In search of a post-communist future

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Why do we so uncritically buy the "democratic rhetoric" of our rulers instead of countering their selfish designs? How was it possible in too many post-communist countries that incredible riches accumulated in the hands of the parasitic few? Why is political power so often fused with wealth? These are only a few of the questions debated by two philosophers in search of an answer to what went wrong in the post-communist world after 1989.

Tomas Kavaliauskas: For Hegel, history is rational and revolutions are for the promotion of a particular epoch’s Geist, for the new stages of political, economic and juridical development, in short, for progress. Nothing is in vain. History has its purpose and moves forward, although in a spiral form.

How would you describe the Hegelian Geist over the past 20 years in Russia? Can we say that the politically uplifting moment when Yeltsin stepped on a military tank in Moscow, or that spiritual moment when Sakharov gave an inspiring speech in the Duma in front of Gorbachov is gone? Dissidents are still active and we hear the voices of human rights activists such as Sergei Kovaliov, or that of Andrey Piantkovsky, criticizing Putin’s regime. Can we say that their voices speak of a different Russian Geist or spirit? If so, perhaps the historic telos of Russia, its end or purpose, is not predetermined and we have to be open to unexpected changes?

Boris Kapustin: The way you posed your question already implies a certain irony towards the notion of Geist. A developmental spiral which bypasses “rational formulas” is a travesty of the progression of Geist – and of the Hegelian Geist in particular. I find this ironic connotation of Geist more to my taste. It does not, however, enhance Geist’s purchase on what has been going on in Russia since the downfall of Soviet power. Nor does it have, in my opinion, much anchorage in the contemporary global reality either. To slightly paraphrase Joseph Schumpeter, there is no single Zeitgeist, except in the sense of an ideological construct, which is meant to suppress the complexity of reality and obfuscate the tensions between the tendencies of its transformation. [1]

Does the chain of events you mentioned – Sakharov’s memorable speech in the Congress of People’s Deputies, Yeltsin’s intransigent posture on a tank in the days of the failed August coup or, let me add to your list, a huge rally in the Manezhnaya Square of
Moscow protesting the attack of Soviet troops on the Vilnius TV Centre (with its wonderfully internationalist motto “For your freedom and ours”) and the like - make up, or represent, the democratic Zeitgeist of the late-1980s or the early-1990s which allegedly disappeared in Russia at a later stage? If this is a “single Zeitgeist” of that age should we disregard the phenomena which accompanied it as a massive de facto and illegal denationalization of the means of production and their concentration in the hands of those whom Jadwiga Staniszkis designated “political capitalists”? Or ignore the emergence of collusion between certain factions of the communist nomenclature on the one hand and the leaders of pro-democratic movements on the other, which paved the way to the formation of the new ruling classes in the post-communist nations and which were premised on the emasculation of the grassroots popular democracy? Or turn a blind eye to the relentless dismantling of the socialist welfare state which, notwithstanding all its failings, had remained up to that point one of the few things socialism could be praised for and which had shielded millions from abject poverty? The poverty they were plunged into henceforth.

This is not to belittle the importance of the democratic tendency you alluded to in your question. Rather, this is to emphasize the necessity of placing it against the backdrop of an actual historical situation to which it belonged and which ultimately determined how exactly this democratic tendency became entwined with other tendencies inherent in the situation in question. Its interaction with the rise of an “irrational capitalism” – assuming that “rational capitalism”, to use Max Weber’s wording, is “identical with the restraint, or at least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse” [2] of unlimited greed for gain – is of particular interest. In Russia, the entwining of democracy and capitalism proved to be such that it resulted in the triumph of what Anders Åslund called “capitalist revolution” and the failure of the democratic one. [3] Certainly, not all post-communist nations were cursed with this misfortune, or at least not to the same extent as Russia. What exactly contributed to harnessing “irrational capitalism” in different post-communist nations and how specific modes of such harnessing were conducive to the emergence of different types of capitalism – quantitatively different in terms of the degrees of their “rationality” and qualitatively different from the perspective of their (in-)ability to serve supra-utilitarian purposes? This may well be one of the most exciting topics for theoretical social research.

It seems, however, that the degree of robustness of the grassroots popular democracy, prior to its emasculation by the elites that presided over the so-called transitions to democracy and the market economy, dovetail to an extent with the (in-)decency of post-communist capitalism. After all, if what succeeds socialism is a “designed”, purposefully constructed capitalism, [4] then the more its “designers” are forced to take the lower classes into account, the less savage the capitalism that is likely to emerge will be. Unfortunately, the Democratic Russia movement was no match in this respect for Polish Solidarity, Lithuanian Sayudis or even the more ephemeral Hungarian EKA. A particularly ugly, socially polarizing, economically inefficient and morally corrupt, in a word “oligarchic”, capitalism ensued from this. It completely subdued democracy and made what remained of it after the October bloodshed of 1993 serve its most vulgar and obscene needs and proclivities. Hence, democracy has become widely perceived in Russia as a plaything, a tool in the hands of the country’s new masters. Furthermore, it was crudely crafted and is unskilfully employed. And who, apart from the fetishists of democracy, those who treat it as a value-in-itself rather than a “method” (Schumpeter)
whereby certain goals *may be* attained, can style this perception “irrational”, or pre- or anti-modern, or residual from the Soviet past? It seems, rather, to be an accurate and incisive take on the actual instrumentalization of democracy by capitalism, accomplished in post-communist Russia in particularly grotesque and unsophisticated forms. Putin’s “authoritarianism” is but a method of prolonging the existence of this awkward creature of Russian post-communist capitalism, which already showed its alarming fragility in the crisis of 1998, by slightly “other means”, such as an “affordable” welfare-paternalism, simulations of the political and military grandeur of the ailing nation, a tightening up of the notorious “vertical of power”, which, in fact, exacerbates the social ills it was declared capable of rectifying.

If Putin’s regime, including its duumvirate incarnation, does not embody a new *Zeitgeist*, an alternative to that of the “roaring and merciless” 1990s, who, or what, does? Do Putin’s liberal critics represent it? They should be respected as courageous disturbers of Putin’s fake and stuffy social tranquility. Unfortunately, what really animates them is nostalgia for the “lost treasures” of the 1990s, a sentiment they have to conceal behind occasional recourse to populist rhetoric, because of this period’s striking unpopularity among the nation.

But is it not better to abandon any quest for the *Zeitgeist*, whether old or new, and take notice of the cracks and fractures which are increasingly visible even on the surface of this supposedly monolithic regime? Widespread, albeit still “subterranean”, unrest caused by the hellish heat and resulting deaths of the summer of 2010, nationalistic riots in Moscow and elsewhere in the autumn of the same year, the resumption of labour resistance to the double pressure on the working class exerted by private capital and the state, the sparks of protests across the country against ubiquitous corruption and crime, as well as the state’s inaction in the face of all this, nay, its complicity in such practices, are instances of what I am referring to.

You can retort, and with reason, that all such instances of resistance and unrest are scattered, impulsive, local and too politically unassuming to overturn the *status quo*. But if we discard the metaphysical teleology of history, couched in terms of the fulfilment of providential plans, or the advancement of human emancipation (through class struggle or otherwise), or technology- science- or economy-driven progress, or modernization as a euphemism for westernization and other things of this kind, history will reveal itself as a reservoir of events. It is in the nature of events to be unpredictable – they are Walter Benjamin’s “explosions of the continuum of history” [5] which are openings for the appearance of agencies that “make history”.

I am not making predictions about Russia’s near future. I am simply arguing that the currently observable disorganized, localized, impulsive and politically unassuming character of protests and resistance in today’s Russia does not justify their dismissal as politically inconsequential. Moreover, they may prove to be more consequential than the much more audible – at least in the West – liberal criticisms of Putin’s regime which recycle the well-known kind-hearted and magnanimous, albeit somewhat worn out, humanitarian mantra of the 1990s. Anyway, it always makes sense to expect the unexpected. This may be particularly true in Russia’s case.

**TK:** In his *Theory of Justice* John Rawls has a concept of “justice of fairness”. According
to this, justice as fairness is possible when the status quo of people is suspended, unknown; everyone is under a “veil of ignorance”. As Rawls says:

No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.

To what extent does does Rawls’ analysis apply to the Polish Round Table of 1989?

**BK:** I think the Polish Round Table of 1989, and still less its dubious imitations elsewhere, had nothing to do with the Rawlsian process of the discovery of a concept of “justice as fairness” in the “original position” under the “veil of ignorance”. And I am tempted to add so much the better for Poland and for all those who rejected communism.

What made the Polish Round Table possible and “successful” was exactly the absence of the “veil of ignorance”. Instead of succumbing to the Rawlsian self-inflicted amnesia, the main promoters of the idea of the Round Table negotiations realistically decided, first of all, to come to grips with the bitter experience of the past – the rise of Solidarity as a movement of grassroots and workplace democracy in the early-1980s, and its later severe suppression through the introduction of martial law – and to settle at least some scores in private and in advance of the public talks. The condition of privacy was a sine qua non for the initial negotiations between the former enemies, Lech Walesa and General Kiszczak, a captor and a captive, exactly because the majorities of both constituencies – of Solidarity and the Polish United Workers’ Party – firmly opposed any dealings between these two forces. [6] Therefore, the Polish Round Table was initiated secretly in a perfectly undemocratic way precisely because, contrary to what happens to the inhabitants of the Rawlsian “original position”, nobody could deprive these majorities of their historical and personal memories. The Interior Ministry’s Villa Magdalenka proved to be an excellent and emblematic venue for those early undemocratic collusions between the communist and the so-called democratic elites which enunciated the process of Bildung of the new Polish ruling class. It is noteworthy that whenever serious difficulties arose in the public Round Table process, small groups of top Solidarity and PUWP negotiators withdrew into the convenient privacy of Magdalenka. Thus, “the burden of negotiations steadily shifted to Magdalenka” [7] progressively turning the “public use of reason” at the official Round Table process into a grandiose PR action. This scheme allowed both camps to circumvent the opinions and interests of their rank and file and to reach “compromises” over their heads, in particular over the heads of miners and other groups of workers who erroneously kept thinking, even in 1989, that Solidarity was about the improvement of their condition and the promotion of a more egalitarian society than the existing communist one, plus workers’ self-management, as had been declared in Solidarity’s Programme adopted by its First National Congress. [8]

Generally speaking, the Polish Round Table proved to be a skilfully orchestrated enterprise which involved sophisticated power games and strategies of domination and exclusion, masterful employments of “symbolic violence” and profitable conversions of symbolic capital into economic and political capital by one group of actors, or vice versa by the other group. This is not to say that the unexpected did not occur in the course of
this enterprise. Who could have imagined, for example, that the communist-sponsored trade unions, OPZZ, would desert their political superior the PUWP and turn themselves into passionate advocates of *ouvrierism* at the same time that Solidarity would start to distance itself from it. Nor can we ignore the tactical miscalculations all the actors involved made at different stages of the Round Table process. And, as always happens in history, certain unintended consequences resulted from the otherwise well-organized operation. Who, for example, could have expected the communist bosses to be so eager to give up all the lingering vestiges of communism, or that the Solidarity bosses would receive much more – and much more easily – than they had realistically hoped for before the start of the Round Table? [9] But why should we call such intrusions of the unexpected, such manifestations of the feebleness of human reason, such unintended consequences of human actions the “veil of ignorance”?  

**TK:** In your book *Morality in Politics* [10] you say that morality cannot control or rule politics even if there is a consensus. But may we not say that morality took precedence over politics in 1989 since at that time, moral requirements for the rightful independence of the Baltic States and Warsaw Pact countries stimulated the disintegration of the Soviet Union? But afterwards, after the great event, that politics once again dominated morality?  

**BK:** Let me clarify one thing before I answer your question. I never argued, certainly not in *Moral Choices in Politics*, that politics takes priority over morality in the sense in which mechanistic materialism believed matter to be prior, and antecedent, to mind. If we understand by *Realpolitik* the paradigm of a politics based exclusively on power and material factors and completely lacking any moral or ideological elements, then *Realpolitik* is as much a chimera as “moral politics”; i.e. politics controlled and led by morality. As long as no social institutions can exist without at least a modicum of legitimacy, no collectivities can persist if human bonds are not reinforced by something extending beyond self-interested pursuits and the concomitant treatment of “thy neighbour” exclusively as a means, no politics, and particularly no grand politics capable of changing the “order of things” and redirecting the “flow of history”, can take place in reality without exacting human sacrifices, which should be offered voluntarily and cannot be extorted by force. As long as all those things remain prerequisites and kernels of any politics it cannot in principle operate without morality.  

But this certainly does not mean that morality can arrogate the role of Master vis-à-vis politics before which, to borrow Kant’s depiction of their “proper” relationship, the latter should bend its knees. On the contrary, it is politics, its conflicts, tensions, resentments and expectations, upsets and restored balances etc., which determine the functions morality can and should perform in this or that historical situation. This, I think, is one of the most important lessons one can draw from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, Marx’s *German Ideology* or Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. It is exactly the (changing) functionality of morality in politics, its different modes and historical manifestations, which dictate both morality’s indispensable function vis-à-vis politics and its subordination to the “logic” of politics. It goes without saying, however, that in certain forms or modalities of politics, morality, for better or worse, acquires a much more important function than in others. Just compare the “Republic of Virtue” at the time of the French Revolution – and the Reign of Terror inseparable from it, or the Indian resistance to British imperialism inspired by Gandhi, or the moral enthusiasm of 1989 in
east and central Europe with the cynicism, weariness and politicking of the regular operation of today’s “representative democracy”.

It is this that explains much regarding the intersection between morality and politics in 1989. Morality played an immensely important role in undermining the legitimacy of the Soviet regime – or what remained of it by that time – in mobilizing the forces of resistance and opposition, in adding steel to their will to persevere and prevail against all odds; or, if I can use Barrington Moore’s metaphor, in giving impetus and lustre to aspiring utopias, which served as a proof that “there were some things worth suffering for”, as Jan Patocka wrote shortly before his death. And it does not matter that those utopias – Solidarity’s programme, Václav Havel’s “Anti-Political Politics”, Sakharov’s Nobel Lecture etc. – proved to be as unattainable as all other utopias that actually transformed the world from Christian chiliasm to early liberalism’s “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. It is noteworthy, though, that it was a “morality of duty”, rather than utilitarianism, that could fulfil those revolutionary functions. Havel was right to underline that since resistance to communism, until the very last stage of the struggle, was an all-or-nothing gamble, it was “difficult to imagine a reasonable person embarking on such a course merely because he or she reckons that sacrifice today will bring rewards tomorrow, be it only in the form of general gratitude”. [11] Ironically, utilitarianism as a paradigmatic morality of bourgeois society, which was to supplant communism in east and central Europe, could not serve as a transition to such a society but fostered compliance with the decaying communist status quo. As to the national liberation movements in different parts of the former Soviet empire, inasmuch as they were part and parcel of the overall process of dismantling Soviet communism they partook of this process’s moral capital and, in their turn, contributed to its growth.

To recapitulate: neither in 1989, nor at any time before or after, has morality taken precedence over politics. But at the turning points of history, and 1989 compellingly demonstrates this, morality can fulfil particularly important functions and, in a sense, become decisive for the success of the various courses of emancipation. These conclusions are applicable to the national liberation movements in the Baltic region and elsewhere, which contributed to the dismantling of the Soviet regime and empire. However, I wish that the heirs to those movements and the beneficiaries of their victories would heed the wisdom of Schumpeter: “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions – and I’d add the relative worth of one’s deeds – and yet to stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.” [12]

**TK:** Twenty years after 1989, it is obvious that Havel’s expression “living in truth” – or living in democratic truth – is not just nave but false. The transitional period from socialism to capitalism and from one party communist ideology to pluralism did not create conditions for living in truth. Mass media plays with the images and creates illusionary truths. But the battle was fought for living in truth, and Havel wrote his essay the “Power of the Powerless” assuming that the fight is for pure victory, to win uncorrupted freedom in central Europe.

Central and eastern Europeans in 1989 did not imagine that many of those Soviet conformists would continue to rule, as is the case in Romania and Bulgaria, where communists participated in the transitional period. But in the Baltic States, communists merely changed their mask to adapt to democracy, and Poland was shaken by the cases
of well-known priests who had collaborated with the KGB – a particular feature of post-communist Poland. And, if we take a look at post-Soviet eastern Europe, we see that Russia and Belarus claim to have democratic elections regardless of political prisoners. The Ukrainians are painfully split into pro-westerners and pro-Russians with very different world-views and values. There, democracy is just a vehicle for the battleground between western and eastern, between the “right ones” and the “wrong ones” as if the latter wanted to live in truth and the former to live in a lie. But what is truth or a lie in the post-Soviet area, especially in eastern Europe?

Shouldn’t we agree that Havel’s words “living in truth” and “living a lie” no longer have the same meaning? Did Havel foresee such a distortion of his thought when he wrote his essay on dissent politics striving for liberation?

**BK:** I do not think that Havel’s “living in truth” can be assessed in terms of epistemological categories of falsehood and truth, or in terms of feasibility/unfeasibility or congruence/incongruence with “reality” which your stress on its naivety implies. As I mentioned earlier, Havel’s “anti-political politics”, with “living in truth” at its heart, is a perfect example of political utopia couched, as it should be, in terms of moral authenticity. Utopias never materialize, nor do they ever serve as strategic blueprints for the construction of a “new society”, and this is more or less as true for Havel’s “living in truth” as it is for “New Jerusalem” as the spiritual beacon of Cromwell’s English Revolution, or the “Republic of Virtue” of the French one, or “Socialism” as described in Lenin’s *State and Revolution* produced on the eve of the October Revolution in Russia. The latter was meant to implement his vision of “Socialism” but immediately showed its total practical irrelevance. It is simply not a feature of political utopias to be practicable or even to offer an outline, however vague, of the “transition strategy”. It has much more important functions to fulfil.

Karl Mannheim was probably the first to delineate those functions clearly; let me refer only to those that are most pertinent to our discussion of Havel’s “living in truth”. First, utopias are powerful instruments of critique of the status quo and of undermining its legitimacy. What makes them powerful is exactly their capacity to “transcend” the status quo without fleeing from it or degenerating into wishful thinking. As Mannheim explains, utopias embrace those “ideas and values in which are contained in condensed form the unrealized and unfulfilled tendencies which represent the needs of each age. These intellectual elements then become the explosive material for bursting the limits of the existing order”. [13] This shows that utopias cannot be congruent with “reality” – they reflect not what it is, but its “nothingness”, what is suppressed in it and what is yet to appear in one form or another if the oppressive status quo is “negated”. But at the same time, utopias cannot serve as blueprints for realizing the “unrealized tendencies” and their endowment with such qualities which did not exist in their suppressed condition. This explains the transition, for example, from the “liberté, égalité, fraternité” of the French Revolution to the fervour of corruption of the Thermidorian regime and the bureaucratic monstrosity of the Napoleonic Empire.

Second, utopias are powerful sources of inspiration for the rising social forces and the crystallization of their rebellious conscience. This crystallization usually has very little, if anything, to do with a “proper” cognition of historical “reality” and of its “immanent”
tendencies. The “ruse of reason” consists exactly in what the revolutionary agencies should not understand what they “objectively” fight for, that is, what can realistically ensue from their heroic feats. The rank and file of the victorious revolutionary armies are normally the first to suffer from the fruits of their triumphs. This is true for the French sans-culottes, who won a capitalist yoke for themselves, as well as for the peasant masses of the Bolshevik Red Army enslaved by Stalin’s “collectivization” and the Gdansk shipbuilders thrown into poverty and social marginalization precisely by what they achieved so heroically. This crystallization means the determination to reach out beyond what prudence, utilitarian calculations and even the instinct of self-preservation would designate as the absolute limit of our practical pursuits. In a nutshell, it means one or another variation of Martin Luther’s, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” No great social transformation can take place without such an attitude being sufficiently spread at least among its initiators because of the unforeseeable character of the future it inevitably inaugurates. This is why, as Max Weber put it:

Man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. […] Even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else men will not be able to attain even that which is possible today. [14]

I am prepared to insist that Havel’s utopia of “living in truth” successfully fulfilled both those key functions of political utopias and that it cannot be accused of failing to attain what, in fact, belongs to the prerogatives of other intellectual-political categories.

You are undoubtedly right that the outcomes of the post-communist transformations caused a widespread, and in some countries quite bitter, disappointment. But should the numerous shortcomings, inconsistencies, corruption, glaring injustices of those transformations be ascribed to the insatiable greed and devilish wiliness of ex-communists who artfully changed their ideological colours and retained many levers of power in their hands? I think this is an extremely nave explanation of the ills of post-communism; we know full well that ex-democrats can be as insatiable social predators as their ex-communist counterparts and that political – and economic – power corrupts its holders regardless of their ideological orientation before their ascension to power. How much wiser classical early modern liberalism is than today’s political commonplaces in understanding how decent political life can be achieved! “It is […] a just political maxim,” writes David Hume, “that every man must be supposed a knave, that the enjoyment of liberty,” and possessions, adds Hume, cannot be based on “the good-will of our rulers”. [15]

This enjoyment depends exclusively on our vigilance towards them and on the operation of an intricate system of checks and balances which allows one group of knaves to counter the rapacious designs of another and thus the “common interest” is served. Democracy is not produced by dedicated democrats; capitalism is not made by ardent and accomplished capitalists. [16] Rather, democracy and “rational” capitalism emerge as undesirable and unexpected compromises, which were nobody’s first choice and which arose from desperate struggles devoid of conclusive and decisive victories. Such democratic and capitalistic milieus can, if Hume’s two provisos mentioned above are observed, nurture more or less decent democrats and capitalists. But the deliberate
designing and crafting of democracy and capitalism, as happened in post-communist east and central Europe, is always biased towards somebody’s specific interests and always proceeds at somebody’s expense. In this case, vigilance towards the “knives” and attention to the “checks and balances” should be doubled. This happened nowhere in the post-communist world.

Why did we ignore Hume’s recommendations? Why are we so apathetic rather than vigilant? Why do we so uncritically buy the “democratic rhetoric” of our rulers instead of countering their selfish designs? What went wrong in too many post-communist countries that made possible an incredible accumulation of wealth in the hands of the parasitic few? Why is political power so often fused with wealth? Why do we tolerate obscene material disparities between the have and have-nots and such a humiliating inadequacy of our welfare states and safety nets? Why are our democracies so useless for the establishment of more just schemes of wealth distribution? I think that grappling with these questions, rather than ascribing our failures to the lingering remnants of the communist past, can help us grasp a new meaning of “living in truth” which would be consonant with the actual ills, challenges and “unrealized tendencies” of our present situation(s).

TK: Now I would like to ask about an extremely sensitive issue for Russians and Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians – the commemoration of the end of World War II on 9 May. Again we see two opposing discourses, one Baltic, where 9 May means occupation, the other Russian and Ukrainian, where 9 May means liberation. I’ve recently been wondering whether the two conflicting views can be reconciled by a hermeneutical approach. Would you agree that a hermeneutical approach might lead to dialogue and reconciliation of the two perspectives? Can passionate hermeneutical comprehension of the Other – embracing all the falsities – open hearts on both sides and bring more respect for the evil experienced? Or would you say that is utopian? Is hermeneutics applied to the interpretation of memory a fruitful philosophy?

BK: If I can adopt W.B. Gallie’s famous notion of “essentially contested concepts” [17] to the needs of our inquiry, I think that the nature of historical events is such that they exist as “essentially contested phenomena”. As soon as they stop being contestable, they fade and become reduced to “historical facts”. Historical “truth” is always interpretative, it always exists in somebody’s “perspective” and we can never to rise above “perspectivism”, even if our “perspective” acquires the proportions of the Kantian/Arendtian sensus communis. You may call this a “hermeneutical approach” and I would agree with you, but with a caveat: this is the hermeneutics of actual political struggle, rather than that of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Vattimo or whoever may give one or another articulation to a much more fundamental hermeneutics of praxis.

This is why I do not really believe that however skilful we, the intellectuals, can become in the conciliatory hermeneutical interpretations of 9 May 1945, we would be able to underpin the currently overheated debates over its significance with a “rational basis” to cool them down and to make them better “balanced”. This is not to say that we should not do what we can do in this respect, but merely to clarify that the historical reconciliation between Russia and the Baltic states, akin to what happened between France and Germany or between the US and Japan, would not be possible until 9 May 1945 is integrated into essentially new national political-ideological projects which both
sides will be able to pursue in the future. This is what I earlier called, again following in Benjamin’s footsteps, a retrieval of the past and a reconfiguration of its ties with the present. Let me briefly explain what I mean by this in relation to the problem we are discussing.

As long as Russia remains a country of socially and culturally harmful and corrupt oligarchic capitalism, which has nothing to boast of, it will have to anchor its legitimacy in a crude fiction of 9 May as the only “great deed” of the recent past epitomizing and “founding” its “timeless” and “infinite” glory. As we know, and Derrida reminded us not so long ago, every nation is based on a performative-constative fiction of this kind. The late Soviet/post-Soviet fiction of 9 May as an unalloyed triumph of freedom, which humanity as a whole was blessed with thanks to the heroism and unselfishness of the “Soviet people”, is particularly crude and hence fragile. This fiction has always been incapable of concealing an oppressive and imperialistic dimension of this phenomenon. After all, the emancipatory élan of what then was known as the “Soviet people” was cast in the institutional, and partly ideological, mould of Stalinism. And when many others, certainly including non-Russians from the “conquered nations”, obediently refrained from openly questioning the meaning of this date, war veterans on the Russian side, such as V. Grossman and A. Solzhenitsyn, to mention only the most eminent writers on the subject, were among those who most eloquently and profoundly described and examined this dark dimension of 9 May. To recognize that the great victory of 9 May is tarnished by Stalinism, with everything this means for Russians as well as for other nations, is necessary for today’s Russian emancipation, which is hardly thinkable until 9 May and its normative resources are wrested from the hands of those authoritarian conservatives who currently dominate Russian politics.

Let me not comment on what I mean by a new democratic project which the Baltic nations can pursue and which would be able to produce and accommodate a new interpretation of 9 May. Being Russian, I think I have to focus on the Russian ills and leave the ills of others to their discretion. Otherwise, how can we distinguish patriotism from nationalistic stupidity and myopia?

But one element of your question I do find worrisome. Are you really saying that the greatest distinction between the Russian approach to 9 May and that of the Baltic nations consists in the former defining evil as fascism whereas the latter identifies it with communism? Let me not discuss the true percentage of Russians who praise (Stalin’s) communism or why the latter has become more popular recently, after the ravages of “liberal capitalism” in the 1990s. But I am curious: does the aforesaid antithesis concerning the interpretation(s) of 9 May mean that the Baltic perspective does not see fascism as evil?

TK: I need to clarify that question: of course fascism in the Baltic States means political evil – Lithuania has acknowledged its collaboration with the Nazis in the extermination of 220 000 Jews in Lithuania. What I wanted to highlight is that because of the experience of triple occupation between 1939 and 1945 – first as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939, then by German fascists, which was regarded as liberation from the Soviets, then reoccupation by the Soviet Union which lasted until 1990, also in the name of liberation, 9 May does not denote victory. That is why I was keen to talk about a hermeneutical effort to be sensitive to different perspectives of 9 May, to understand the
processes of memory.

**BK:** Perhaps, for many of the former Baltic Waffen-SS members and their backers and advocates, fascism is not evil at all. But this can hardly typify the Baltic perspective as such, since, for example, Lithuania officially acknowledged the guilt of its collaboration with Nazism and its complicity in the extermination of Lithuanian Jewry. If so, why is 9 May one-sidedly seen as an emblem of occupation and as a source of grief, as if there were nothing commendable in what this victory symbolizes? What does this one-sided interpretation of 9 May tell us about the ongoing projects of nation-state building in the Baltic region, in particular about the “founding fictions” legitimizing those projects (recall my earlier remarks about Derrida’s conception of such “fictions” and about the Russian employment thereof in the case of 9 May)? Are they not also regrettably crude? More generally speaking, can nation-state building which is based on the old French formula for this – “one and indivisible” – avoid being overly crude, and hence fragile in our age of multiculturalism and globalism?

**Footnotes**


7. Ibid., p. 32.


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