

The Geopolitics of History in Latvian-Russian Relations. Ed. by NILS MUIŽNIEKS. Academic Press of the University of Latvia. Rīga 2011. 238 pp. ISBN 9789984453231.

“History is written by winners” is the quotation which comes first to my mind while reading the collection of analytical papers written by a number of Latvian social scientists and edited by Nils Muižnieks, a former NGO activist, former Minister for Social Integration Affairs of Latvia and current High Commissioner of Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

History has always been a part of politics and it continues to be a mighty weapon in the hands of a skilled user. Even more so, if history, historical facts, their interpretations, misperceptions or stereotypes are combined with modern media, the child of the latest information revolution. In democratic countries the politics as well as interpretation of history and its use in politics can be analysed and questioned by the public and the mass media. In authoritarian countries such a possibility is limited, even in the modern world of internet and information technologies. Therefore, in authoritarian countries history is frequently used to serve the regime to justify its existence and increase the loyalty of its people. Traditionally, governments and countries have always paid great attention to its information space, since no government can survive if it is unable to communicate its policies to its people as well as their neighbours and adversaries. History and its interpretations are an integral part of overt and covert media wars between people, governments, NGOs and even individuals. In recent years we have seen the rise of satellite TV stations such as “Al Jazeera” and “Russia Today” which communicate their message across the world. An important part of their content is devoted to politics and geopolitics, with history frequently used to legitimise their arguments.

The publication of Muižnieks’ book is both relevant and timely. The Baltic region, including Latvia, still today continues to be the battleground of ideas and perceptions, where history is used as a political tool to gain the support of the populations living in the geopolitically important and ethnically diverse region.

The book consists of two parts, where the first part analyses Russia’s historical narrative about Latvia, while the second part is devoted to the comparison of Latvian and Russian attitudes, perceptions, and statements vis-à-vis historical topics, political rituals and the use of history in international diplomatic and legal battles between Latvia and Russia. As the editor notes in his introduction, history and subjective memories and perceptions of historical events loom large on the agenda of Latvian-Russian bilateral relations. Latvian officials have often accused Russia of trying to “whitewash” the past of Soviet totalitarianism and Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries in 1940. In turn, the Kremlin and its official historians and ideologists have regularly accused their Latvian counterparts of “revising”

the history and “glorifying” Nazism. Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and restoration of Baltic independence, there still seems to be no clarity who won the battle and who has the right to write history. Are the winners those who represent the liberal democratic views or those standing for the rights of the Empire to strike back?

In the first part of the book, the interpretations of history in post-Soviet Russia is analysed from four perspectives. Kristine Doronenkova discusses the official Russian perspectives on the historical legacy. Vita Zelče analyses Latvia and the Baltic states in Russian historiography. Solvita Denisa-Liepniece scrutinizes Russia’s school textbooks which form the basis of political awareness in the young generation of Russians, shape their attitudes towards history and their neighbouring countries. Finally, Dmitrijs Petrenko analyses three Russian documentary films about Latvian history, revealing stereotypes and presenting a strong case about films as tools serving ideological aims and bearers of certain political values.

In the second part of the book, Klinta Ločmele, Olga Procevska, and Vita Zelče present an analysis of contemporary Russian political rituals in Russia and Latvia. Particular attention is devoted to the role and political transformation of the Soviet Victory Day on 9 May. Ojārs Skudra compares historical topics and concepts in two Latvian newspapers – *Diena*, a Latvian language newspaper, and *Vesti Segodnya*, a Russian language newspaper. The comparison clearly demonstrates how the historical topics presented for readers of different ethnic and linguistic groups can serve to support the political division based on ethnic origin and facilitate forming two mutually conflicting perceptions of the same historical facts.

Ivars Ijabs touches upon the issue of compensation for the losses caused by the illegal occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union, while Toms Ros-toks discusses the use of history in the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Last but not least, Nils Muižnieks analyses seven court cases at the European Court of Human Rights. The presented cases have at least one common feature – the role of history in the interpretation of these cases.

Regarding the methodology of the articles, in the introduction by Muižnieks, a considerable number of references on the contemporary analysis of the role of history in international relations are given. It sets a good prelude to the following studies of the Latvian situation in this area. Obviously, as editor, Muižnieks has a profound knowledge of the events and discourses in particular and the role of history in the Baltic region in general. All nine contributors have provided a great deal of instrumental information regarding the respective topics which until now was unavailable for non-Latvian speakers. There is vast information on school textbooks and their contents, various statistics, references to quantitative and qualitative sociological data. In the references one can find information on contemporary political theory and various policy and political analyses papers. In

general, these are concise, but academically and scientifically significant publications providing a solid basis for further discussions about the role of history in geopolitics in the Baltic region. The analytical papers are very timely and well-fitted in the context of the general academic research conducted on other historically controversial geopolitical regions.¹

In any case, it is difficult to imagine that the identity of respective populations would not be deeply influenced by history and its major events. It is also clear that history has a strong influence on contemporary and future political decisions and events. The major challenge is to find what the connection between the historical events and today's political decisions is, and make it obvious to academics, decision makers and the general public. This book on the geopolitics of history in Latvian-Russian Relations is a valuable contribution to such a task. Finally, it is obvious that one of the major historical conflicts that continues to determine Latvian-Russian relations is the interpretation of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries in 1940, where contemporary Russia continues to claim that it was anything else but occupation.

The collection of various analyses on the use of history, memories, and media in the political discourse of Latvian-Russian relations is the great strength of the book. It can be used as a case-study for many other regions and relations between countries with conflicting interpretations of their history. One might argue that our past continues to determine not only the present, but, to a great extent, also the future of politics and daily lives of people across the globe. There is no time-machine invented that would allow us to return to the past events in order to find out the one and only so-called "objective" truth about history. All we can do now is try to find some common ground how to use the history for the benefit of the "general good" instead of using different interpretations of the history to promote the interests of a particular group, nation, or regime. However, in the world of geopolitical struggles, for the time being, it remains wishful thinking.

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¹ Here, one must add, that the issues of identity, history, and politics are not a new area in the writings on political science. To mention just a few of them: ADRIAN HASTINGS: *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge 1997; ROGERS BRUBAKER: *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996; ANTHONY SMITH: *National Identity*, London 1991.