interpretation of history by various political forces are frequently driven by the disparate ways in which various countries legitimize their post-socialist models of political and economic development. The ability of states to control “places of memory” also plays an important role. In certain cases, ruling elites seek a monopoly over key events in 20th-century history and in order to gain international legitimization. Politicians throughout the post-socialist space employ similar methods in their manipulation of history and are quick to copy each other. For example, the Institute of National Remembrance was created in Poland in 1998, an experience since replicated (with some variation) in Ukraine, Latvia, Georgia and elsewhere.

The politics of history has two faces: one “for domestic consumption,” and one for the foreign-policy arena. The connection between these sides is extremely strong but difficult to

predict. Frequently, foreign-policy *demarches* are explained by the demands of some or another political force in domestic politics, and vice versa. The shared focus on uncovering and labeling enemies unites both approaches, however.

In the course of the discussion, Alexey Miller, progenitor of the project, underscored that, paradoxically, the politics of history in different countries support and justify each others' existence. Politically tinged arguments arise and frequently evolve into "historical wars." Following the logic of confrontation, historians begin to build their narratives according to the principle of contradiction. History begins to resemble a "zero-sum game." If your neighbors present history in an advantageous light for themselves, then why should you not do the same? This approach is devoid of nuance and is characterized by the categorical nature of its conclusions, giving rise to inflexible dichotomies: "us vs. them," and "friends vs. foes." All sides sweep under the carpet those facts that don't fit neatly into this black and white picture.

Such an approach to history undermines the space for dialogue. All at once, the possibility of finding general interpretations or compromises is lost, while disagreements are unnecessarily emphasized. The historian ceases to be "an objective observer and analyst," and is dragged into the political process, making makes his or her work and conclusions extremely fragile.

While it is possible to fight the propaganda machines within historical discourse, Miller argued, a significantly greater effect can be obtained by renewing the dialogue between scholars in various countries. "If you do not agree with what is taking place in historical studies in your country, then find a colleague in a neighboring country who, just like you, is opposing the manipulations of politicians, and work with him directly," Miller said. "Such connections and regular consultations present an opportunity to create alternative interpretations of history that are acceptable for both countries."