

# Change and Continuity: The Second World War in the Memory of Russians and in Russian Politics

Łukasz Adamski, PhD

**A clash between the forces of good – the Red Army, supported by the entire population of the USSR and the troops of the Western allies – and the forces of evil – 'Nazi invaders' and their collaborators from the countries of East-Central Europe: this official message of the Russian authorities with regard to the history of the Second World War essentially repeats the interpretations prevailing in the Soviet Union. The Kremlin usually silently ignores events that damage the positive image of the USSR or interprets them in a manipulative fashion. However, it does not deny them, unlike in Soviet times.**

[The Second World War](#) occupies an extremely important place in the historical consciousness of Russians. For its veterans and those children who lived through the war or the post-war period, marked by extreme poverty, it was an experience that influenced their entire later life.<sup>1</sup> For others, it is a matter of family history, school education and mass culture, such as books and films. For the Soviet Union, the war brought not only enormous material destruction, but also a far greater loss of human lives than in other countries. The tragedy of the population of St Petersburg (Leningrad in Soviet times) is one of the symbols of the Second World War: during the two-and-a-half-year siege of the city over 600,000 people died of starvation and lack of fuel during the bombing. According to official estimates made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, **some 26.6 million of its inhabitants, including almost 9 million Red Army soldiers died** as a result of wartime operations or the poor living conditions caused by the war; many men who returned from the war were invalids. In percentage terms, only Poland suffered greater losses. More than half of the Soviet casualties came from Russia. **No country lost more soldiers than the USSR. Nor was there**

---

<sup>1</sup> *Great Patriotic War (Великая Отечественная Война)*, the results of a study by the Levada Centre of 20 June 2018 [accessed 20 January 2021]. Available at Levada.ru: <https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/20/velikaya-otechestvennaya-vojna-3/>.

**a country with a higher percentage of mortality in relation to the total mobilized.**

In a 2018 public opinion poll, 81 percent of Russians declared that in members from their families had participated in the 'Great Patriotic War', as the USSR's war against Germany and its allies between 1941 and 1945 is called in Russia, and 58 percent of them added that they had lost someone close to them during the war.



↑ Street fights during the siege of Leningrad, 1943.

It is only natural that as more time passes since the end of the war, the memory of it is shaped less by personal memories and family stories and increasingly by actions of the state. For example, the state shapes the school curricula, finances mass culture, especially war films, and even determines the content of news programmes in the media under its control. In practice, however, the state is not necessarily interested in ensuring that the public's perception of the war, and thus the nation's historical memory corresponds to the findings of professional historians. Russia's rulers give primacy to political objectives. They want the victory over Germany to remain as one of the binders of the multinational Russian Federation for a long time. In the USSR, shortly after the war, it was called a 'victory over fascism' and now 'over Nazism', so as not to hinder the winning over of the German population to communist ideas.

**The rulers are also aware that the mythologized image of a heroic USSR is a**

**popular belief, especially among the older generations of Russians, so that its revision** – to correspond to the findings of historians – **may lead to the government losing some of its popular support.** We should also be aware that the politicians governing Russia – most of whom were born in the 1950s – have themselves grown up with the Soviet cult of the Second World War.

**The 'appropriately shaped memory' of the Second World War is also used by the Kremlin in its foreign policy.** On the one hand, it is intended to remind people in other countries of the former USSR of their shared fate with Russia. The EU and NATO countries, on the other hand, should be inclined to accept Russia as a great power, a status that the USSR ultimately acquired precisely as a result of the Second World War, and to consult with Russia on various decisions in international affairs, for example those concerning the EU's and NATO's bilateral relations with Ukraine and Belarus as well as other countries which, in the Kremlin's view, lie within Russia's 'sphere of influence' or 'buffer zone'. It should be noted that in the 1990s, when the countries of Central Europe, including Poland, were not yet members of the EU and NATO, Russia tried to block the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance, claiming the right to co-determine the foreign policy of other countries. History was one of the tools for this policy. When the countries of Central Europe freed themselves from Soviet domination, they began to effectively disseminate knowledge about Soviet crimes outside their borders and used the past, among other things, to convince the West of the need for EU and NATO enlargement. Seeing those actions as a threat to its own interests, Russia responded by disseminating manipulated accounts of the history of its relations with East-Central Europe.

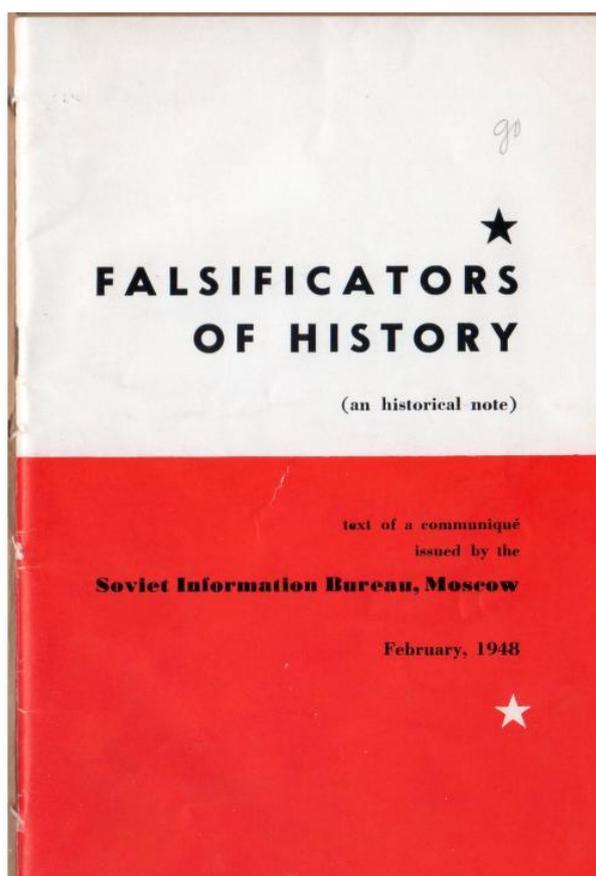
## How the Second World War was interpreted

The Russian satirist Mikhail Zadornov (1948–2017) is the author of the saying that **'Russia is a country with an unpredictable past'**, an aphorism that illustrates the problem of the Kremlin imposing certain historical interpretations. This tendency is clearly manifested in the approach of successive leaders of the Soviet and later Russian state to the Second World War. In the 75 years that have passed since the end of the war, most interpretations have remained the same: the USSR was the first

to see the danger of fascism and did everything to prevent the outbreak of war, and when it came, it beat the enemy thanks to the efforts of its authorities and the entire nation. Looking at the details, however, interpretations were changing.

In the years just after the war, Stalin's wisdom was emphasized: in the summer and autumn of 1941, he deliberately drew the armies of Germany and its allies deeper into Russia, wearing them down in order to increase the chances of a successful counter-offensive. At the same time, in response to the publication by the US government in 1948 of documents on the cooperation between Germany and the USSR, including the secret protocol to the Soviet–German non-aggression treaty ([the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact](#)), which divided East-Central Europe into spheres of influence for both powers, **the authorities of the USSR published a pamphlet edited personally by Stalin entitled *Falsificators of History*.**<sup>2</sup>

*Falsificators of History (an historical note)*, February 1948 [accessed 20 April 2021]. Available on Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/FalsificatorsOfHistoryAnHistoricalNoteTextOfCommuniqueIssued>



The English-language translation of the *Falsificators of History (an historical note)* brochure edited by Joseph Stalin and originally published in Moscow in 1948.

<sup>2</sup>See *Falsificators of History (an historical note)* (Washington, DC: Published by the Information bulletin of the Embassy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1948).

Among other things, the booklet argued that the USSR had done everything it could to prevent the Second World War, while Western businessmen, especially those from the USA, were arming German imperialism with the approval of their governments. According to the pamphlet, the Western countries, by concluding a political agreement in Munich in 1938 with the Third Reich and fascist Italy on the necessity for Czechoslovakia to cede part of its territory to Germany, wanted to push the Hitler-ruled state to attack the USSR. They accused Finland of unleashing a war against the USSR in November 1939 and stressed that the annexation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the USSR in 1940 was voluntary.

**The next leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev**, not only significantly reduced the level of terror in the USSR, but also **initiated an era of reckoning with Stalin and his crimes**. In his famous paper 'on the cult of personality and its consequences', prepared for the 20th Party Congress, **he brought up the question, among other things, of the Soviet dictator's responsibility for the country's unpreparedness for war and the disastrous first months**. 'Not Stalin, but the Party as a whole, the Soviet government, our heroic army, its talented leaders and brave soldiers, the whole Soviet nation – these are the ones who assured victory in the Great National Patriotic War,' Khrushchev said.



↑ Nikita Khrushchev delivering a speech entitled 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences' in Moscow, 1956.

Khrushchev was deposed in 1964 and **in 1965 the new general secretary Leonid Brezhnev upheld this interpretation** of the history of the Second World War as a victory for the party and the Soviet people **with one significant change: Stalin's crimes were simply not talked about** and his significance was minimized.

Brezhnev spoke on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, thus creating an official interpretation of the USSR's role:

In an extraordinary situation, the party [and] the Soviet people made enormous, truly heroic efforts to strengthen the army and adapt the economy to the requirements of war, to transform the country into a unified war camp. A State Defence Committee was set up with the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), J.V. Stalin, to direct all measures to repel the enemy. As long as the enemy enjoyed temporary successes, the wisdom and determination of the party [and] the self-sacrificing efforts of the people forged and hardened an invincible force which soon became the terror of the fascist invaders.

It was also during this period that **Victory Day**, celebrated on 9 May **became one of the most important public holidays in the USSR** with celebrations in front of 'eternal candles', graves of 'the unknown soldier' and war parades. The day marks the date that the final surrender of the Third Reich was signed in accordance with Moscow rather than Central European time.

A significant change occurred during the period of *perestroika* – that is, the 'restructuring' and democratization of the Soviet Union, initiated when Mikhail Gorbachev headed the party (1985–91). **In 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR condemned the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. In 1990 the Soviet government confessed to the Katyn Massacre** – the murder committed in the spring of 1940, on orders from the highest authorities of the USSR, of almost 22,000 Polish officers taken prisoner in 1939 and of arrested representatives of the Polish elite. **The discussion about Stalin's crimes was also resumed**, much more intensively, because the censorship and the ideological control of the party in Khrushchev's times had been relaxed, and the debate began on the quantity of war losses. There was

even discussion as to whether Stalin had anticipated the attack on the USSR and whether Hitler had not simply overtaken him in 1941.

**However, when Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, there was a gradual return to the Soviet narrative.** While it was impossible to deny the facts of the disclosed documents and Russian academic historiography continued to write relatively freely about the war period for the first decade of his government, the state put its efforts into promoting the Soviet interpretation of the Second World War, albeit in a language devoid of communist newspeak. It inhibited the declassification of archival material on the Second World War. **Even a moderate rehabilitation of Stalin took place:** government propaganda did not deny the repression but emphasized his willpower, which led to the industrialization of a backward country and the defeat of Nazism.

#### **Russia's President Vladimir Putin on Joseph Stalin:**

Stalin was a product of his time. You can demonize him all you want, or, on the other hand, talk about his contributions to victory over Nazism. [...] There was an activist like Cromwell in English history. He was a man stained with blood; he came to power on a wave of revolutionary transformation; he became a dictator and a tyrant. But his monuments still stand everywhere in Britain. [...] They idolize Napoleon in general. What did he do? On the wave of the revolution, he came to power and not only restored the monarchy, but also declared himself emperor, led France to a national disaster and complete defeat. [...] It seems to me that the excessive demonization of Stalin is one method – one way to attack the Soviet Union and Russia.

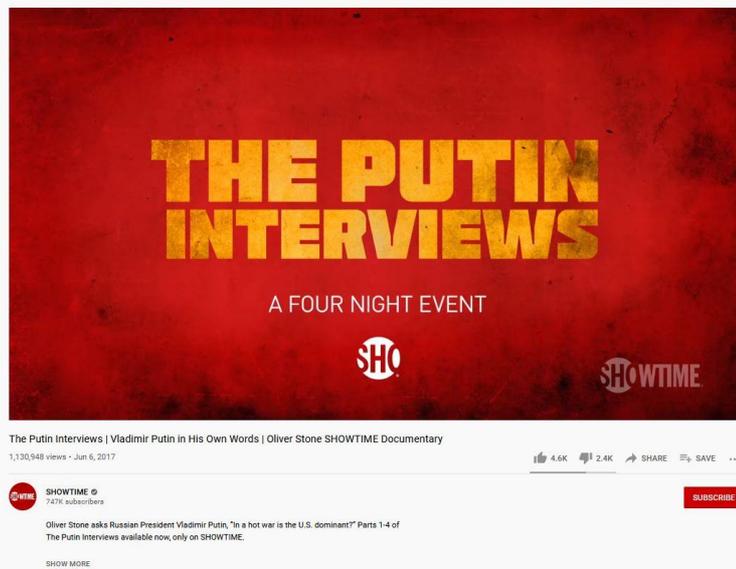
Vladimir Putin interviewed in Oliver Stone's documentary *The Putin Interviews*, 2017.

As a result, the percentage of Russians for whom Stalin evokes positive associations has risen steadily – from 38 percent in 2001 to 51 percent in 2020, while the percentage of those for whom these associations are negative has fallen from 43 percent in 2001 to 14 percent in 2020.

**In 2020 70 percent of Russians rated Stalin's role positively** (53 percent in 2001), while 19 percent rated it negatively (33 percent in 2001).<sup>3</sup>

**In the second decade of the Putin administration, the authorities began to exert more pressure on historians** not to undermine the Kremlin's 'historical policy', that is, measures taken at the state level to popularize a particular interpretation of history, one that the rulers considered to be beneficial to Russia (or themselves). Between 2009 and 2012, a special Commission for Counteracting Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, which advised the authorities on how to neutralize anti-Soviet historical interpretations, operated under the patronage of the president. Its chairman was Sergey Naryshkin, then head of the presidential administration and since 2016 head of Russia's foreign intelligence service. In 2014 the Criminal Code was amended – **'disseminating false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War' became punishable with up to three years imprisonment, and if the media were used for this, up to five years.** In 2016, a Perm resident was ordered to pay a penalty equivalent to PLN 12,400 (approx. 2,700 EUR) for publishing material on a social network about a joint attack on Poland by Germany and the USSR in 1939.

The Putin Interviews | Vladimir Putin in His Own Words | Oliver Stone SHOWTIME Documentary, 06 June 2017 [accessed 20 April 2021]. Available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fajGIA\\_0dw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fajGIA_0dw)



A trailer of a four-part documentary entitled *The Putin Interviews* based on Oliver Stone's interviews with Vladimir Putin made in 2015–17.

<sup>3</sup> *The level of approval for Stalin by Russians broke a historical record (УРОВЕНЬ ОДОБРЕНИЯ СТАЛИНА РОССИЯНАМИ ПОБИЛ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ РЕКОРД)*, the results of a study by the Levada Centre, 16 April 2019 [accessed 20 January 2021]. Available on Levada.ru: <https://www.levada.ru/2019/04/16/uroven-odobreniya-stalina-rossiyanami-pobil-istoricheskij-rekord>

Russia's highest authorities themselves have repeatedly made statements about the Second World War. This culminated in the June 2020 publication by Vladimir Putin in the American magazine *The National Interest* of a long article on the origins, course and the conclusions drawn from the Second World War.

Origins of the Second World War officially interpreted by the authorities of	
the Soviet Union	Russia
<p>Having seized power in Germany, Hitler and his clique destroyed the democratic rights and freedoms of the German people, crushed workers' and other mass organizations, and introduced a regime of bloody terror. [...] Communists warned of the danger fascism posed to all nations. They stressed that fascism is an openly terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist elements of imperialism, aiming at stupefying the working masses and preparing an aggressive imperialist war. Our party and the Soviet people well remembered Vladimir Lenin's warning that imperialism could at any moment unleash a second cycle of wars against the USSR, and sought to increase the economic and defence power of the country. In its quest for world power, fascism took as the main aim of its policy the struggle against communism, against the world's first socialist state. [...] The anti-Soviet</p>	<p>The root causes of World War II mainly stem from the decisions made after World War I. The Treaty of Versailles became a symbol of grave injustice for Germany. [...] It was the national humiliation that became a fertile ground for radical sentiments of revenge in Germany. The Nazis skilfully played on people's emotions and built their propaganda promising to deliver Germany from the 'legacy of Versailles' and restore the country to its former power while essentially pushing German people into war. Paradoxically, the Western states, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, directly or indirectly contributed to this. Their financial and industrial enterprises actively invested in German factories and plants manufacturing military products. [...] The 'Versailles world order' caused numerous implicit controversies and apparent conflicts. They revolved around the borders of new European states</p>

direction of Hitler's policy was actively supported by reactionary circles in the West. The imperialists of the USA, England and France did much to revive German militarism after the First World War and to direct it against the USSR. And when, with the help of the German monopolies, Hitler came to power, directly proclaiming a course for war, the Western countries engaged in a policy of 'appeasement' of the aggressor. They threw more and more victims at Hitler's feet, hoping that he would direct his hordes eastwards against the land of socialism. The Munich conspiracy, which handed Czechoslovakia over to fascist Germany, was the most shameful manifestation of this treacherous imperialist plan. History has cruelly punished the 'appeasers' who rejected all the proposals of the Soviet government for joint opposition to the fascist aggressors.

Leonid Brezhnev, 'The Great Victory of the Soviet People' (speech marking the 20th anniversary of the end of the Second World War) delivered on 8 May 1965

randomly set by the victors in World War I. [...] unlike many other European leaders of that time, Stalin did not disgrace himself by meeting with Hitler who was known among the Western nations as quite a reputable politician [...] Today, European politicians, and Polish leaders in particular, wish to sweep the Munich Betrayal under the carpet. Why? The fact that their countries once broke their commitments and supported the Munich Betrayal, with some of them even participating in divvying up the take, is not the only reason. Another is that it is kind of embarrassing to recall that during those dramatic days of 1938, the Soviet Union was the only one to stand up for Czechoslovakia. [...] Britain, as well as France, which was at the time the main ally of the Czechs and Slovaks, chose to withdraw their guarantees and abandon this Eastern European country to its fate. In so doing, they sought to direct the attention of the Nazis eastward so that Germany and the Soviet Union would inevitably clash and bleed each other white.

Vladimir Putin, 'The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II' (article published in the American magazine 'The National Interest'), 18 June 2020

# Analysis of the mechanisms of manipulation

It is possible to identify at least **four problems with how the official Kremlin interpretation** – despite some secondary differences between Soviet times and now – **refers directly to Soviet propaganda** and how it is based on lies or manipulation:

- **the question of the origins of the war.** Russia radically opposes the claim that the Soviet Union shared responsibility for the outbreak of war;
- **the role of the USSR in the first period of the war (1939–41).** Russia rejects the premise that the Soviet Union became involved in the Second World War in 1939 by launching, in concert with the Third Reich, an attack on Poland; and then, in November 1939, by invading Finland, for which it was expelled from the League of Nations (then equivalent to the United Nations); and finally by illegally annexing Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the summer of 1940. The Kremlin denies the aggressive nature of those actions and excludes them from their description of the Second World War;
- **assessment of the USSR's actions in East-Central Europe in 1944–45.** Russia emphasizes the pro-liberation nature of the Red Army's actions in 1944–45 and claims that the communization of Central European countries was the result of a shift in the public mood towards the left and the consequence of the beginning of the [Cold War](#) between the West and the USSR. Russia treats opposition to communist rule as a civil war (in USSR times: a fight against reaction), not a fight for independence;
- **the question of changes to USSR borders.** Russia denies the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940–41 and 1944–91 and of Poland in 1939–41 and 1944–45. It considers that the USSR border changes took place in 1939–40 and not after 1945 and, moreover, that the USSR returned certain territories to Poland, such as Podlasie (in eastern Poland).

How do the Russian (and earlier Soviet) authorities convince you of their point of view? This can be analysed using the example of the aforementioned article by the Russian president.

### – Lies about the facts. Reversal of the cause-effect relationship

Vladimir Putin claims that 'by 17 September, the military and political leaders of Poland had fled to Romania', and, among other things, he justifies the USSR's decision to occupy Poland's eastern provinces considering that situation. As a result of this lie, the loose connection between the crossing of the border with Romania by the Polish authorities and the Soviet invasion is reversed. In reality, the 'Red Army operation' was the cause of the government's evacuation from Poland rather than its consequence.

### – False interpretations of international law

The Russian president writes that the accession of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the USSR 'was implemented on a contractual basis, with the consent of the elected authorities. This was in line with international and state law of that time.' However, the 1939–40 international treaty on the renunciation of war as an instrument of foreign policy (known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928) prohibited states from solving problems with other states by means of war, which also outlawed the possibility of threatening war. Moreover, in 1933, the USSR signed a treaty with Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Poland, known as the London Convention, according to which the blockade of sea ports and the coast of another state was tantamount to aggression. In June 1940 the USSR had already blockaded their ports before issuing an ultimatum to the Baltic States demanding entry for its numerous armed troops into their territories. It is also difficult to recognize the validity of the treaties on the accession of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the USSR, since they were signed by the illegal authorities of those countries, elected in pseudo-elections organized in an atmosphere of communist terror and with the Red Army occupying those territories.

### – Selective silence

Nowhere in his article does Vladimir Putin mention the USSR's invasion of Finland in November 1939 and its three-month war with that country, nor the removal of the USSR from the League of Nations, which was triggered by Soviet aggression. He also leaves out the Katyn Massacre, that is, the murder of Polish prisoners of war by order of the highest Soviet authorities, and the active cooperation of the USSR with the Third Reich in 1939–40. Yet he mentions the pacification of the Belarusian village

of Khatyn, dated March 1942, by a German detachment, which, in view of the omission of Katyn, can be treated as an additional manipulation – giving the impression that the Germans were responsible for the Katyn Massacre through a misleading association. This case can be seen as part of the propaganda war against Ukraine since a unit of Ukrainian collaborators took part in the pacification of Katyn.

### – **False comparisons and argumentative presentism**

Putin's accusation that the Western countries did not accept the USSR's proposal to build a united front against the Third Reich, and that Poland additionally 'rejected the idea of joint action with the Red Army to fight against the *Wehrmacht* [armed forces of Nazi Germany]', is a manipulation that consists of constantly comparing the criminal, extremely repressive state of the USSR – which sought to create a new man, destroy existing elites and culture and impose the ideology of a totalitarian utopia on other nations – with democratic and authoritarian European states. As a rule, the latter posed no threat to their neighbours and, above all, did not carry out social experiments and mass crimes against their own citizens. Without any knowledge of Stalin's crimes, it is difficult to understand why European countries, especially Poland, were reluctant to cooperate with the USSR before the war, and why the Soviets were perceived as a danger at least as great as, if not greater than, Nazi Germany. Moreover, European politicians in the 1930s could not have been at all certain that war with Germany would break out.

### – **Insinuations**

Insinuations are also an element of contemporary Russian propaganda, designed to further convince audiences that the USSR's foreign policy was as 'normal' as the foreign affairs of other countries. As Putin wrote in his article: 'other states have preferred to forget the agreements carrying signatures of the Nazis and Western politicians. [...] Besides, we do not know if there were any secret “protocols” or annexes to agreements of a number of countries with the Nazis. The only thing that is left to do is to take their word for it.' There is no circumstantial evidence to believe that the archives of European states, generally long opened and combed through by historians, contain any 'secret protocols' similar to the one signed by the two

totalitarian powers in August 1939. Such statements, however, may reflect the conviction of Russia's rulers that other European countries use the same procedures with regard to history as themselves, only that they are more efficient, because they have never succumbed to the delusion, as the USSR did during *perestroika*, that revealing skeletons in the closet – admitting the guilt of the past – will bring benefits.

### – Appeals to authority

Russia is trying to support its historical interpretations by referring to the position of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which tried leading politicians of the Third Reich. In the justification for its judgment, this international court set out the reasons for the outbreak of war. According to the Kremlin, the position formulated by the tribunal's judges, including those from the USSR, who worked immediately after the end of the Second World War, should provide the acceptable framework for contemporary historical interpretation.

Vladimir Putin, *The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II*, 18 June 2020 [accessed 20 April 2021]. Available on The National Interest: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>



The article entitled 'The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of the World War II' by Vladimir Putin, published on the website of the American magazine *The National Interest*.

All accusations of this kind can easily be refuted, provided you have the knowledge of the facts and the analytical ability to expose manipulation. **More difficult to counter, however, is a different kind of argument**, officially one not put forward by the Russian Federation authorities directly, but rather by scholars and commentators working with them. **It claims that history is manipulated not only in Russia but also in other countries, especially in East-Central Europe.** The truth lies somewhere in between. This is another logical fallacy for the truth is not a compromise between two positions, but 'lies where it lies'. In any case, **it should be remembered that any manipulation of one's own history, especially through embellishment or defamation for political purposes, is a sign of dishonesty and political shortsightedness.** It only makes it easier for the Kremlin to popularize its historical misrepresentations.

Translation: Mikołaj Sekrecki

Copyediting & Proofreading: Caroline Brooke Johnson