

RUSSIA'S VICTIM NARRATIVE

The case of the Winter War
and how rewriting WWII
history is used in an attempt
to break down the
European security order

Summary and Recommendations

- Unwilling to co-operate and achieve real progress and competitiveness on the global arena with peaceful means, Russia turns to history to create a bellicose heroic narrative suiting a great world power. Here the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945 assumes a central role. Great effort is being made to deny and obfuscate the role and plans of the Soviet Union as a partner of Nazi Germany to carve up Europe and start World War II.
- Russia's attempt to consolidate a Soviet interpretation of the history of the Winter War and the Soviet Union's cooperation with Hitler's Germany is discussed. The analysis draws heavily on Soviet and Russian deliberations in the late 1980s and 1990s. Attempts to re-interpret Stalin's allegedly limited and benign ambitions regarding Finland are rejected.
- Putin's long article in the National Interest Magazine in June 2020 is a fierce apology of Soviet actions prior to World War II and of having carried the major burden in defeating Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945. It also states Russia's contemporary ambitions to assume the same role as the victorious powers of World War II did and again create a stable new world order together with the other major UNSC Permanent Five nations, with special responsibilities and spheres of interest.
- The Russian attempts to get universal recognition for a Soviet interpretation of the history of World War II should be rejected. A new world order, which dismisses the principles of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and the profound co-operative achievements in CSCE/OSCE during the 1990s, is contrary to the interests and values of Western societies. The rights of sovereign states, as stated in the Paris Charter for a New Europe (1990) and the Istanbul Document (1999), must be upheld.



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Introduction - The Winter War Legacy

The Winter War is sometimes characterized as Finland's footnote to World War II. For a small country, such resistance was not particularly common but Finland's – as it was thought – I hopeless struggle for survival was then the subject of broad international marvel. Winston Churchill lyrically expressed himself during the war in his radio speech on January 20, 1940:¹

“Only Finland – superb, nay, sublime – in the jaws of peril – Finland shows what free men can do.”

He added: “We cannot tell what the fate of Finland may be, but no more mournful spectacle could be presented to what is left to civilized mankind than that this splendid Northern race should be at last worn down and reduced to servitude worse than death by the dull brutish force of overwhelming numbers.”

Fortunately, things did not work out quite that way. Finland's free men and women prevented it, with the aid of significant luck. The Winter War struggle for survival became a kind of rear-guard battle which the Finnish army and the home front managed to maintain just long enough to avoid ultimate disaster. The legacy of the Winter War is Finland's business card in the world.

The 80th anniversary of the Winter War again sparked a public debate in Finland about the causes of the war. Now it was asked if the Finnish government acted properly and if it could even have avoided the war. In this context, the works of American historian, Professor Stephen Kotkin, famous Stalin researcher and interpreter, was particularly highlighted. With the so-called “newest research” as a backing, Kotkin expressed that the war could indeed have

1 Winston Churchill, “The War Situation: House Of Many Mansions”, *International Churchill Society*.

been avoided since Stalin's objectives were limited and only concerned how to ascertain Leningrad's security.² In this view, the Finnish government's unbending attitude led to a poor result for Finland.

That interpretation is not supported at all in “older” research. The “newest” historical research should, of course, be taken seriously and should be assessed, but its scientific

value is not linked to how fresh the results are but how its validity stands in relation to previous research. As a scientific discipline history is not exact science, such as physics, where individual geniuses like Newton or Einstein could change the worldview with their revolutionary theories. Special

knowledge about Finland is not one of Kotkin's particular strengths, and for that reason alone he cannot be considered an authoritative Winter War expert.

The Internal Soviet Struggle about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement

The question of what position to take about the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement became a hot domestic political issue in the USSR in 1989. In July of the previous year, Gorbachev himself reiterated in Poland the old Soviet position that Stalin's and Hitler's settlement was necessary.³

The Soviet Union's long-time Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who at the beginning of his career was Molotov's

2 Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Vol. II, Waiting for Hitler 1929–1941* (Penguin Books, London, 2017), pp. 703–761. Kotkin develops his thoughts about Stalin's aims particularly in Chapter 12, Smashed Pig.

3 Harry Järv, *Oavgjort i två krig* (Draw in two wars) - Finland - Soviet Union 1939–1944, Samfundet Sverige-Finland (Infomanager Förlag Jan Linder, Stockholm 2006), p. 40.



“There was no doubt about the existence of the secret supplementary protocol.”

assistant, expressed his views on the secret additional protocol in an interview for *Der Spiegel* on 24 April 1989. He sharply contested the existence of the secret additional protocol. He claimed that he had never heard any Soviet diplomat mention such a document. After the war, Molotov had pointed out to Gromyko that no documents concerning his negotiations with Ribbentrop in 1939 should be acknowledged except for those officially published.

However, the war historian, Colonel General Dmitry Volkogonov, noted in October 1992 that there was watertight evidence that Gromyko and an unnamed Deputy Foreign Minister had seen the secret documents in 1975, as well as Gorbachev's assistant, Valery Boldin, in 1987. Gromyko did not speak the truth to *Der Spiegel's* editors.⁴

Let's go back to 1989. The debate in the Soviet Union gathered speed in the spring and summer of 1989, when Estonian professor Endel Lippmaa proposed to the sitting People's Congress on 1 June that a commission be formed to investigate the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement and its secret additional protocol. Gorbachev, who was under strong pressure from several directions, raised some objections but accepted the proposal approved by the People's Congress. Gorbachev's close associate Aleksandr Yakovlev, known as the architect of the president's *perestroika* reform programme, was elected Chairman of the Commission.

A number of influential officials in turn then testified to the existence of the secret additional protocol. A copy was published in the weekly newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* in

4 Michael Collins, “Russia releases original Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts”, *UPI Archives*, 29 Oct. 1992.

August 1989. For a long time, it had been claimed to be a forgery since the original document had not yet been found.⁵

Historian Lev Besymensky finally found a copy in the Foreign Ministry archive. Referring to Besymensky, Yakovlev too announced in *Pravda* on 18 August 1989 that “*there was no doubt about the existence of the secret supplementary protocol*”. Molotov's meticulous archivist, Vasily Panin, had filed the document in 1939 and also made three copies identical to the contents of the microfilm stored in Bonn, Germany.⁶

At the end of October 1992, it was reported that the originals of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement and its additional protocols had been found in the CPSU archive.⁷ According to Volkogonov, there were a total of nine documents. However, it is likely that Gorbachev handed them over to Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 23 December 1991, two days before the change of power and his own departure. When Gorbachev handed over the dossier, which also plausibly contained other sensitive documents, to Yeltsin, he stated:

*“I am afraid they can lead to international complications. However, it is up to you to decide.”*⁸

5 Harry Järv, “Vinterkriget: Attitydförändringen i Sovjetunionen”, *The Winter War: The Change of Attitude in the Soviet Union*, 1 (Fenix – Tidskrift för humanism, 1989), pp. 3-11.

6 Op cit., Harry Järv, see note 3, pp. 41-47.

7 “Archives Yield Soviet-German Pact”, *The New York Times*, 30 October 1992.

8 Wojciech Matierski, in *Katyn - A Crime without Punishment*, Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia S. Lebedeva and Wojciech Matierski, eds. (Yale University Press, Yale, 2007), p. 254.



Yakovlev presented the Commission's findings on 23 and 24 December 1989.⁹ The investigation had not been easy. The non-aggression agreement itself was uncontroversial. By contrast, Stalin's "main motive was not the treaty itself, but the provisions of the secret protocols: the opportunity to move Soviet troops into the Baltic States, Poland, Bessarabia and potentially even Finland. In other words, the main motive for the treaty was imperialist ambition. [...] Dividing the prey with the predator, Stalin began to issue ultimatums and threats against neighboring countries, especially the small nations. He brought Bessarabia into the USSR and restored [sic] Soviet power in the Baltic states in the manner of a great power. All of this distorted Soviet politics and national ethos".¹⁰

The following day, Yakovlev made a summary at the session of the People's Congress and concluded his speech as follows:

"We are drawing a clear line between the non-aggression treaty, which was legitimate and justified, and the protocol that was immoral, unacceptable, and fails to comply with socialist values. The

"Dividing the prey with the predator, Stalin began to issue ultimatums and threats against neighboring countries, especially the small nations."

9 А. Н. Яковлев, Сообщение комиссии по политической и правовой оценке советско-германского договора о ненападении от 1939 года (Доклад председателя комиссии А. Н. Яковлева 23 декабря 1989 года на II Съезде народных депутатов СССР), Report of the Commission for the Political and Legal Assessment of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, presented by the Chairman of the Commission A. N. Yakovlev on 23 December 1989 at the II Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, Pravda, 24 December 1989.

10 Heiki Lindpere, ed., *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: Challenging Soviet History*, The Foreign Policy Institute (Tallinn, 2009), Appendix 16. The book provides detailed information of how Yakovlev's Commission dealt with this issue.

theory of relativity was a great breakthrough in our understanding of the laws of physics, but there is no relativity in the sphere of ethics. We have an obligation to maintain firm and sound criteria in making ethical judgements. It is time that we admit that criminal activity is unacceptable not only because of its effect, but also because it distorts minds and creates a situation in which opportunism and the absence of ethical considerations become normal.

Comrade People's Deputies, regardless of what we decide, this will be not only a political decision, but also a moral one".¹¹

The Soviet People's Congress annulled the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement and its Additional Protocols with the

votes 1432–252 on Christmas Eve 1989. After that, Yakovlev no longer belonged to Gorbachev's closest circle and he was sharply criticized by both conservatives and extreme nationalists.

Winter War Research seen with Russian and Finnish Eyes

From a Finnish perspective, Professor Mikhail I. Semiryaga's article 'The Un-famous War (Neznamenitaya voina)' in the magazine *Ogonek* in May 1989 was groundbreaking.¹² In it, Semiryaga challenged Soviet notions then prevalent that the war was nothing but a limited border conflict. According to Semiryaga's information, the Red Army's forces against Finland had

11 А. Н. Яковлев, "Выступление А. Н. Яковлева 24 декабря 1989 года на Съезде народных депутатов СССР" (A. N. Yakovlev's speech on 24 December 1989 at the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR), *Izvestiya*, 25 December 1989, *ibid*, Appendix 18.

12 Михаил И. Семиряга: "Незнаменитая война" (The un-famous war), *Огонёк*, No 22, Май 1989,.



increased in March 1940 to more than 50 divisions and a few dozen brigades. When manpower of the other branches of the Armed Forces were included, the Soviet forces' total strength was 960,000 men.

The questions regarding the Winter War have been thoroughly investigated for decades in both Finland and the Soviet Union/Russia, and they have returned to the fore at least once a decade. Half a century after the signing of Hitler's and Stalin's Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement and the start of the Winter War came the first clear signs in the Soviet Union that the country's role and share as instigator of the great war we call World War II began to be treated objectively.

Colonel General Volkogonov – also the author of a biography of Stalin – told the newly revealed, but still unofficial truth about the Winter War to senior Finnish diplomat Max Jakobson in January 1989:

*"Stalin was guilty. He alone decided to start the war without caring about the objections of the marshals."*¹³

The general was also sure that Beria was guilty of the Mainila Shots, the staged provocation a few days before the war. According to Professor Ohto Manninen, it is likely that an NKVD unit headed by Major Pavel I. Okunev conducted the artillery barrage.¹⁴

Later that year, Gorbachev's assistants tried to get their chief to acknowledge the Soviet Union's debt as the instigator of the Winter War and to visit the Hietaniemi War Memorial in Helsinki, but neither took place because of the resistance by conservatives. Instead, he honoured Lenin's

13 Jaakko Blomberg, *Vakauden kaipuu – Kylmän sodan loppu ja Suomi* (The longing for stability – the end of the Cold War and Finland), (WSOY, Helsinki, 2011), p. 137.

14 Ohto Manninen, "Uutisia historiasta" (News from history), *Sotilasaikakauslehti*, 3 (2001).

"Beria was guilty of the Mainila Shots, the staged provocation a few days before the war."

memory at a building in Hakaniemi, Helsinki, where the Revolutionary leader had lived for a while in 1917.¹⁵

On 13 September 1995, the influential Russian newspaper *Rodina* (Fatherland) organized a roundtable seminar on the Winter War in Moscow. In addition to journalists, prominent Russian and Finnish historians and diplomats also participated.¹⁶

Perhaps most interesting in this "peaceful" discussion was how some of the Russian historians, such as Professor Semiryaga and the historian Pavel Aptekar (b.1968) at the Russian State War Archives, expressed opinions that were very similar to traditional Finnish beliefs and how they clashed with history professors such as Nikolai Baryshnikov and his son Vladimir Baryshnikov from St. Petersburg and Vladimir Fyodorov representing the Russia-Finland Friendship Society. The latter mostly expressed traditional Stalinist Soviet views.

Regarding the issue of the Soviet objectives in Finland, Professor Semiryaga stated that the Soviet Union intended *"to integrate all of Finland with the Soviet Union. The talk of moving the border 35 or 25 kilometers from Leningrad is pointless. Specialists who know the material from the archives cannot take seriously the suggestion of moving the border to protect Leningrad that was discussed during the negotiations. We know that the orders for the first day of the war clearly outlined when to take Viipuri, when to raise the red flag over the Finnish parliament, when to reach the Swedish border. There*

15 Op cit. Blomberg, see note 13.

16 Татьяна Максимова, Дмитрий Олейниковы: "Граниты финские, граниты вековые" (The Finnish granite, the age-old granite), *Родина* 12/1995, *Rodina* 12/1995.



were even instructions on how to behave with Swedish and Norwegian border guards. There are those who say that Stalin did not want war. Of course, just like any leader of any country making demands of its neighbors, he did not want war, he wanted results. And he would not have minded if the results could be achieved by peaceful means.”

Pavel Aptekar gave a detailed account of the military contingency plans and the force build-up along the Finnish border. He argued that: *“Hopes that the Soviet Union was willing to solve problems [with Finland] peacefully are only very weakly substantiated [...] If the Soviet Union really wanted to solve the problems in a peaceful way, why did they start transporting troops, army formations and tank brigades to the Finnish border as early as the summer of 1939?”*

For example, Aptekar mentioned the 168th Division that was set up in Vologda as well as some military units at the Estonian border: *“Overall, this was already the beginning of concentrating forces.”*

Russian diplomat Sergei Belyaev, who later served as a Minister Counsellor at the Russian Embassy in Helsinki, expressed his firm opinion that the Soviet Union's intention was to Sovietize Finland. Belyaev referred to Molotov's statement regarding the League of Nations' protest against the Soviet attack:

“The Soviet Union does not wage any war against the Finnish Republic, there is an agreement with the Finnish People's Republic, with the Kuusinen government (signed literally on the second day of the war). The old government has fled and abandoned the country to its fate. The Soviet troops are only assisting the aforementioned government in defeating White Finnish robber bands.”

Belyaev, who later assisted President Putin during numerous state visits, actively participated in the project in Suomussalmi to erect a memorial – Raatteen Portti (Raate Gate) – to honour the memory of the Finnish and Soviet

soldiers who fell during the Winter War. In the Soviet Union or in Russia, there are no memorials to soldiers who fell in that war.

Belyaev also drew attention to the question of why the Soviet Union selected Suomussalmi as a strategic thrust direction for the Red Army operations:

“The military justification is clear: It [Suomussalmi] is located where Finland is narrowest, and the 163rd Division had been assigned to cut the country in two halves. But Finnish historians point to another motive: this area was known for the poverty of its population and for its leftist sympathies. In addition to army units, there was also an NKVD independent regiment among the attacking forces. Its tasks included working with the locals. During the 2–3 weeks spent by the Soviet troops in these

municipalities, they formed committees and held meetings – cells were created, and while they were not yet Soviet or socialist, they were cells of “popular” power. This shows that attempts were made to Sovietize Finland.”

“Attempts were made to Sovietize Finland.”

Russian researchers have later reached similar conclusions. Historian Tatiana S. Bushueva summarizes the following in her article “Talvisotaa koskeva venäläinen historian kirjoitus” (Russian historical writings about the Winter War) included in the 2009 book *Tuntematon talvisota – Neuvostoliiton salaisen poliisin kansiot* (The Unknown Winter War - The Soviet Secret Police files) by Professor Timo Vihavainen and Academician Andrei Sakharov:

“However, all Russian researchers are in fair agreement that the Soviet government intended to incorporate Finland and to make the country a socialist republic or a Soviet Republic



in order to secure Leningrad and strengthen its northwestern border.”¹⁷

In the same book, Russian historians reported in more detail on the results they had reached in the 2000s regarding the Red Army Alliances needed for Finland's Sovietization and their goals. Historian Lyudmila P. Kolodnikova refers to the Soviet leaders' own statements. “*The attack [on November 30, 1939] began [on the Karelian Isthmus] with a devastating firestorm from our artillery. The opponent's area became one big fire*”, Red Army chief political officer Lev Mekhlis later recalled. Stalin demanded that the troops be ready to launch the main attack in the direction of Vyborg on 14 December at 9 a.m. “*The most important task of the operation is to beat the opponent thoroughly and to conquer Vyborg*”, was the order issued by Stalin, Voroshilov and Shaposhnikov.¹⁸

But this was still only Stalin's official, allegedly “limited” goal. Kolodnikova:

“The task of the Red Army was to annihilate the opponent on the Karelian Isthmus and north of Ladoga in 8-10 days and to prepare for the attack against Helsinki and the entire country's occupation. Leningrad's military district council was fully convinced that [...] the troops honorably fulfilled their sacred duty to the motherland, totally destroying the White Finnish

17 Tatiana S. Bushueva, “Talvisotaa koskeva venäläinen historian kirjoitus” (Russian historical writings about the Winter War), in Timo Vihavainen and Andrei Sakharov, eds., *Tunteaton talvisota – Neuvostoliiton salaisen poliisin kansiot* (The Unknown Winter War - The Soviet Secret Police files), (Edita (Kleio), Helsinki, 2009), p. 58.

18 Lyudmila P. Kolodnikova, “Neuvostoliiton ja Suomen sota: Suurvaltojen ja pienten maiden politiikan erityispiirteitä” (The Soviet – Finnish War: Special features of big powers and small countries' policies), in *Ibid.*, p. 107.

“It seems that the mighty superpower wants to rob us of our independence.”

army and forever denying the warmongers entry to the Gulf of Finland and the city of Leningrad.”¹⁹

“We do not come to Finland as conquerors, but as the friends and liberators of the Finnish people from the yoke of the big landlords and capitalists. [...] We respect Finland's freedom and independence. Forward, the sons of the Soviet people, the Red Army warriors, Onwards to the enemy's total downfall”, wrote Leningrad Military District commander Meretskov and War Council member Zhdanov in their order of the day on 29 November 1939.²⁰

In reality, therefore, Stalin's allegedly “limited goals” stand out in stark contrast to the tasks his subordinates received, and the orders they issued, as well as against the background of what took place during the war itself. The information the Finns gathered during the war and by thorough research for several decades thereafter does not justify giving up long-standing perceptions built on solid foundations.

President of the Republic Kyösti Kallio stated in his radio address to the people on Independence Day on 6 December 1939:

“Now the whole world can see that this is not about Leningrad's security, as the offensive takes place along the entire long border from Petsamo to Rajajoki [ru. Сестра] and all the way to Hankoniemi (Hangö udd). [...] It seems that the mighty superpower wants to rob us of our independence, which [the

19 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

20 *Ibid.*



Soviet Union] *itself has recognized and thus everything that is precious and sacred to us.*"²¹

In assessing the objectives of the Soviet Union, the overall picture is central. In addition to the political negotiations between the Soviet Union and Finland, the plans of the Red Army and their execution must also be taken into account. Professor Kotkin's "newest research" addresses the latter question very sparingly. In this context, it is therefore worth highlighting older research: Finnish Colonel Matti Aarnio's classic work *Talvisodan ihme* (The Miracle of the Winter's War) contains a very good, detailed analysis of the Soviet railway network and its transport capacity and the problems that related to the troop concentrations.²²

Aarnio notes that the agreement with Germany in August 1939 came as a great relief to the Soviet Union. Already that spring, powerful measures had been taken to strengthen the implementation of the plans aimed at Finland, including increasing the personnel that were subordinate to the Leningrad Military District War Council. *"These measures were soon recognized at our eastern border",* wrote Aarnio. *"In early October [...] our [opponents] could also use such divisions and troops as were originally reserved for action elsewhere in the original plans."*

21 Martti Turtola, "Talvisodan tausta" (The Background to the Winter War), in Hannu Jauhiainen, ed., *Mikkeli – Talvisodan Päämajakaupunki* (Mikkeli – The town of the General Headquarters of the Winter War), (Savon Sotilasperinneyhdistys Porrassalmi, Mikkeli, 2011), p. 7.

22 Matti Aarnio, *Talvisodan ihme – Itärintaman venäläiskeskitykset ja suomalaisten torjuntavoitot* (The Wonder of the Winter War – The Russian troop concentrations on the front in the east and the Finnish defensive victories), (Gummerus, Helsinki, 1966), pp. 59-76.

The danger of a German attack had disappeared, but they had to act quickly in view of Germany's victorious war in Poland and its conquest. *"Thus, even before the war, a division, the 100th Division, was sent from the Kiev Military District to the Karelian Isthmus."*

The Soviet mobilization and the force build-up along the Finnish eastern border in the autumn of 1939 was already a huge logistical task in itself. *"The pressure and urgency caused by Hitler's attack in Poland didn't ease the task of executing the troop concentrations despite preparations already made."* Aarnio describes in detail the problems related to transport and their implementation and highlights the traffic congestion in the rail network of Russia. His conclusion is that *"the transport of troops (the force buildup) by rail to Finland's eastern border took three times longer than to the Karelian Isth-*

"The Soviet Union's intentions towards Finland were already clear months before the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement was concluded."

mus. If you take further into account the long march distances and [the weak] road connections from the Murmansk railway [i.e. the Kirov Railway] to the border, you will realize that it also extended the force buildup phase to our eastern border."

Adding to this, the fact that necessary supplies for the invasion of Finland had already been transported along the waterways and railways, *"all this shows that a firm decision of the march of the troops into Finland had been made long before the actual mobilization."*

Aarnio also fully acknowledges the Soviets: *"Taking into account the special circumstances in which the troop concentrations were carried out, it can be said that this extensive movement of forces in technically difficult circumstances was expertly executed. It points to the competence and high level of Red Army's high command and Railway authorities. [...] The transport of troops by railway was superbly planned, which is the best evidence that not only time was spent in the*



preparation, but also that highly competent people put a lot of effort into this.”

Colonel Aarnio’s analysis is solid. The *Rodina* magazine (12/1995) stated that concrete war preparations began as early as in June.²³ Then, for example, basic logistics centres for the troop transports were established. The Soviet Union’s intentions towards Finland were already clear months before the Molotov–Ribbentrop agreement was concluded. Marshal Kirill Meretskov, then commander of Leningrad’s military district, wrote in his memoirs:²⁴

“Stalin emphasized that serious moves can be expected from the German side already during the summer. Whatever they were, they would also affect Finland directly or indirectly. Therefore, there is reason to hurry.”

How these Soviet military preparations eventually had an impact on Finland, and what the Finnish High Command knew about them at the outbreak of the Winter War has been described

in detail by Finnish former chief of intelligence, Major General Raimo Heiskanen.²⁵ On 25 November 1939, five days before the Soviet attack, the Finnish intelligence had identified 7-8 Red Army divisions along the Finnish

23 Op cit. Maksimova and Oleinikov, see note 16.

24 Кирилл А Меретсков, На службе народу (In the service of the Fatherland), 1968. Marshal Meretskov writes about the war against Finland 1939–1940 in the chapter “Финская кампания” (The Finnish campaign).

25 Raimo Heiskanen, *Saadun tiedon mukaan ... - Päämajan johtama tiedustelu 1939 – 1945* (According to received information ... - The Intelligence operations led by the Finnish High Command 1939 – 1945), (Otava, Helsinki, 1989). In Chapter 3, “Tiedustelu ja sen tulokset syksyllä 1939”, Heiskanen writes about the intelligence collection and its results in the autumn of 1939, pp. 51-83.

eastern border from Pechenga to Salmi, the real number being 9–10 divisions, and eight divisions on the Karelian Isthmus. The real number there was nine according to Heiskanen.²⁶

Russia’s current attitude to World War II

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, historical research in Russia could be conducted in a fairly Western way for nearly two decades. In May 1994, President Yeltsin apologized to Finland for the Winter War as a crime against Finland. Unfortunately, in recent years, this position has changed.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s reform efforts did not produce the desired result. Russia was unable to compete successfully with the West or with rapidly growing China. According to two eminent Russia scholars, Professor Timothy Snyder of the United States and British analyst Keir Giles, it

“A national victim narrative was created, which derives its power from the past.”

was for that reason that the country’s leadership decided to apply a different strategy to regain and preserve its status as a superpower.²⁷ A national victim narrative was created, which derives its power from the past, and a narrative in which the country is forced to fight for its existence surrounded by malevolent opponents.

The Great Patriotic War became one of the pillars of self-image in Putin’s Russia. As Russia’s extreme nationalist former culture minister Vladimir Medinsky has indicated, the image of the Soviet Union’s glorious Red Army cannot

26 Ibid., Table 3, p. 70

27 Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe and America* (Penguin Random House, London, 2018), particularly chapters 3 and 4; Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules* (Chatham House, London, 2019), particularly chapters 2 and 3.



be allowed to be shattered.²⁸ Even fabricated myths are supposed to be generally accepted.²⁹

Russia reacted sharply to the resolution adopted by the European Parliament in September 2019 on the importance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement.³⁰ According to the EU resolution, the Soviet Union also bears

28 Владимир Мединский, "Будут жить 28 – Новое о подвиге героев-панфиловцев" (The 28 will live – New information regarding the deeds of Panfilov's heroes), *Российская газета*, 2 December 2018. An official Soviet investigation into the event, compiled in 1948, concluded that the story was the "invention" of a journalist from the Red Army's newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*. See, for example, Harry Bone, "Putin backs WW2 myth in new film", *BBC News*, 11 October 2016. "Mr Medinsky, the culture minister, defended Panfilov's 28 Men, saying "even if this story was invented from start to finish, if there had been no Panfilov, if there had been nothing, this is a sacred legend that shouldn't be interfered with. People that do that are filthy scum."

29 The famous tank battle of Prokhorovka on 12 July 1943 provides another clear example of grossly distorted military history. Two elite SS divisions were supposed to have been obliterated there and up to 300 German panzers crushed. British military historian, Dr Ben Wheatley, has charted the fate of every German fighting vehicle on that day to demonstrate that the battle was a disaster for Moscow. Archival evidence proves that all but five of the German tanks survived and were destroyed only in the following months. See Oliver Moody, "Battle of Prokhorovka: Russian tank victory of 1943 denied by British historian", *The Times*, 15 June 2020. The full study is Ben Wheatley, "A visual examination of the battle of Prokhorovka", *Journal of Intelligence History*, 18/2 (2019), pp. 115-163.

30 Cezary Lewanowich (Press officer), "Europe must remember its past to build its future", *European Parliament News*, 19 September 2019.

responsibility for starting World War II. President Putin described this position as "a shameless lie", according to German news agency DW.³¹ The Kremlin's official position had already been expressed earlier, in August by the head of the foreign intelligence service SVR, Sergey Naryshkin.³² Russia was said to have had no alternative but to conclude an agreement with Germany. Several well-known Russian politicians have directed the blame even on Poland itself.³³

In this way, Naryshkin struck the first notes of the Kremlin's counter-attack to eradicate the disastrous historical consequences of Hitler's and Stalin's agreements.³⁴ The news agency TASS formulated Russia's goal as follows on 31 January 2020:

*"Russia requires the OSCE to approve a resolution condemning the attempts to rewrite the history of World War II."*³⁵

Here, however, it is Russia which is conducting the historical revision and attempts to pressure others to also approve of the re-established Stalinist view of history. President Putin himself has used exceptionally harsh language

"Attempts to pressure others to also approve of the re-established Stalinist view of history."

31 "Vladimir Putin condemns EU stance on Nazi-Soviet WWII pact", *Deutsche Welle*, 11 December 2019.

32 Sergey Naryshkin, "There was NO other way", *RT*, 29 August 2019.

33 "Poland Started WWII: Russia Reacts to 80th Commemoration Snub", *The Moscow Times*, 2 September 2019.

34 "Disinfo: Poland is largely responsible for WWII", *EUvsDisinfo*, 6 February 2020.

35 "Russia to urge OSCE to sign declaration on fighting WWII revisionism", *TASS*, 31 January 2020.



on several occasions.³⁶ In December 2019 he gave a long speech at an informal meeting of nine CIS heads of state in St. Petersburg, which dealt with this issue specifically.³⁷

Prior to Russia's postponed 75th Victory Day parade in Moscow, which eventually took place on 24 June 2020, President Putin published a long article in the *National Interest*, which built on the aforementioned speech. There he stated Russia's current position on the subject.

The Russian president offered a comprehensive assessment of the legacy of World War II, arguing that “today, European politicians, and Polish leaders in particular, wish to sweep the Munich Betrayal [of 1938] under the carpet. The Munich Betrayal showed to the Soviet Union that the Western countries would deal with security issues without taking its interests into account.”³⁸

On 22 July 2020 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation issued a self-contradictory comment – the Soviet Union and Germany being close partners – on the 80th anniversary of the incorporation of Latvia,

36 “We’ll shut your filthy mouth’: Putin says Russia will combat the rewriting of WWII history with new free-to-all archive center”, *RT*, 18 January 2020; “Idea that Hitler & Stalin share equal responsibility for WW2 ‘garbage’ promoted by ‘ignorant people’ in EU Parliament – Putin”, *RT*, 10 March 2020.

37 Vladimir Putin, “CIS informal summit”, President of Russia, 20 December 2019.

38 “Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”, *The National Interest*, 18 June 2020. A Russian language version was published simultaneously on the President of Russia's home page; “75 лет Великой Победы: общая ответственность перед историей и будущим”, 19 June 2020.

Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union.³⁹ The following excerpt describes the present Russian position well:

“In June 1940, becoming aware of the truly real threat of Nazi Germany using the Baltics as a bridgehead for the invasion of the Soviet Union, Moscow had to deploy more troops in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in addition to the forces stationed there under the 1939 mutual assistance agreements. In itself, this measure, which was taken with approval by the Baltic countries’ authorities, was legitimate and did not amount to the transfer of sovereignty over their territories to the Soviet Union. The subsequent incorporation of the Baltic countries into the Soviet Union was not unilateral either but was carried out by mutual agreement.”

The outcome of the July 1940 parliamentary elections in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was a natural reaction of the overwhelming majority of voters to support their countries’ incorporation into the Soviet Union, which they saw as the only power capable of resisting a Nazi aggression.”

The current and, in fact, long-held Russian interpretation is, however, very much at odds with the Soviet aims, as expressed by Foreign Minister Molotov to his Lithuanian colleague in June 1940, and with common western positions of today. Harvard University scholar, Dr. Mark Kramer's powerful article on this topic in the *Washington Post* in June 2001 states a regrettable continuity of the Russian position: “*The Soviet Union is still dead, but some Soviet fictions live on. The Russian government's recent statements in*

39 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Comment by the Information and Press Department on the 80th anniversary of the incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union”, 22 July 2020.



defense of the Soviet occupation of the Baltics are more than just bewildering or dishonest.”⁴⁰

Russia's continuing phantom pains over the severed Soviet Union is evident. Russia's embassy in Estonia published a quite telling document about Estonia's allegedly voluntary accession with the Soviet Union on the 80th anniversary of that occasion.⁴¹ “80 years ago, on July 21-22, 1940, the State Duma of Estonia transformed the country into a socialist republic and adopted the Declaration of Joining the USSR. On August 6, 1940, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted a law that approved the decision of the Estonian parliament.” Simply put, this was a provocation which also displayed continued contempt for the sovereignty of Estonia.⁴²

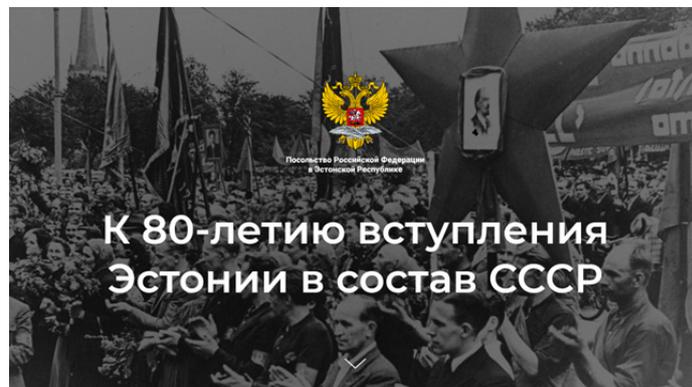
“The small nations will disappear”

Molotov's conversation with Lithuania's Foreign Minister Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius in the Kremlin on 30 June

40 Mark Kramer, “Why Is Russia Still Peddling This Old Soviet Lie?”, *Washington Post*, 10 June 2001.

41 Посольство Российской Федерации в Эстонской Республике, “К 80-летию вступления Эстонии в состав СССР” (On the 80th anniversary of Estonia's accession to the USSR), 8 August 2020.

42 Gorbachev's adviser Georgy Arbatov, founder director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, was very open and forthcoming in his discussions with Finnish colleagues and observers about Gorbachev's thinking on international politics and the future of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. German unification was on its way and Soviet forces were being pulled out from Central Europe. On a direct question concerning the possible restoration of the independence of the Baltic states, Arbatov was, however, adamant: “Never.” Jarl Köhler, private communication, August 2020. Köhler is a superbly connected Finnish observer and industrialist, who used to organize such informal, discrete meetings with top-ranking foreign decision makers.



“On the 80th anniversary of Estonia's accession to the USSR”. Screenshot from a tweet by @RusEmbEst on 8 August 2020.

1940, three and a half months after the end of the Winter War, left no ambiguity about the Soviet Union's ambitions also concerning Finland. Molotov demanded a sense of reality from his interlocutor:

“You must take a good look at reality and understand that in the future small nations will have to disappear. Your Lithuania along with the other Baltic nations, including Finland, will have to join the glorious family of the Soviet Union. Therefore you should begin now to initiate your people into the Soviet system which in the future shall reign everywhere, throughout all Europe, put into practice earlier in some places, as in the Baltic nations, later in others.”⁴³

Finland's situation after the Winter War was still precarious. In Lev Trotsky's assessment in April 1940 of events in north-western Europe, he hints at Stalin's perceived anxiety:

“The division of Poland was developed and expanded on in the arena of Scandinavia. Hitler could hardly have avoided telling his ‘friend’ Stalin at least to some extent about his plans to seize the Scandinavian countries. Stalin again could hardly have avoided breaking out in a cold sweat: this meant Germany's

43 Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, “Conversations with Molotov”, *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal Of Arts And Sciences, Lituanius*, 2 (1965).



total dominance over the Baltic Sea and over Finland, and a direct threat to Leningrad. Stalin once again had to seek additional guarantees against his ally, this time in Finland. But he encountered serious resistance, and his 'military excursion' was held up. [...] Hitler, who meanwhile had had time to prepare his move against Denmark and Norway, demanded that Stalin make peace as quickly as possible. Stalin was forced to reduce his objectives regarding Finland and abandoned the Sovietization of the country.”⁴⁴

The defense minister, Marshal Tymoshenko, and the commander of Leningrad's Military District, Meretskov, had a new plan ready in September 1940 (General Staff document, 18/9 1940) for an attack on Finland after a 35-day mobilization phase. The plan included 46 infantry divisions, a motorized infantry division, two armoured divisions, three armoured brigades and 13 artillery regiments. The goals were set from Viborg to Helsinki, from Savonlinna to St. Michel and from Lappeenranta to Heinola. In the north, Finland would be cut off from Sweden and Norway.⁴⁵

Molotov travelled to Berlin in November 1940, determined to achieve Hitler's approval to settle the score with Finland, the only remaining question regarding implementation of

the secret protocol of August 1939.⁴⁶ For Hitler, this no longer was acceptable, even though he confirmed that the agreement with Stalin and the spheres of interest were still in force. The Soviet military, however, issued a new directive on 25 November 1940 with the order to reach the Gulf of Bothnia in 45 days.⁴⁷ Stalin, however, felt that it was no longer wise to start a new war.

“They were replaced with hard-liners, often with a background in the security services.”

Further developments and conclusions

During the final years of the Soviet Union, liberal politicians such as the aforementioned Aleksandr Yakovlev could talk about World War II in the same terms as in the West. When, on

23 December 1989, Yakovlev presented to the People's Congress deputies the commission report which he himself had led, he commented:

“However, the reliable information that we have been able to collect has enabled us to reconstruct the way in which individual countries and mankind in general were drawn into World War II, and on the basis of analyzing those facts overall, to draw appropriate conclusions.”⁴⁸

46 “Aufzeichnung über die Unterredung zwischen dem Führer und dem Vorsitzenden des Rats der Volkskommissare Molotow in Anwesenheit des Reichsaußenministers und des stellvertretenden Volkskommissars für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten Dekanosow in Berlin am 13. November 1940”. Paul Schmidt (Chief Translator in Auswärtiges Amt) documented the conversations. The English language translation, “Hitler and Molotov meetings, Berlin, November 12 and 13, 1940, Official transcripts”, is provided by *World Future Fund*.

47 Op cit. Manninen, pp. 132-134.

48 Op cit. Yakovlev, note 9.

44 Lev Trotskij, “Итоги финляндского опыта” (Results of the Finnish experience), *Iskra-Research*, 25 April 1940.

45 Ohto Manninen, *Miten Suomi valloitetaan – Puna-armeijan operaatiosuunnitelmat 1939 – 1944* (How Finland is conquered – The Red Army operational plans 1939 – 1944), (Edita, Helsinki, 2008), pp. 123-127.



Yakovlev's words were an indication of a possible evolution of the Soviet Union and, after the failed coup in August 1991, Russia, towards normalcy in the western sense.

Finland had played a role in facilitating the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and hosted the ground-breaking summit when the *Helsinki Final Act* was adopted on 1 August 1975.⁴⁹ A year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the next great achievement, the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, was adopted.⁵⁰ It defined the new security order in the OSCE area from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The last important OSCE summit took place in Turkey in November 1999, when the OSCE *Istanbul Document – Charter for European Security* was adopted.⁵¹ These three central CSCE/OSCE documents were the results of fruitful co-operation with the Soviet Union/Russia onboard, although the Istanbul Document was agreed upon only reluctantly.

President Yeltsin was about to transfer the presidential duties to Vladimir Putin and his western-minded liberal ministers were long gone. They were replaced with hard-liners, often with a background in the security services. Eventually the forces behind the failed August 1991 putsch had prevailed. It is reasonable to conclude that successors of the Yeltsin administrations regarded the Istanbul Document to be treated much the same way as the Soviet leadership had regarded the Helsinki Final Act: as a document of little significance as it would not be adhered to in practice.

Some central excerpts from the Istanbul Document are worth mentioning, since they indicate clearly what

49 OSCE, "Helsinki Final Act", 1 August 1975.

50 OSCE, "Charter of Paris for a New Europe", 21 November 1990.

51 OSCE, "Istanbul Document – Charter for European Security", 19 November 1999.

principal values, particularly important for smaller states, may be lost, perhaps permanently:

II. OUR COMMON FOUNDATIONS

7. [...] All OSCE commitments, without exception, apply equally to each participating State. [...] Participating States are accountable to their citizens and responsible to each other for their implementation of their OSCE commitments. We regard these commitments as our common achievement and therefore consider them to be matters of immediate and legitimate concern to all participating States. [...]

8. Each participating State has an equal right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. Each State also has the right to neutrality. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in these regards. They will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States. Within the OSCE no State, group of States or organization can have any pre-eminent responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the OSCE area or can consider any part of the OSCE area as its sphere of influence.

By the late 1980s, anti-Soviet and anti-communist movements throughout Eastern Europe had begun to open cracks in the Warsaw Pact alliance. In 1990, East Germany left the pact to prepare to reunify with West Germany. The other WP members soon followed suit independently and the Pact was finally terminated on 31 March 1991. Less than nine months later the Soviet Union itself was dissolved.

The former Warsaw Pact countries, pursuing their commonly acknowledged sovereign rights to improve their



national security by seeking membership in the Atlantic Alliance, eventually became NATO members in several waves, in 1999 and 2004, including the three Baltic States.

When other former Soviet republics, such as Georgia, openly declared its aspirations to join NATO, Russia reacted sharply. It went to war with Georgia in August 2008 and seized two of its provinces, which now are *de facto* if not *de jure* Russian controlled territories.

The late American scholar and diplomat Ronald D. Asmus observed in 2010:

“The reality is that Russia unilaterally changed the borders of a sovereign member of the OSCE by force, allowed ethnic cleansing of Georgian citizens from parts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to create ethnically more homogenous entities, has not fully complied with the terms of a ceasefire bearing the name of its president – and has gotten away with it.

[...]

The real reason was the core conflict between Russia and Georgia over Tbilisi's desire to break free of what had been a quasi-colonial relationship with Moscow and to become a part of the democratic West.”⁵²

The war in Georgia was a loud signal to the West of Russia's disregard for the commonly agreed European security regime and President Medvedev soon announced the five leading principles of the Russian world order, reflecting Russia's new attitudes.⁵³ He stated the need for a

52 Ronald D. Asmus, *A little war that shook the world: Georgia, Russia and the future of the West* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2010), pp. 214-216.

53 Paul Reynolds, “New Russian world order: the five principles”, BBC News, 1 September 2008.

multi-polar world as opposed to the US-NATO, which cannot be allowed to determine world policy. Russian-privileged interests had to be recognized, particularly in neighbouring states with long historical relations. No extension of NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. Russia also commits to protect and defend its interests all over the world and its citizens wherever they live.

President Medvedev presented his ideas for a new security structure in Helsinki in April 2009. In a reference to the famous Helsinki Final Act from 1975, he called the new draft Helsinki Plus, although it lacked many of the impor-

tant and specific rules of behaviour. “The draft of the European Security Treaty” was finally published in November 2009.⁵⁴

European security deteriorated further after Putin's comeback as president for a third term and Russia's military assault on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014. The war

in Donbass has gone on for six years with various intensity but with no end in sight. Russia has undoubtedly benefited from the largely disinterested West, preoccupied with its own internal problems in many major countries, and their unwillingness to tackle the problem. Some voices, like President Macron in France, have yielded and support a pragmatic reset with Russia.⁵⁵ If this view gathers strength, Russia may again get away with its aggression without further consequences, just like in Georgia.

In his own efforts to achieve a new world order of Russia's liking, President Putin turns to history, to the World War II legacy of the Allied Powers:

54 “The Draft of the European Security Treaty”, President of Russia, 29 November 2009.

55 Nemanja Popovic, “Macron's Idealistic Russia Pragmatism”, *Atlantic Sentinel*, 22 February 2020.



“A series of conferences – Tehran, Yalta, San Francisco and Potsdam – laid the foundation of a world that for 75 years had no global war, despite the sharpest contradictions.

Historical revisionism, the manifestations of which we now observe in the West, and primarily with regard to the subject of the Second World War and its outcome, is dangerous because it grossly and cynically distorts the understanding of the principles of peaceful development, laid down at the Yalta and San Francisco conferences in 1945. The major historic achievement of Yalta and other decisions of that time is the agreement to create a mechanism that would allow the leading powers to remain within the framework of diplomacy in resolving their differences.

[...]

The cautionary tale of the League of Nations was taken into account in 1945. The structure of the UN Security Council was developed in a way to make peace guarantees as concrete and effective as possible. That is how the institution of the permanent members of the Security Council and the right of the veto as their privilege and responsibility came into being.

What is veto power in the UN Security Council? To put it bluntly, it is the only reasonable alternative to a direct confrontation between major countries. It is a statement by one of the five powers that a decision is unacceptable to it and is contrary to its interests and its ideas about the right approach. And other countries, even if they do not agree, take this position for granted, abandoning any attempts to realize their unilateral efforts. So, in one way or another, it is necessary to seek compromises.

[...]

It is a duty of ours – all those who take political responsibility and primarily representatives of the victorious powers in the Second World War – to guarantee that this system is maintained and improved. Today, as in 1945, it is important to

demonstrate political will and discuss the future together. Our colleagues – Mr. Xi Jinping, Mr. Macron, Mr. Trump and Mr. Johnson – supported the Russian initiative to hold a meeting of the leaders of the five nuclear-weapon States, permanent members of the Security Council. We thank them for this and hope that such a face-to-face meeting could take place as soon as possible.

[...]

There can be no doubt that the summit of Russia, China, France, the United States, and the UK can play an important role in finding common answers to modern challenges and threats, and will demonstrate a common commitment to the spirit of alliance, to those high humanist ideals and values for which our fathers and grandfathers were fighting shoulder to shoulder.

Drawing on a shared historical memory, we can trust each other and must do so. That will serve as a solid basis for successful negotiations and concerted action for the sake of enhancing the stability and security on the planet and for the sake of prosperity and well-being of all States. Without exaggeration, it is our common duty and responsibility towards the entire world, towards the present and future generations.”⁵⁶

The real essence of President Putin's statement is that only major countries matter and that the UN Security Council's Permanent Five essentially have the responsibility, indeed the obligation, to decide on global matters. His view is that the veto power of these select few is the only guarantee for preserving peace and avoiding direct confrontation between major countries. Most countries probably disagree. For smaller countries, in particular, such an excluding world order where they have no say either individually or collectively is obviously out of the question.

⁵⁶ Op cit. “Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”, *The National Interest*.



For Russia, the real meaning of its veto power in UNSC is that it allows Russia to pursue its national interests, including military aggression and territorial expansion without legally mandated interference from the UN. Putin's perception of the role of the UN as a guarantor of world peace is both overblown and a mockery of the core principles on which the UN is built.

The upcoming summit between the leaders of the Permanent Five can be welcomed as, citing Winston Churchill once more: "Meeting jaw to jaw is always better than war."⁵⁷ But it also gives reason for concern as the western leaders of P5 are not very reassuring champions of western values. The spectre of a Yalta 2.0 agreement cannot be entirely dismissed.⁵⁸

Professor Philip Zelikow's thorough analysis of President Putin's National Interest article ends as follows:

"My own observation, as an historian and occasional participant in policymaking, is that it is easier to start wars than to end them. This new cold war with Russia has now long been underway. Given the environment of mistrust, and the fact that each side's list is bound to have disagreeable items, any degree of understanding seems hard.

One alternative is to put aside hopes of real cooperation with countries like Russia, at least as ruled by Putin. In this theory just let this new struggle run its course. Suitably motivated Americans and Europeans, if there are enough of them, should then just prepare for a generation of indefinite struggle. Each side will denounce the sins of the other, rewrite historical narratives accordingly, and leave the rest to a later generation.

⁵⁷ "Quotes Falsely Attributed to Winston Churchill", The International Churchill Society.

⁵⁸ For a summary of the implications of the original Yalta agreement, see Nicu Popescu, "Why a new Yalta wouldn't end the malaise between the West and Russia", European Council of Foreign Relations, 9 June 2020.

They would then hope the 2020s turn out much better than the 1930s did.

A better alternative would at least start defining the terms under which a more promising system of security can be recreated. This is not just a matter of process or institutional reform. It requires envisioning a set of results on the ground, and then figuring out how to get there, point by point.

Such an effort would be an enormous and multifaceted diplomatic task. This is the kind of task that was undertaken, with some success, in the 1940s and early 1950s. It was done again, with even more success, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

It would be a big job. But if statesmen do not even try to construct a more viable world order than the one they have now, at the beginning of the 2020s, they will indeed have neglected the lessons of the Second World War."⁵⁹

In the meantime, Europe will have to stick to the best we have got, the key OSCE documents.

⁵⁹ Philip D. Zelikow, "A Reply to President Putin", *The American Interest*, 31 July 2020.