

Wojciech Materski

OD CARA DO „CARA”

STUDIUM ROSYJSKIEJ POLITYKI HISTORYCZNEJ

Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk

Warszawa 2017

Summary

From Tsar to the 'Tsar'

A Study of the Russian Politics of Memory

The subject of this book is the Russian politics of historical memory as seen in a wide chronological spectrum, yet with a clear focus on recent decades. While politics of memory is defined in a variety of ways in science and journalism, here it stands for the state's control over the past through appropriate regulation of knowledge, relevant commentary and tight control of school curriculum at subsequent levels of education. This is, therefore, a form of indoctrination and political control, which is especially effective in a country like – tsarist, Soviet, post-Soviet – Russia, where society has little influence on the authorities.

When discussing individual periods in Russian and Soviet history, I try to emphasise the internal and external priorities behind the interpretation of history imposed by the authorities. I attempt to capture moments of their revalidation and to outline for what reasons this was done. I also point out the undoubted continuity of the Russian/Soviet politics of memory, the specificity of its unchanging content, adapted to existing conditions. In this context, I also note the unchanging tendency of the Russian/Soviet authorities to impose their politics of memory on non-Russian, conquered, annexed territories and the states affected by the Yalta

Conference. This imposed politics of memory is evident, for example, in Russian-Ukrainian relations; it serves to justify the annexation of the Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. It can even be used to justify the aggressive operations of Russia in the Middle East, which Cyril, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, legitimised as the natural help of Orthodox Russia for ‘Syria – the cradle of the Orthodox Church’.

The content of the Russian politics of memory concerns both the international position of the state and its internal politics, from the weakness of which attention can be diverted with appropriate historical arguments, for example, by inducing nationalist sentiment and by denying traditions referred to by political opponents. In this way, the authorities avoid solving socially important problems as effective short-term success in this area can lead to partial loss of support from an electorate that does not like sacrifices.

Although divided into distinct periods (tsarist, Soviet, Russian), the Russian politics of memory has a number of common features and can, therefore, be discussed in a single study. These features are: comparable territory; European-Asian civilizational rupture; centralised, vertical model without control of the formal or informal executive power (party); the lack of democratic institutions; the extensive system of control and supervision over society; the low average level of education; comparable mechanisms of mythologisation of the past; combatting any tendency for critical approaches to the historical content imposed by the authorities; as well as manipulation of both the inferiority complex felt by those living in a peripheral country and Great Russian megalomania.

Russian and Soviet politics of memory is similar. Its main goals have only slightly changed over time, depending on priorities. History has been treated as a tool: it has strengthened the myth of the nation, the leader and the anointed, as well as the myth of the leading social class in Engel’s mechanistic approach to the historical process. The politics of memory has consolidated society

by referring to common territory, major myths, the cult of the leader (tsar/dynasty, party secretary, president) or religion. In this way, the authorities have shaped social attitudes, relativized their crimes and errors and created desirable stereotypes. The politics of memory has been used as a tool to implement mainly temporary political and, to some extent, commercial objectives.

The chronological and argumentative structure of the narrative adopted in this work is intended to serve to make it mainly a reference textbook. The work is nonlinear, the chronologically earliest part is sketchy and the chapter devoted to the 21st century and contemporary Russia is the most elaborate. The conclusion is that today's Russian politics of memory differs little from the politics of memory pursued by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. While methods have changed, the goals have remained almost the same in many aspects. The side effect of these activities is also similar: history has been deprived of the features of science. It is no longer science as it is manipulated to produce a picture that is considered useful for strengthening power, diverting society's attention from its mistakes and omissions, creating the cult of the leader and depreciating political opposition and groups aspiring to power in the state and competitors in the international arena.

The aggressive Russian politics of memory – the policy of creating enemies, promoting nationalist sentiment to unite society around power – is an important tool for implementing the imperial aspirations of the modern Russian state.