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AN ESCAPE FROM THE EMBRACE OF POLITICS. A STUDY INTO THE CULTURES OF REMEMBRANCE AS A MEANS TO ENCOURAGE A HISTORICAL DIALOGUE IN LITHUANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

*V. Safronovas**

This article focuses on the factors inhibiting a productive rethinking of the past in contemporary Lithuanian-Russian relations. The rethinking of the past is understood as a process facilitating the reconsideration of historical meanings through adjusting them to the expectations and values of the contemporary society. The author argues that in this process historical research — as an important tool for encouraging the co-existence of communities — should fulfil certain social functions. Having chosen the Lithuanian-Russian communication space as a case, the author emphasises the need to develop an interest in mutual knowledge of cultures of remembrance in this space. Outlining the strategies specific to the prevailing cultures of remembrance in contemporary Russia and Lithuania, the author addresses the issue of their proper relationship, as well as that of the appropriateness of historical policy. The criminalisation of certain evaluations of the past and the academic dialogue between historians are regarded as two opposite extremes of historical policy actually existing in the Lithuanian-Russian communication space. The author stresses that research into the values and interpretations of the past peculiar to certain social groups in both Lithuania and Russia may be considered as a basis for further development of the historical dialogue. It is assumed that such research may contribute to the improvement in the field of politics of history.

Key words: culture of remembrance, politics of history, rethinking of the past, Lithuanian-Russian relations

The growing distance between the academic historical research and the simplified images of the past nurtured

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within the social discourse became a general trend of the contemporary knowledge space. Therefore, one can assume that one of the goals of historians should be the aspiration to narrow this gap. The experience of Germany and other countries shows that, in this case, of special importance is the so called "processing" of the past, which involves rethinking of historical meanings and adjusting them to the expectations and values of the contemporary society. In most cases, the pioneers of such rethinking are historians who have an opportunity — owing to the nature of their profession — to see the discrepancies between the "generally accepted" perception of the past and the facts contained in documents and suggested by the elementary logic.

In the post-Soviet space such processing of the past, which is connected to the changes in general attitudes, was determined not only by the disintegration of the "socialistic camp", but also by the goals that were set above the society in the states that found themselves on the path of political, social, and economic reforms [4; 10]. For example, the implementation of foreign policy and economic priorities identified in Lithuania in the 1990s resulted in the reconsideration of historical images connected to Lithuanian-German, Lithuanian-Polish and other relations. The implementation of different strategies helped the negative experience of these relations stop to reproduce and develop, at least, as the dominant positions of the social discourse. However, the experience of Lithuanian-Russian relations started to be evaluated with the help of completely different strategies, which, as it was stressed before [2, p. 451—456], was to a great extent a result of the influence of internal political factors. It seems that such dependence on different internal and external priorities is characteristic not only of Lithuania, but also of Russia. The formation of value orientation with the use of certain historical symbols and images also depends on the focus on a certain audience — internal, Eastern European, or Western European [13, p. 250]. The question as to what benefit it brings to both parties cannot be considered rhetorical anymore.

What hampers a productive progressing of the past in the Lithuanian-Russian space? Probably, it is a space where the categories of "historical truth" and "falsehood" still preoccupy the minds of many; a space that lacks mutual respect for national myths and predominant memory constructs. Such respect can develop only through communication and understanding of each other; contradictions with someone's "historical truth" arising in this process should not become a handicap which makes it impossible to respect a different opinion and understand not only the need of certain beliefs in certain situations, but also the reasons behind it. Only when such an understanding emerges one might ask cautiously whether these myths and constructs are really necessary in the view of all the consequences they lead to.

Is it really impossible to harmonise the opposite positions? What is the role of historians in this process? Can historical research facilitate the reconsideration of the past in the Lithuanian-Russian space (and if it can, how exactly)?

The essence of historical research — infinite extension of knowledge about the past or fulfilment of functions?

Just recently historians thought that a deep study into the methodology of analysing historical sources helps them play the role of "oracles" of the past who have an exclusive right to talk about it. However, the creation of a common market, as well as developments in the different types of communication, which have taken place over the recent decades, emphasise the fact that the works of historians are just one of the sources, on the basis of which the social reception of the past is formed. By many parameters, this source is at a disadvantage compared with more "popular" representations of the past which put attractiveness above accuracy — movies, fiction, and even computer games. Thus, a "traditional" historian, who receives his/her salary for continuous extension of knowledge about the past, becomes something not unlike a dinosaur. Thus, of growing importance is the question as to what role the historians should play in a society, where the interest in the past is increasing not because of an aspiration to understand the outer world, but for the pleasure of consumption which entails a simplification and distortion of historical meanings.

Let me draw two opposite examples of the choice of such roles made by historians. The first example: historians using their specialised knowledge and adapting to the prevalent cultural practices oriented towards unlimited consumption can play the role of consultants where such services are required by the developers of goods and brands. They can help create plots and images that can be used for the legitimation of goods and brands in the consumer market, i. e. for their more "valid" historical background. The second example: properly channelled historical studies can facilitate real changes in the public self-perception and attitude to the others. If we admit that the peaceful coexistence of societies is a value in itself, and the upkeep of negative images and the implementation of other strategies of cultural opposition is just a tool in the hands of manipulators acting in the public discourse, historians can and even must focus on those areas that correspond to such value.

The choice of a research area is always a prerogative of the historians themselves, thus the central question is what effect the choice of this or that role will have. Will this effect be short-term and aimed at consumption, or vice versa long-term, oriented towards the progressing of the past by concentrating on the issues standing in the way of peaceful coexistence of different societies? If the latter is chosen, the major step is the understanding of each other's past and the motivation behind the other society's need for certain perceptions of the past.

Studies into the culture of remembrance — a sphere of historical knowledge "in vogue" or a response to the need for coexistence?

The history of creating symbols and images of the past, their social reproduction in the form of texts, rituals, holidays, and material objects is one of the most discussed topics of contemporary European historiography. The

aggregate of such studies creates a phenomenon which can be simplistically called a thematic field of memory. However, the interest in this topic which has been persistent over the last three decades is not only connected with the fact that memory is a new "fashion" in the historiography. First of all, memory is important, because it helps people distinguish between "their" and "alien" past in the present.

A productive analytical category which makes it possible to reason about relations to the past in different historical and contemporary societies is the term "culture of remembrance". Having been introduced into scientific usage by the cultural scientist, Jan Assmann, in the early 1990s [6, p. 30—31], this term has found a wide application in the interdisciplinary research (first of all, in Germany). General trends were described by the historian Christoph Cornelißen, who proposed that "culture of remembrance" is to be perceived as the most generic term applicable to all possible forms of conscious remembrance of historical events, persons, and processes [8, p. 555].

I define culture of remembrance as a system of meanings which is formed by different methods of representation actualising the past and stimulating the "collective memory" [1]. Such a definition suggests that the research object of culture of remembrance is the processes of creating meanings that constantly take place in the milieu of social communication. These are the processes that regulate, support, and transform the memory of people — the participants of a certain communication milieu. The understanding of the structure of meanings, which determines all the behaviour relating to the past, including concrete actions actualising the past, in fact, comprises research on the culture of remembrance.

Researchers engaged in the analysis of the culture of remembrance observe a characteristic of community's self-perception, which can manifest itself in the roles of either the victor, or the defeated, the guilty or the victim. They stress that many societies facing a certain influence apply similar strategies of adaptation, mourning, oblivion, silencing, "repression" of unpleasant and traumatising memories [5, p. 62—116]. On the other hand, despite the similarities in the strategies for handling the past, each culture of remembrance (which can exist at the national, group, confessional, and other levels) features an original set of meanings relating to the past, which fulfil the function of what J. Assmann calls the "connective structure" of society. These meanings unite the society through explaining why we are like this and who we are in relation to the others (see also [7; 9]).

Thus, an analysis of the cultures of remembrance gives an opportunity to define the values underlying any culture that has anything in common with the past. A study into the cultures of remembrance is a discovery of the actual state of affairs and unveiling the reasons behind it. When analysing the cultures of remembrance, one can learn how these cultures perceive themselves in relation not only to the past, but also the future since the values

[1] Collective memory is defined as one of the components of human memory, where the "content" of recalled meanings is supported and transformed under the influence of everyday or formalised group communication.

supported by memories are always projected in the future. Moreover, this analysis gives an opportunity to evaluate whether the projection of the culture into the future, which develops this or that way in any society, corresponds to the values supported by the remembrance of the past.

It is paradoxical, but such a correlation is rarely observed, especially in the cases when societies deal with different systems of values at the same time. The point is that, alongside general values characteristic of many cultures there are values that are supported on a daily basis within communication milieus. Thus, the degree of originality of a culture predetermines the degree of originality of perception of the past characteristic of only this particular culture. The strategy used in case of collision of such cultures depends on a different factor which is called "politics of history" or "politics of remembrance" in professional literature. It is a force manifested in the discourse on the past, which strengthens some memories and mitigates the others, biasing the carriers of one's own memories against the others or attempting to reconcile them. It is this factor that facilitates the formation of corresponding relations between different cultures of remembrance within one state or between states. This relation can be either adapting or suppressing, conflict or coexistence-oriented.

It is not historians who decide what strategies will be used, but historians can use their research to create prerequisites for the application of a certain strategy. Let us consider the actual state of affairs in Lithuanian-Russian space. What impact may historical research, aimed at understanding the characteristics of mutual cultures of remembrance as well as meanings and values they are based on, have in the space of these two states?

Gleams and interruptions in the relationship between cultures of remembrance in the Russian-Lithuanian space

The prevalent cultures of remembrance supported at the national level in Russia and Lithuania can be discussed in two different ways through an independent identification of their characteristic meanings and strategies. Many meanings are opposite in these cultures; however, when discussing strategies used in constructing these meanings and values, one can notice more than one similarity. In both cultures of remembrance, the role of the foundational myth, the sacralised narrative explaining the present, is played by a story about the transformation of the society, where the basic categories are those of the victor and the defeated (victim). In Lithuania, for more than two decades, it has been a story of transformation from the victim into the victor. The period of WWII and the first post-war years are associated in this story with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and are described using such terms as "occupation", "enforced deportation", "resistance", "genocide", which attaches the victim status to Lithuania (moreover, a victim that was injured by the Soviet Union more than by Germany), whereas the collapse of the USSR is associated with the terms of "liberation", "independence", the restoration of independence, i. e. a victory. In Russia, vice versa, it is a story of transformation from the "victor" into the "victim". The period of World War II is

associated mostly with the symbol of the Victory over Germany, which made the Soviet Union a liberator of the nations of Eastern Europe (including Lithuania), whereas the disintegration of the USSR is linked to the status of a "victim", for its collapse is often perceived negatively, as a great tragedy after which Russia faced the period of "decline"[2].

In both countries, the politics of history connects the values formed in the present with the status of a victor. In modern Russia, not unlike the Brezhnev era, the greatest and unrivalled historical value is the victory in WWII (or, more precisely, the Great Patriotic War). In Lithuania, the historical policy of the recent decades turned into the highest value the fight for independence and the symbol of restoration of independence, i. e. the secession from the USSR. Such a situation, when the current values are formed in the context of the status of a victor are a typical characteristic of a "young" politics of history in the states that aspire to strengthen thus their position, their morality and be acknowledged and respected by the others. The others should understand that victory is important not only for those who enjoy this status, but also for themselves. It can explain the fact that Russian politics of history — in the expectation of the recognition of the Soviet contribution to the common cause — tries to reconcile the important for Russia symbol of the Victory with the European practices of commemorating World War II. Lithuanian historical policy follows the same line, sometimes making attempts to present its victory as a contribution to the common cause — the disintegration of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire".

It means that, despite an opposite assessment of the same historical symbols and images (cf. [10; 12]), Lithuania and Russia use similar strategies of reconstructing values through both the prevalent culture of remembrance and politics of history. It is important to understand this, because there is not and there cannot be a single "right" system of values or a "good" or "bad" culture of remembrance. On the other hand, the issue of their appropriate correlation and hence the adequacy of politics of history in Lithuanian-Russian relations seem to be a question open to discussion, especially because the trends of politics of history, unlike those of culture of remembrance, relate not only to the formation of certain values, but, first of all, to the strategies of legitimation chosen by the corresponding regimes. The weaker is the influence of the regime agents on the prevalent perceptions of the past in the public discourse, the greater is the need to develop the symbols and images of the past, which would legitimate the policies of the regime.

In effect, it is the reason why the discrepancies, which exist in different cultures of remembrance because of the *difference* between these cultures becomes the subjects of disagreements and gives rise to the competition for the identification of a single and unquestionable "historical truth". The confusion starts when such a competition is recognised as the only kind of mutual relations. In effect, there are other ways. When positions clash, one can

[2] As the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, emphasised, "one must admit that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian nation it became a real tragedy" [1].

sidestep it, but one can also solve it by means of an honest dialogue and a search for common grounds. The problem can be solved through an argument about who is right and who is wrong, in which it is not logic and arguments, but strength that often wins, but one can also use the method of evaluation of arguments, the needs of societies, and search for common values. It is a paradox, but the contemporary Lithuanian-Russian relations combine both methods, i. e. they feature both the enforcement of a singe "historical truth", and a discussion. It results in the progress from point A to point A — the problem is not being solved, probably, because the agents of the regime do not fully understand the objectives and functions of politics of history.

Let me draw two examples of parallel processes. Over the last five years, similarly trivial trends towards suppressing dissent related to the foundational myth of the nation emerged both in Lithuania and Russia. On June 17, 2008, the Lithuanian Seimas adopted an amendment to the Law on Public Assembly, which forbade the demonstration of any symbols of not only Nazi Germany, but also the Soviet Union (including the Lithuanian SSR) during public assemblies. Two years later, on June 15, 2010, an amendment to the Civil Code of Lithuania was adopted, which imposed criminal liability for the denial of genocide and other crimes against humanity, as well as public approval of Soviet and German aggression against Lithuania, approval of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed on the territory of Lithuania or against Lithuanian citizens, and approval of aggression against the Lithuanian Republic in 1990—1991. In this connection, one should recall that the Lithuanian definition of genocide is quite peculiar; the Lithuanian legislation suggests that the genocide was also committed against Lithuanians [2]. In effect, similar trends also develop in Russia, where, in February 2009, Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed to introduce criminal liability for the denial of the victory of the Soviet Union in World War II, whereas a decree of the President of the Russian Federation of May 15, 2009, created a Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, which consists of representatives of special services and the Administration of the President.

In my opinion, such trends are, first of all, a result of the discrepancies that are caused by a clash of two different value systems and the generations for whom they are relevant. On the one hand, the older generation does not want to put up with the "relativisation" of the "historical truth" and the situation when the same events can be evaluated differently. On the other hand, an increasing number of alternative evaluations penetrate the same communication milieu which is dominated by traditional attitudes, and the logic of "discourse protection" makes one try to deliver the meanings that have the status of the most "sacred" from "defilement" thus criminalising such "defilement" by institutional methods. The meanings of certain events of the past selected to cherish show what meanings are considered prevalent in the process of formation of a common identity.

However, the mentioned criminalisation is not the only means to solve the problem. It is sufficient to acknowledge that it is characteristic of original

cultures (thus they are original) to have different perceptions of the past and it would be illogical to demand that one culture should adopt the "historical truth" of the other. The central questions are why many neighbouring states can ignore the differences in the perceptions of the past without actualising the components that can strengthen the opposition and conflict in the present and why the relations between other states should be based on attempts to impose a single perception of the past. In other words, we should find the answer as to why the issue of the acknowledgement of the occupation of the Baltic States or the evaluation of the participation of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian residents in the SS and Wehrmacht structures should be a *conditio sine qua non* — an issue that requires a single opinion, without having which it is impossible to make a step forward within modern intergovernmental relations.

Probably, a certain attempt to resolve such an issue was to be the commission of Lithuanian and Russian historians established in February 2006 on the basis of a bilateral agreement between the Ministries of Education and Science of Lithuania and Russia (both parties have established such commissions also with other countries). Alongside research workshops and conferences, which feature productive discussions on the past, one of the major results of cooperation between the members of the commission, who predominantly represent the Lithuanian Institute of History and the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, is the two-volume collection of papers entitled "The USSR and Lithuania in the years of World War II". The first volume ("The USSR and the Lithuanian Republic (March 1939 — August 1940)") was published in Lithuania at the beginning of 2006 [3]; the second one, which is dedicated to the Lithuanian issue in the international relations of 1940—1945, was completed at the end of 2011.

The publication of the first volume provoked an inadequate reaction both in Lithuania and (moreover) in Russia. Probably, it was due to this reaction that the completion of the second volume was postponed. It might partly have contributed to the above mentioned determination to criminalise the "historical falsehood".

Anyway, the publication of a two-volume collection of papers is only the first, though significant, contribution to the discussion, as well as a step towards a more adequate perception of each other. As it was expected earlier, this general trend can be followed by research into the cultures of remembrance, the analysis of which can shift the processing of the past to completely different grounds. The processing of the past cannot become efficient if it is conducted at the "upper" level — the academic or political one. It can be efficient if it is supported by values that do not need a separate or an additional public legitimation.

That is why there is a need to study the values and perceptions of the past that are formed and supported and whose necessity is justified this or that way in a certain society. Even small progress in the progressing of the past requires steps taken in view of this values and perceptions against the background of harmonising the old and the new, rather than a mere introduction of the new. At the same time, one should take into account that the

progressing of the past will never yield positive results if it is used for the purpose of manipulation. The motivation behind such progressing should be clear for anyone, and the achievement of its targets should lie in a consensus.

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