

# „ჩვენ სხვა გამოსავალი არ გვაქონდა“, უნაღეს ისტორიული ნაწარმოების დაპირისპირება რუსეთის აგრესიის შედეგად

„WE HAD NO OTHER OPTIONS“, OR THE CLASH OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES  
BEHIND THE RUSSIAN INVASION IN UKRAINE

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## რეზიუმე

პუტინი უკრაინასთან ომს ისტორიული კანონზომიერებით ამართლებს – ის ამტკიცებს, რომ რუსეთსა და უკრაინას საერთო წარსული აქვს და რომ „რუსეთს სხვა გამოსავალი არ დაუტოვებს“: დღევანდელი პოლიტიკური ამოცანები განსაზღვრავს რუსეთის ხელისუფლების ისტორიულ დისკურსს: მისთვის დღეს ისტორია არის მტკიცებულება იმისა, რომ რუსეთის წარსული იყო გმირული და პატრიოტული; ის, რომ თანამედროვე რუსეთი არსებობს და მისი მოსახლეობა ცოცხალია, წარსულში გაღებული მსხვერპლის შედეგია. წინამდებარე ესეში რუსი ისტორიკოსი, ივან კურილა განიხილავს ისტორიის მიმართ მსგავსი დამოკიდებულების მეთოდოლოგიურ პრობლემას.

კურილა იმას არ ამტკიცებს, რომ ისტორიული მოვლენები 21-ე საუკუნეში მნიშვნელობას კარგავს. მაგალითისთვის მას მოჰყავს აშშ, სადაც გასული წლების საზოგადოებრივი პროტესტების შედეგად, არაერთი ისტორიული მონუმენტი განადგურდა. თუმცა, მისი აზრით, რუსეთისა და აშშ-ის შემთხვევებს შორის არსებითი განსხვავება ხელისუფლების როლში მდგომარეობს: აშშ-ში მონუმენტები აქტივისტებმა გაანადგურეს, ხოლო რუსეთის ხელისუფლებას ისტორიის ინტერპრეტაციაზე აქვს მონოპოლია დაწესებული და საზოგადოების ჩართულობა მინიმალურია.

ავტორის აზრით, მეთოდოლოგიური პრობლემაც სწორედ ამაში მდგომარეობს: 21-ე საუკუნეში ისტორია, როგორც სამეცნიერო დისციპლინა არის წარსულსა და აწმყოს შორის დიალოგის საშუალება და არა მონოლოგი ან წარსული ფაქტების მშრალი აღწერა. პრობლემაა, როდესაც დიალოგის ამ კომპლექსურ პროცესში წამყვანი როლი სახელმწიფოს უკავია და სხვადასხვა საზოგადოებრივ ჯგუფს ისტორიის ინტერპრეტაციის შესაძლებლობა არ ეძლევა.

კურილას მიაჩნია, რომ პუტინი ამას ორი მიზეზით აკეთებს: 1) გაამართლოს უკრაინასთან ომი და 2) საკუთარი კონტრიბუცია შეიტანოს ისტორიის სახელმძღვანელოებში,

„ჩვენ სხვა გამოსავალი არ გვექონდა“, ანუ ისტორიული ნარატივების დაპირისპირება რუსეთის უკრაინაში შეჭრის თაობაზე

რომლებიც მომავალში შეიქმნება. ის ცდილობს, ისტორიაში შევიდეს პეტრე I-ის მსგავსად, რომელმაც რუსეთს ტერიტორიები შეუერთა. სტალინსაც აქვს მსგავსი დამსახურება, თუმცა პუტინს მასთან საკუთარი თავის გაიგივება არ სურს. მიუხედავად დიდი მცდელობისა, კურილას აზრით, პუტინი „ისტორიულ ენას“ ბოლომდე ვერ აკონტროლებს, რადგან რუსეთში ომის მხარდამჭერ აქციებზე საბჭოთა დროშები და სიმბოლიკა უფრო შეიმჩნევა, ვიდრე რაიმე სხვა.

აქედან გამომდინარე, ესეის მიხედვით, გარდა იმისა, რომ ისტორიის ინტერპრეტაციაზე მონოპოლია და სწორხაზოვანი შეფასება 21-ე საუკუნეში მეთოდოლოგიურად გაუმართლებელია, ის ასევე ერს თვითგამორკვევის შესაძლებლობას უკარგავს. დღევანდელ რუსეთში არ არსებობს პასუხი შეკითხვაზე „ვინ ვართ ჩვენ?“ თუ, საბჭოთა კავშირის დაშლის შემდეგ, 1990-იან წლებში ამ შეკითხვაზე მეტ-ნაკლებად გაეცა პასუხი, ეს დღევანდელი რუსეთისთვის არარელევანტურია. შესაბამისად, ხალხი, რომელიც წითელ დროშებს აფრიალებს, თავის იდენტობას საბჭოთა პერიოდს უკავშირებს. ისინი სწორედ ამას მიიჩნევენ რელევანტურად – რადგან ჩვენ არ ვართ რუსი დემოკრატები, მაშასადამე, ჩვენ საბჭოთა ადამიანები ვართ.

In 2021, Russia's President Vladimir Putin published an article on the “historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”<sup>1</sup>. On the eve of February 24, 2022, he again lectured the world about his view on the history of Ukraine and Russian-Ukrainian relations that, presumably, explained his decision to invade a neighbouring country. For many weeks in Spring, the billboards were mounted in Russian cities with an exclamation, “We were left with no other choice!” This essay discusses the methodological problems with this view on our relations to history.

Almost any government, in one way or another, refers to the past. This has been going on since at least the emergence of nation-states. As a modern academic discipline and research field, history took its shape simultaneously with the emergence of nation-states. For a long time, historians worked for the state-building.

The first great Russian historian Nikolai Karamzin even received the official title of court historiographer and wrote his *History of the Russian State*, embodying the idea of creating a modern nation and a modern state. Similar things happened in almost all countries. The state considered the history of being part of the glue that keeps different people together into a single nation and subordinates this nation to the state.

However, much has changed in 200 years since Karamzin's writings. Today we see how history functions differently in various countries and what conflicts arise in the past - this shows where the relationship between the state and society has gone in these countries. In most cases, the state and society, sometimes only society, need to be aware of the past and how to look at the past.

There was a significant social and protest movement in the USA in 2017, and again, with BLM in 2020, that took down monuments. America seemed to be the last country to turn to the past. The USA seems to be oriented on the future, built on ideals and ideas from the future, not from the past. However, it turned out that there was someone to demolish the monuments. There is someone to argue about the past.

1    Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев». Kremlin.ru, 12 июля, 2021. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (21.01.2023)

The American and Russian examples differ precisely with the state's role. In the US, the monuments are demolished and protected by activists, local communities or local authorities, but not by the federal government. In Russia, disputes over the past usually start from the very top. The state offers or imposes something, and society either accepts or tries to resist. But as a rule, our society has few forces.

The Russian state uses history in the same way as it was used in the era of the formation of national states. From history, from the past, it extracts examples that allow Russian politicians to speak with modern society in the past language. Who was the hero, and who was the traitor? We need clear black-and-white examples. Moreover, these examples should illustrate such a past, which inevitably led to the present day. Today should be the culmination of the entire thousand-year development of the country. Moreover, today must be justified by the past that preceded it.

Therefore, the past must, first of all, be heroic. Sacrifices could have been made on the altar of a brighter future in which we all live. Furthermore, everything should be clear: who was an enemy, who was a friend, who should be heroized, and who should not.

This is where the problem arises. Because today, in the 21st century, history as a research and scholarship is a dialogue between the present and the past, between today and the past. This is not the same as a monologue description of the past, as, for example, in Karamzin's book. Since this is a dialogue, it can be conducted on behalf of today, not only by the state but also by any social group or region of the vast country.

It turns out that each of these groups has questions about the past and is focused on the past. They pull out different things from the same past. The same character may be a hero for someone, and a traitor, an executioner for someone else. This is where conflicts arise because the state wants unambiguity and this past to be unambiguously used. The state wants to take each figure in the past as a symbol of one thing: heroism, betrayal or self-sacrifice.

When there are many questions, any person from the past appears in a different light and turns out to be ambiguous. This ambiguity is disturbing and creates problems for the state using this past. When Dmitry Medvedev was president of the Russian Federation, he said what many in the Kremlin thought: "After such a fairly clear position, which historians adhered to in the Soviet period, history began to fall apart"; and he went on: "Let scholars write what they want, but textbooks, public media should still adhere to the generally accepted point of view on such events".<sup>2</sup>

Politicians need a simple and unambiguous story that can explain their current behaviour and today's decisions. From a historian's point of view, there is an inverse relationship. Politicians always want to say that they have no other choice because that is the history behind their decisions, but the reality is different. The politician takes some action, decides on something - and then pulls up the past in that convenient configuration that allows him to say that his decision is the only possible one. In fact, today's decision determines a particular politician's history, not vice versa. History can be addressed from multiple positions, but politicians pull up what they need from this multiplicity.

We can say that Putin did not make his decision to attack Ukraine on February 24 but was preparing for it for some time. Furthermore, this decision and concrete steps matured simultaneously with the historical justification.

2 Встреча с пенсионерами и ветеранами. Kremlin.ru, 17 ноября 2011 года. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/13555> (21.01.2023)

It would be an oversimplification to claim that a person sits down and deliberately manipulates the past. Maybe such situations happen, but people more often sincerely believe that the story that makes them feel right in their actions today is the only one possible. As a rule, this means that a person does not have a primary humanitarian education, and is ignorant of the modern understanding of how the past and the language influence our thinking. It seems to a politician that the past, which best justifies his current determination, is the only possible one. Everything else is a falsification or “enemies invented it”.

So, I do not claim that Putin is consciously manipulating history. Perhaps he sincerely believes that the story he told us on the eve of February 24 is the most correct or even the only correct story and that it unties his hands.

However, the way he came to this version of history, and his decision, which he carried out on February 24, are interconnected. Something was forming in his mind, and the story was pulled up to fit the decisions that were ripening on their own. I am sure the past did not dictate these political decisions; this is not how it works. It is untrue that nothing would have happened if he had been told about a different picture of the past. In my opinion, this is not true at all.

We can recall that Stolypin was once among such models that Putin was guided by. That is, a reformer: “We do not need great upheavals. We need a great Russia.” Now, this is forgotten, and we needed upheavals more than great Russia. This year, what is happening is precisely the opposite of what Putin propagated with quotes from Stolypin 15 years ago. At one time, Putin was compared to Franklin Roosevelt and liked it. True, these were moments when relations with the United States were much better than they are now. There was a time when his speeches were devoted to medieval history: remember Prince Vladimir, who baptized Rus’.

In the speech we heard in February, everything was just about the 20th century, about Lenin and the Soviet Union. However, by the summer of 2022, the historical justification of the war has changed. We heard about Peter I as a role model for Putin’s decision.

Our textbooks depict Peter as a person who solved the historical problems of Russian statehood. For example, as everyone crammed for exams, he solved the problem of access to the sea. In June, Putin voiced almost the same opinion, who claimed he was solving similar problems. He transferred Peter into the 21st century completely “without seams” and continued to solve problems that were not fully resolved 300 years ago<sup>3</sup>.

Several years ago, my colleague Evgeny Viktorovich Anisimov wrote the book “Peter the Great: good or bad for Russia?” Two views on Peter in that book contrasted, positive and negative. Each chapter examines what was positive in his legacy and what was harmful. There is a lot of both. For me, it is essential what today Putin chose from Peter’s legacy. So, according to this latest speech, Peter was solving the problem of returning the lands and access to the seas.

Nevertheless, we honoured Peter for a long time because he opened “a window to Europe” and made Russia a European state. That is, you can choose completely different things from the legacy of Peter. Now it seems we are closing this window, which he cut through, and Russia no longer wants to be a European power. That is, you can choose convenient parts of the past and forget about inconvenient ones.

3 Путин сравнил себя с Петром I и назвал своей задачей возвращение территорий. BBC.com , 9 июня 2022  
<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-61749842> (21.01.2023)

This is an excellent example of how our relationships with the past work. The past is always multi-dimensional and multi-valued. We can draw some lessons from almost any era, from almost any great personality in the past, and any Russian ruler, confirming quite different points of view. Paul Valéry used to say that history does not teach anyone anything because history has examples of everything, and it confirms everything. We choose what seems to us more suitable here. Concerning Peter, one could choose Europeanization, but Putin now prefers expansion.

The person who puts questions about the past, a historian or a politician, represents some group. He can ask these questions on behalf of the state, as it used to be, he can ask them on behalf of some minorities, and he can write history on behalf of the oppressed. American historian Howard Zinn's volume *A People's History of the United States* is very popular in America. There, the history of the United States is written from the point of view of those oppressed at each stage of the historical past. From the point of view of the slaves, from the point of view of the Irish settlers, from the point of view of the workers whose strikes were suppressed, and so on. This is also a possible history. This view does not make the history of the state "wrong", but it does make it just one of the histories.

So, it is necessary to study history in such a way that both the history of the state and those who suffered from it are visible. Both the history of the majority and the history of the minorities. The history of the dominant ethnic group and those whom this ethnic group suppressed. If, in some future, in school or university textbooks, these descriptions of the past made from different points of view would appear, then perhaps, there would be fewer conflicts. Conflicts often come from the fact that it is difficult for a person to accept the possibility that his opponent, who tells some opposite things, may also be suitable. In such disputes, sometimes it is impossible to find the truth that would reconcile you, and you must be able to live with the fact that your neighbour, friend, or partner has a different view on some things, and such a view has the right to exist.

History should teach this because things that seem mutually exclusive must coexist in the modern world. We should not strive for the victory of our view at any cost over all other views. At the same time, we should not give away our views, accepting the views of a neighbour - this is not the goal. The purpose of studying history is to understand the possibility of diversity.

You can also go into the past and talk about the XIX century, about Alexander II. Alternatively, remember general Paskevich from a Russian textbook. He was the general mentioned in our textbooks as the man who suppressed the uprising of the Hungarians in 1849. Nicholas I sent a Russian army corps to crush the revolution in Hungary in 1849. General Paskevich did it; of course, he is poorly remembered in Hungary. And in our textbooks, especially those written in the Soviet era, he appears as a cruel suppressor of this uprising. And then you come somewhere in Armenia, to Yerevan, and you see Paskevich is a very positive hero there. His full title is Prince Paskevich-Erivansky because he once liberated Yerevan from Persia. The same person turns the other way. And again: one does not destroy the other. We are not judges of the Last Judgement, to weigh a person and decide where he is going after all - to hell or heaven.

This is all the more true if we are not talking about an individual but about large historical configurations of events and institutions. Here all the complexity in one chapter of the textbook will not fit. Write one chapter from the point of view of those who created these institutions, and in another chapter write the opinion of those who suffered from these institutions. And then, it will be two views, three-dimensional views. You will never reconcile them but look at both.



About the history of ordinary people - I mentioned Howard Zinn. “People’s History of the United States” is an attempt to write a history not of the state but of those who suffered. Russia has its examples. At one conference, I was asked just about Stalin and Peter. They said: “But under Peter, many people also died, whom he attracted for his great construction projects. St. Petersburg was built - how many people died? But we do not remember this; we remember him as a great reformer. Maybe this will happen to Stalin too? I then had a spontaneous answer, which I still consider correct. The difference here is that we do not have the voices of those who died under Peter I. These were peasants, of whom nothing remained except perhaps some demographic statistics. And the people who lived in Stalin’s time were literate, and we have the voices of many who died; their loved ones, protocols, and state machine documents have also been preserved. Therefore, these voices can no longer be excluded. We hear the voices of those affected, and we can see history through their eyes. We cannot see history through the eyes of those peasants who were sent to build St. Petersburg; we can only guess.

What historians do is not just facts. But the request is for a coherent story. What came from what. And when historians say that everything is more complicated, that we see this causal relationship differently every day, they become of no interest to the general public. Because people still need coherent narratives. This is a big problem in understanding our relationship with the past, our interaction with the past, and what historians do.

Maybe the problem is that our historians are not public figures. There is France, where historians, starting from the 19th century, have occupied prominent places in public life in all debates. A historian in France is always a person who is in the public eye. Some comments or books he prints are not published for a narrow circle of colleagues. This is not a monograph for a few dozen readers who will understand, it is always a book read by the whole of educated France. And this is not at all what we have.

Maybe we can turn to this too. Considering the state’s efforts to ensure that history enters every person’s life, perhaps historians will someday be listened to. But not yet.

In a sense, our Free Historical Society, created in 2014 and suspended its activities this year, aimed to reach people. And many publishing houses, not only NLO, began to turn to historians. Such a historical turn is taking place before our eyes, and it comes not only from the Kremlin and publishers who respond to the readers’ demand. Another thing is that, apart from professional historians, various publicists rushed into this niche without asking, trying to fill this interest with their creativity.

Some ten years ago, I noted a difference between how Yeltsin talked to historians and how Putin talks. Yeltsin gathered historians and asked, “Well, tell us what they will write about us in the history textbook?” And Putin gathers historians from time to time and does not ask but tries to tell them what to write in textbooks. He is trying to construct, to form, the past or the present, which will become the past. It seems that he does not believe in the future, which itself will make a judgement on us.

And only what began to happen this year made me think that Putin was thinking about his contribution to history, about what will be in the textbooks. His idea of what is included in textbooks is a “Karamzin” story. Whoever expanded the country, well done. Peter expanded the country - well done. Stalin also expanded the country, although, as I understand it, Putin does not really like Stalin, or he fears him as an example. But the expansion of the country is such a critical moment for him.

By the way, let us look at Stalin’s presence in contemporary Russia. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, especially at the beginning of 2015, a wave of re-Stalinization took place throughout the country. Monuments to Stalin began to be erected, and somewhere even the streets began to be

renamed after him. I attributed this to the historical framework in which President Putin explained that the annexation of Crimea did not work. That is, people did not understand how sacred Chersonese and the baptism of Prince Vladimir are connected with the fact that we annexed Crimea today. However, the history of the Soviet Union, which was expanding all the time, is much more apparent to people. Here the USSR, under Stalin, all the time annexed some new lands. And re-Stalinization began, which symbolically sank the country at a time when it was also growing.

Then that re-Stalinization was suspended. At the end of 2015, the project of a monument and a law on commemorating victims of political repression was revived. The monument was erected - and that was a clear signal to stop restalinization. And we saw that in 2022, with the outbreak of hostilities, Stalin did not appear anywhere in public spaces, oddly enough. That ban of 2015 is significantly strictly observed, it was then felt and understood. But the flags of the Soviet Union began to appear: both the “grandmother with the flag” and Lenin were being restored in Ukrainian cities taken by the Russian military. That is, the idea is the same: what is happening is falling back to the Soviet Union in the middle of the 20th century. Putin did not say this, he would rather say that it was to Peter that they failed. But Peter myth works worth than the recent past that dominates this rating system. I went to the Immortal Regiment this year and looked at the flow of people. There was a huge number of people with the flags of the USSR, some in t-shirts “Born in the USSR”. In 2022, the framing of the war again used the Soviet Union as a model. For many people, for activists who support it, it is really the restoration of the USSR, no matter how much Putin tries to say something else. Because the picture of the past that Putin is delivering to us does not really resonate with those activists, middle-level bosses, and regiment commanders who decide which flag to raise choose the USSR. If in 2014-2015 we saw that Stalin was pulled out instead of St. Vladimir, now we see not Peter the Great or the denazification of Ukraine, but the red flags being used. Putin still does not control the entire historical language.

He gave the go-ahead to the fact that we no longer live in that democratic Russia, as it was called before, that this is already some other country. But what is the other one? This is a matter of identity. We again wondered who we were. This question was when the Soviet Union collapsed. And who are “we”? It was challenging for the Russians to answer this question, unlike the inhabitants of any post-Soviet republic, because they quickly began to build their states. And it is not so apparent to Russians what Russia is as to those who have gained independence. The question “Who are we?” hung for a long time and was never satisfactorily resolved. And now we are stuck in it again.

Somebody managed to answer this question during the 1990s, but now it is clear that that answer is no longer relevant, and does not correspond to today’s Russia. And people who come out with a red flag find their identity in the Soviet Past. They see it as relevant today. Since we are no longer Russian democrats, then we are Soviet people and we are restoring the Soviet Union. The search for identity is a severe issue, and Putin understood this when he came to power. He started by trying to construct an identity in a complex way. He took the flag, anthem and state symbol from different eras. All this worked for a common identity, it seemed that Putin was looking for a compromise. Then it all collapsed 10 years ago, and now again in this wreckage, fragments, people find something for themselves. Somebody finds a red flag among the fragments and believes that this is his correct identity. Vladimir Putin himself found Peter the Great among these fragments. But I do not think Peter will be as famous throughout the country as Stalin.

Returning to the title of this essay, I would reiterate that there are always many options for political decision-making, and the past is not a one-dimensional corridor but a wide field of possibilities.

„ჩვენ სხვა გამოსავალი არ გვექონდა“, ანუ ისტორიული ნარატივების დაპირისპირება  
რუსეთის უკრაინაში შეჭრის თაობაზე

We are not confined to history and are not doomed to repeat the past at any new history turns. Let us think, talk and write about the past using new ideas and try to understand better the options that our predecessors or we missed at the critical historical crossroads.

We must try to develop a new language for what is happening in the 21st century. Explain what is happening now in a new language that does not use emotionally charged, morally connotated words from the past. Let us use some other language. Comparisons are indispensable, but these comparisons should not turn into labels we drag from the past. Empire, fascism, and even totalitarianism are old words from an old language of the last century.