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What could I wish to us all in Central and Eastern Europe on the Victory Day? First and foremost, peace. And second, that one day we would all commemorate the end of WW2, understand its meaning, honour the victims and the fallen – and not use the day for short-term political propaganda.

One of my last memoirs from Russia: it is summer, the pandemic time, appeals to get vaccinated are everywhere in the famous Moscow subway. Yet, another posters appear even more numerous. They carry a two-word message: Strana Pobediteley, a country of the victorious. Some of the posters feature 18th-century admiral Fyodor Ushakov, others – the medieval prince Alexander Nevsky, yet another ones – Marshal Georgiy Zhukov. They are everywhere. The military commanders watched me stepping onto a local train, or electrichka, on Moscow-Belarussian station. I could see them again even at the most isolated stops in the forest. The station infrastructure may have been desolate, but the posters kept reminding: this is Russia, the country of the victorious.

I could observe the Victory message undergo an evolution over the consecutive years of Putin's Russia. For it was Putin who introduced the every-year massive 9 May military parade – in the Soviet Union, it was held no more than three times. While the burdens of Russian capitalism became harder and harder to bear for average citizen, the state seemed to suggest: the identity based on 9 May and the heroism of ancestors should compensate for all the sorrows of living. And the official memory of Victory was consciously crafted. The state propaganda comfortably forgot to mention that the Soviet Union was a non-capitalist state, preferring to emphasize the role of the Russian Orthodox Church during the war instead. National pride was to replace questions about the current situation. If you are a citizen of the ever-victorious country, how can you complain about prices going high, bad housing opportunities and growing inequalities?

We can realize how cynical this propaganda is only when we take into account how dear is the memory of Victory for Russians. The Immortal Regiment marches, in which people carry the photos of their ancestors who fought and/or fell in the war, may have been invented as part of Putin's state memory politics, but they are full of genuine emotions. There is no Russian family without war memories, some heroic, others horrying. „Victory Day is the feast with tears in the eyes” – says a popular Soviet song, and this is not an exaggeration. In Soviet times, the veterans met one another in city parks, looking for *odnopolchaniye* – the frontline comrades, sharing stories, drinking and singing war songs. There was no huge military parades on the Red Square, with the exception of the year 1945 and then two 'round anniversaries' in 1965 and 1985.

*The popular memory emphasized that the Red Army men and women defended their country and fought to secure a peaceful future for next generations. Peace, not military supremacy, was the key word.*

Using the memory of war to build up an imperial propaganda and to turn people's attention away from injustices of Russian capitalism has already been a mockery. This year, when the 'anti-nazi' rhetorics was used to justify an invasion of Ukraine and the destruction of Ukrainian cities, another level of cynicism was reached. Putin's 9-May 'explanations' how Russia had to stage a preventive strike before the supposed Western attack were just mere additions to the general script. The official history came to a point in which Russia is fighting the eternal and always victorious war against fascism, which is found everywhere when needed.

Over the years, while the Russian state was building this official memory of Victory, the Central-Eastern European anticommunists developed their own. They taught us to forget that the Nazis actually planned to destroy Slavic people, just like they planned and ruthlessly executed the annihilation of the Jewish populations. They told us that there was nothing to celebrate on 8 or 9 May. They insist on commemorating the anticommunist post-war fighters and forgetting those who fought the Nazis on the Eastern Front. Polish soldiers who participated in the final battle of Berlin were just Communist collaborators, we can hear from the staunchest right-wingers.

In 2022, while Putin was explaining to his compatriots why Ukraine must have been attacked, the head of Polish Institute of National Remembrance announced that for our region, there was no Victory at all – just the beginning of the second occupation. A more cruel occupation, our anticommunists often add.

*As simple as that: we are told that five decades of the people's republics were a tragedy greater than mass killings and systematic extermination of the Nazi occupation period.*

From this point, one easily jumps to another level of propaganda: our Central-Eastern European countries do not develop fast enough, because they were destroyed by the Soviets back in 1945. The Communists are to be blamed for modern peripheral capitalism's failures.

We may be outraged by Putin's war propaganda, mixing up pure fascination with military force and bad historical parallels. But the total rejection of Victory is not an answer. We could also put it another way round: idolizing the Victory and forgetting about dark sides of Stalin's state and army is not a constructive reaction to the dismantling of Red Army monuments in Poland, Czechia and elsewhere. Polish anti-communists suggest that we need a collective memory totally different from what is promoted by Russia, in order to be

immune for Putin's propaganda. But the real cure for propaganda is the truth, and understanding that history is not black & white.

Besides – if we forget that our grandfathers helped to defeat Nazism back in 1945, how is this supposed to stop Putin from bombing Ukraine in 2022?

The war history of Central-Eastern Europe deserves more than just being exploited in political games. We need this memory, for we will never understand our realities if we simply forget what happened back in 1945, 1941, and 1939. And no matter if we choose 8 or 9 May for the celebration, we need an honest historical examination of what happened before, during and after the war. Why that disaster happened – and what changed in the lives of Central and Eastern Europeans once their states became people's republics. We need to understand how and at what price the Nazism was beaten – and why it was not beaten forever.