

International conference

The Politics of Memory as a Weapon: Perspectives on Russia's War against Ukraine

Organisers:

**European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS, Warsaw)
Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe (Oldenburg)**

in collaboration with

the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation (Berlin)

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Venue: Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung (Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation) in Berlin

The instrumentalization of history and culture in order to achieve political aims has a long history. For many years now, Vladimir Putin and the Russian authorities have been advancing falsified historical narratives and highly fictional historical and/or cultural arguments as geopolitical weapons. During his long-drawn-out preparations for military aggression, his attempts to legitimise the military invasion of Ukraine – which contravenes international law – have been particularly blatant, as have the concomitant propaganda and the justifications put forward for further escalation. His target audience was not only the national 'enemy' but also, and especially, the Russian population at home, whose loyalty he needed to shore up, and further afield, the general public in Europe and across the world.

When putting the current war in Ukraine into a broader context we must ask about how Central and Eastern Europe are perceived by their neighbours. One question is whether the great powers will be deciding about the conflict or whether local actors will also take part in the decision-making process. Therefore, while discussing the Russian aggression, one must consider the *longue durée* of narrations related to East-Central Europe and Western indulgence towards Russia. A further question is the role of the European Union in the hoped-for future peace process.

There are very different images and perceptions of Russia in the European consciousness. In Western and some Central European countries the increasing

domestic political repression in Russia and the aggressive foreign policy following the collapse of the Soviet Union were underestimated. Western Europe had been at peace for over 75 years, and a Russian invasion of Ukraine was hardly considered. There was a strong temptation in Germany to focus on the country's Second World War guilt, which also influenced the experience not only of division during the Cold War, but also – until recent years – of detente and reconciliation, and of a policy geared towards economic cooperation.

The argument that Russia must have felt threatened by the eastward expansion of NATO has also often played a role. Moreover, we should acknowledge the dramatic rift in the European memory related to the year 1989. Also the collapse of the Soviet Union is seen as the triumph of freedom and democracy in Central and Western Europe, whereas for President Putin and his supporters it was the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century. This in turn has widely influenced the policies in various European countries. Poland and other countries in eastern and south-eastern Europe reacted more sensitively and emotionally to developments in Russia – after 1945 they had fully experienced Russian and Soviet occupation and hegemony and kept it in the collective consciousness. Still, both the official and the popular views vary in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc and cause among other factors difficulties in working out a unanimous European Union policy towards Russia.

Putin has often expressed a hegemonic ambition vis-à-vis Russia's 'near neighbours'; his ambition has been shaped, among other influences, by images derived from imperial Tsarist and Soviet tradition. The warnings from historians and security experts in several European countries and the USA since the end of the first decade of this century were born out by the Russian invasions in Moldavia, Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas. These were accompanied by lengthy, targeted and systematic state-sponsored campaigns of disinformation, historical lies and manipulations, disseminated through the mass media, schools, and various other institutions. History was used by Stalin as well as Putin as a geopolitical weapon. Therefore, the question is whether the Russian actions may lead – contrary to Russian aims – to longer-term unification of Europe as a community of democratic values, law and territorial integrity. For the past two decades, any Russian efforts to engage in critical appraisal of their own history – for example by the human rights organisation Memorial – have been fiercely challenged. Since the start of the war, independent reports and any kind of opposition have been suppressed. Seemingly many Russian citizens go along with the official statements about the war. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the methods of counteracting this disinformation.

The international perception of Russia, and the European stance towards Russia and the Ukraine, have been radically altered by the invasion of Ukraine. Almost overnight, existing principles underlying political and cultural intercourse with Russia were completely abandoned. The war enabled the media and the scholarly community to ‘discover’ Ukraine, its culture and history, which had been overlooked in the previously one-sided focus on Russia.

This conference aims to examine the mechanisms and methods used in the political and social implementation of historical disinformation, the portrayal of the enemy, and discuss ways in which these can be prevented or mitigated. This will entail a (self-)critical analysis of political and scholarly dealings with history in various European countries. We shall also reflect on what happens when warnings from political and academic voices are not taken seriously enough, and on the consequences of the way in which attention has shifted from Russia to Ukraine.

The above statements bring out some crucial questions: When is it appropriate not only to speak out in contradiction, but to engage in political or even judicial countermeasures when dealing with widely divergent interpretations or indeed the falsification of historical facts? Where do propaganda and social manipulation begin? What can or should we expect from ‘public intellectuals’ in times of war and crisis? How can we ensure that civil society is enlightened and immunised, while at the same time guaranteeing the free exchange of ideas and historical interpretations? How effective can literature and art be in this endeavour? Is it possible for the concepts used in public history to be properly understood, and what part can dissidents play here? What digital tools can be deployed to deflect propaganda and trolls on social media?

This conference will be preceded by a conference in Prague “Memory of the Past and Politics of the Present” on 28-29 November 2022 at the Goethe Institute in Prague. The main organizer is the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences (www.usd.cas.cz). Both conferences will take place within the ENRS content framework “History, Memory, and Russia’s war against the Ukraine”.

Possible thematic blocks:

1. Political approaches to Central and Eastern Europe

Being the subject or merely the object of international politics is one of the key issues for Ukraine as well as for many countries in East-Central Europe. One of the basic issues to be tackled is how traditional visions of the European order influence contemporary relations on our continent.

2. European perceptual patterns and stereotypes of Russia and Ukraine

Collective and personal experiences; national/collective perspectives in participants' own countries, and their consequences; traumas; historical benchmarks and various lieux de mémoire and great powers' economic and political aspirations, military considerations, intellectual historical approaches enframed into memory politics.

3. Russian and Ukrainian identity and history – weaponizing history

Perceptions of history and identities; longue durée of Russian and Ukrainian identity as well as the idea of self-determination; historical auto-stereotypes of Russians and Ukrainians – the 'brother nation' myth; the doctrine of the unity of state and society; the adoption of a structural conflict with 'the West'; Putin's narrative as geopolitical weapon; reasons why Russian propaganda finds internal and external believers; the aims of Russia's policy.

4. The limits of European intellectual and political discourse

The importance of nation and heroic tradition in Europe; the European Left and Right in relation to Russia and Ukraine; the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine; Russian representations of history as seen by European and US Sovietology and Russian Studies;

5. Strategies and possible measures to combat disinformation

Invasion day, 24 February, and its consequences for historiography and politics; the significance of the 'Putinisation' of politics and the intended division of the European community; conceptual understandings to date and the need for redefined tasks; diplomacy versus public discourse.

Panel discussion

What did we know? What might / should we have known?

Persons wishing to participate in the conference including a presentation should submit a paper of 400 words and a short CV (only three main publications) in English or German before **20 October 2022**.

Papers which go along with the thematic blocks above are particularly welcomed.

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Conference languages: English and partly German