



INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The topic of the “Great Patriotic War” still calls for a new approach. This is partly due to the fact that Central and Eastern European historians’ perception even now lacks an inclusive and integrated approach to this historical process. The overall picture should include not only military history, but also political issues and the social face of the conflict. So far, there has been no broad compilation of the perspectives of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians, and finally the North Caucasus nations and Tatars. Meanwhile, treating the region as a political, economic, and military system requires not only paying careful attention to each of these areas and its local conditions separately, but also considering their mutual connections. What is decisive here is to analyse these issues taking into account the cultural and political integrity of the communities living in the region, their aspirations, and identity. Adopting an imperial interpretation of the history of the war, whether from the Soviet or German point of view – naturally resulting from the nature of the conflict described – simultaneously degrades all cultural, national, religious, and political communities to the role of objects of the historical game, and makes of their attributes, aspirations, and internal structure merely functions of an imperial interpretation of modernity. Removing national perspectives from the study of history not only reduces the cognitive value of the research – it also legitimises the totalitarian nature of Germany’s

and the Soviet Union’s plans towards Central Europe.

However, undertaking integrated studies requires outlining a detailed scope of problems. Drawing attention to the consequences – primarily political – of the German-Soviet war of 1941–1945, which affected Central Europe, lays the foundation for most of the possible studies on the history of the second half of the 20th century in the region. It is also necessary to look at the micro and medium scale: political, military, and security decisions made in Moscow since 1938 have influenced not only the existence of entire states and communities but also the lives of millions of individuals. A number of questions that constantly arise in the background of research on the history of World War II in Central and Eastern Europe concern not only the facts but also how the events were interpreted, misinterpreted, falsified, and silenced.

There is no doubt that the outbreak of World War II in Europe was the result of planned and consistent actions of the German state and its dictator – and the participation of the Soviet Union in the war may only seem a consequence of the launch of German plans to build a “living space” in the East. This would be the case if only the events (and even then not all of them) taking place since the German attack on the USSR on 22 June 1941 were taken into account. However, it cannot be denied that the outbreak of World War II and the disintegration of European relations that preceded it were a supporting, if not decisive, factor in Soviet policy. The German political and military initiative from 1938 dismantled the complicated system of relations in Central and Eastern Europe, and shook the European and world balance,

ultimately destroying it. However, the rapprochement with the USSR in 1939–1941 was, in fact, a collusion of significant interests, transcending the merely tactical ones. The relations between the countries and nations of Central and Eastern Europe – in many cases not at all friendly – were exploited by the pressures from Germany and the Soviet Union to destroy the entire European political system, with these relations being the first target. The political and cultural integrity of Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe fell victim to dictatorships using ideologised “geopolitical” visions of territory and society.

The imperialism of Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union weighed heavily on the history of Central and Eastern Europe. The ruthless German policy, at a significant turning point also carried out with the participation of the Soviet Union, resulted in the destruction of the independent existence of Czechoslovakia and Poland, and the gradual subordination of Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The illusion of achieving sovereign policy goals based on alignment with Germany had a particularly painful outcome for Hungary. As a result of the war, Hungary reached the depths of political and ethical decline, suffering a totalitarian *coup d'état*, subjecting its citizens to genocide, and ultimately falling under Soviet occupation, with all its consequences, including the loss of territories annexed in 1938–1940. The course and consequences of World War II in Central and Eastern Europe clearly demonstrate that imperial intervention aimed at its own interests destroys the ability of small nations to conduct sovereign policy and eliminates their internal legitimacy and sovereignty. This applies not only to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, or the countries subjected to

German aggression: Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, but also to countries attacked by the Soviet Union whose territories were fully or partially annexed – again Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Romania.

The occupation of Central Europe by the Soviet forces in 1944–1945, proclaimed as “liberation”, was, in fact, an act of conquest, followed by political, military, and economic subordination and exploitation (in the case of countries that entered into an alliance with Germany during the war – additionally justified), the elimination (or prevention of emergence) of legitimized systems of government and *de facto* sovereignty.

The subjugation of Central Europe by the Soviet Union could not be a merely military endeavour. The political conditions of Soviet hegemony were determined by decisions made by the Allies at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945. It should be noted that the status of the conquered countries – whether declaratively liberated, such as Poland or Czechoslovakia, or conquered, such as Germany’s allies – Romania, Hungary or Bulgaria, ultimately had a generally formal significance for the model of their dependency. A characteristic feature of the Soviet Union’s model of dependency for the occupied countries was the construction of façade political organisations and unions (“democratic” parties, national fronts, etc.) that created the appearance of democracy. Their important function was also to create subordinated local political and state elites from the top down. The accommodation with local elites was a basic tool of Russian imperial rule also before the Bolshevik revolution (until 1830 also in Poland). Communist parties (previously – except in Czechoslovakia – marginal on the

political scene) became not only an obvious instrument of Soviet policy but also a means of establishing *de facto* colonial relations. From the perspective of Central and Eastern European societies, the Soviet victory in the war created a situation with limited prospects for a change or improvement. After the possibility of open change was blocked, social reactions and attitudes spanned a spectrum: from armed and political resistance through particularistic protests and passive resistance, followed by adaptation, various forms of conformism, collaboration with the new governments, and even ideological identification with them.

The catalogue of problems that arises when trying to verify the research needs regarding Soviet participation in World War II is extensive, and fully addressing them goes far beyond the scope of a single or even several issues of an academic journal. We therefore acknowledge the need to pay integrated attention to the problem of the Soviet Union's political plans for the region and the tools for implementing them. Another issue is the treatment of both national and cultural communities in the territories conquered by the USSR: from the liquidation of their legal representations to the oppression and repression on a micro scale. Another thematic area is the problem of respecting human and civil rights during the war by the Soviet authorities – from the rights of their own citizens and citizens of the conquered countries, to the rights of veterans of the conflict participants.

Another issue that should be raised falls into the category of broadly understood customs of warfare. What is notable is the Soviet treatment of their own citizens and those of other states, namely, reducing them to mere human resources for exploitation,

extending to isolation and liquidation if they were seen as threats to the cohesion and security of the Soviet rule. Among the tools used on a massive scale there are deportations and internment of entire population groups (and at the end of the war even entire national groups), precisely distributed repressions against the leadership classes, and the use of forced labour as a common tool of economic and security policy. The issue of the fate of prisoners of war also remains an illustration of the Soviet policy towards their own citizens and veterans of their armed forces. The Soviet war law actually criminalised soldiers for surrendering, leaving their positions, or retreating, all of which are very common circumstances during an ongoing combat. It cannot be said that the Soviet authorities were completely indifferent to the fate of the Soviet soldiers in German captivity (where the soldiers were treated inhumanely). However, upon their liberation, they were automatically regarded as suspects, as if the very fact of having been in captivity made them guilty. The same applied to the soldiers who found themselves surrounded or behind the enemy lines, even if they managed to avoid being captured, as well as to the civilian populations on the territories occupied by the Germans or their allies. The fact that a significant number of Soviet soldiers were in the auxiliary service of the German armed forces or joined units formed by the Germans only exacerbated this situation, making it easier to blame them all. However, it cannot be denied that the experiences of the Soviet citizens before the outbreak of the war – even if they did not personally experience terror or deprivation of liberty – could have led them to abandon their loyalty to the Soviet government or even to oppose it.

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The Soviet point of view, combining imperial and ideological features, significantly influenced the course of World War II. To understand (and deconstruct) this imperial or colonial perspective, it may be helpful to compare two speeches by Joseph Stalin, which form the narrative framework of the Soviet understanding of European policy and Soviet participation in World War II. These are the so-called Chestnut Speech of 10 March 1939, which marked the Soviet Union's adoption of the position in the developing European crisis, and his speech of 9 January 1946, summarising World War II.

The speech of 10 March 1939 at the 18th congress of the VKP(b) contains significant fragments regarding the international situation, although the congress was supposed to concern the work of the party's Central Committee. Stalin stated that the post-war (i.e. after 1918) international system was established by the victorious countries: Great Britain, France, and the USA. He accused Japan, Germany, and Italy of breaking this order (through the wars in the Far East, Spain, and Abyssinia) and starting a "new imperialist war".

Stalin ridiculed the suggestions that the German-Italian alliance or the German-Italian-Japanese bloc could threaten European and Asian security, and the interests of Great Britain, France, and the USA, or even cause a war. However, he emphasised that an aggressive bloc of three countries existed and was indeed conducting wars—not against the Comintern, as they claimed, but against other states. As he put it, "before our eyes, an open division of the world and

spheres of influence is taking place at the expense of non-aggressive states, without any attempts at resistance, and sometimes with the consent of these states". Stalin explained the weakness of the attacked states by pointing to the "bourgeois" politicians' fear of a world war and the inevitable victory of the revolution in its aftermath. However, he pointed out that the main reason for the progress of the aggressor states was the refusal to build a collective security system (presumably, with the participation of the Soviets) in favour of "neutrality", thus openly criticising the policy of Western democracies. He directly accused the European powers making concessions to Germany of pushing Germany into war against the Soviet Union. Stalin paid special attention to the concerns of the British, French, and American press regarding German desires to annex Soviet Ukraine to Transcarpathian Ukraine (still part of Czechoslovakia, but, according to Stalin, already "in German hands"), which could not have been achieved without breaking away the southeastern territories of the Republic of Poland. Stalin commented on this unequivocally: "It seems that this suspicious noise was intended to raise the anger of the Soviet Union against Germany, poison the atmosphere and provoke a conflict with Germany without any apparent basis". He ridiculed those who wanted to annex the "elephant" (Soviet Ukraine) to the "kid goat" (Transcarpathian Ruthenia). He described the makers of such plans as "insane" and appealed to "normal people" to see the ridiculousness of the plans to annex Soviet Ukraine to the "so-called" Transcarpathian Ukraine (thus negatively commenting on the declarations of Avhustyn Voloshin, the leader of Transcarpathian Ruthenia, but

clearly directing his remarks also towards the German ruling circles). Here, Stalin criticised not so much the “aggressor states” but primarily the Western public opinion, which was bitterly disappointed with the German post-Munich policy (even before the peak of the crisis in March 1939), attributing to it (and implicitly to the governments of Western countries) the desire to push Germany into war against the Soviet Union. Concluding his arguments about the contemporary crisis, he used an unveiled threat: “However, it is necessary to point out that the great and dangerous political game started by the supporters of the policy of non-interference may end in their serious defeat”. This was not a threat directed at Adolf Hitler.

Stalin’s speech of 10 March 1939 indicated an important turning point in the European situation – it was an act of Soviet appeasement, moreover, made in the post-Munich context. The issue of Transcarpathian Ruthenia was a pretext to say whether the Soviet Union saw a war threat from Germany possible and whether it considered the fears of Western European opinion about the development of events to be justified (and Stalin considered them an attempt to sic Germany on the Soviet Union). The part of the speech concerning European affairs is filled with clear suggestions as to the further development of events in Europe, where Hitler’s Germany maintained the initiative. Stalin’s speech was a clear signal that not only was there a space for understanding between the Soviet Union and Germany, but that the latter also had a *de facto* free hand in regard to the Second Czechoslovak Republic, as long as they did not take steps – presumably in line with Western democracies’ interests – against the Soviet Union. A few days later, the acts of German

annexation occurred in Czechoslovakia and Lithuania; Slovakia became “independent” under German tutelage, and Hungary annexed Transcarpathian Ruthenia with German acceptance (and Polish approval). While the sequence of events primarily depended on German preparations and plans, Stalin’s speech could be interpreted as a Soviet “green light” for annexation (the Sovietologist Adam Ulam pointed out that Stalin had little else to offer Germany at that time). Subsequent events positioned the Soviet Union not only as an observer but also as a moderator of the deepening crisis, leading up to the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which triggered the war. As the historian Gerhard Weinberg noted, Soviet policy had long sought cooperation with Germany, but success depended on Hitler’s willingness to engage in it. It was not only the Soviet “nod of the head” in March 1939 that was important in this case. Germany could no longer count on the appeasement from Western democracies or most Central European countries, and in Central and Eastern Europe it needed a more serious collaborator than “junior partners”, naturally oriented towards achieving smaller, particularistic goals. Germany nuanced its position when concluding the Pact of Steel in May 1939 to avoid openly declaring as an enemy of the Soviet Union, leading to direct German-Soviet negotiations. The path to closer agreement was thus opened, culminating in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

On 1 September 1939, as Hitler announced in the Reichstag the commencement of military operations against Poland, he summarised the essential elements of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact to the German deputies:

“[...] Russia and Germany are governed by two different doctrines. [...] At the moment, Soviet Russia has no intention of exporting its doctrine to Germany, I no longer see any reason why we should still oppose one another. We are clear on that on both sides. Any struggle between our people would only be of advantage to others”.

Hitler described the conclusion of the pact with the Soviet Union as “eine ungeheure Wende für die Zukunft” (“an incredible change for the future”), and his entourage saw this act as a “stroke of genius” of the Führer.

The divergence of strategic goals in Europe between the Soviet Union and the German Reich became fully apparent after the outbreak of the war. Hitler’s assessment of his situation and of the possibility of reaching an agreement with Stalin pushed him to attack the Soviets. As a consequence of that war, the Soviet Union found itself in the camp of the Allies who fought against Hitler since 1939 (when the USSR supported the Nazi Third Reich). However, the far-reaching consequences, as seen today, were much more serious: the USSR demanded, and actually obtained from the Allies, the mandate to arrange affairs in Central Europe according to its own plan.

The interpretation of the war, dictated by Joseph Stalin himself in a speech delivered at a “pre-election meeting” with voters from Stalin’s own constituency of the city of Moscow on 9 February 1946, specifically defined the USSR’s attitude towards the rest of the world. Stalin stated *ex post* that the outbreak of the war was essentially inevitable due to the internal conflicts of the “capitalist” world, resulting from its very essence and expressed in the pursuit of raw materials, sales markets, and the creation of “spheres of influence” using armed force. Perhaps

the conflict could have been avoided by an international economic agreement, but Stalin argued that it was not possible to achieve it “under the current capitalist conditions of development of the world economy” (and therefore, according to Marxist categories, “objectively”). The nature of the war between two hostile capitalist camps was exacerbated by the fact that on one side of the conflict there were states that, before entering the conflict, had built “cruel, terrorist regimes” and removed the remnants of “bourgeois and democratic freedoms”, and during the conflict, they did not hide their ambitions to conquer and rule the world. This turned the war from a conflict arising solely from the internal contradictions of capitalism into an “anti-fascist, liberation” war aimed at establishing democratic freedoms. To use Stalin’s words: “The entry of the Soviet Union into the war against the Axis powers could only reinforce – and indeed did reinforce – the anti-fascist and liberation character of World War II.”

In Stalin’s terms, the construction of “cruel, terrorist regimes” was simply a function of the development of the capitalist world, which, due to its very mode of operation, was doomed to lead to devastating and gigantic conflicts. The Soviet Union, by definition remaining outside the processes creating conflicts in the capitalist world, took part in the war on the side of countries defending democratic freedoms, and the coalition formed on this basis defeated the Axis powers. The unspoken – but clear – suggestion here is that the role of the Soviet Union must have been decisive. The Soviet entry into the war strengthened (one might guess, irreversibly) the “anti-fascist, liberation” character of the war, which, as a conflict between capitalist

states, was inevitable anyway. The defence of democratic freedoms (previously not of much value to the Soviets) became a key feature of the conflict. In this interpretation, the Soviet Union was not only a benevolent force but also completely uninvolved in the causes of the outbreak of the war. The phrase of Marxist “social liberation” was supplemented with the image of “liberation” toward democratic freedoms, aligning the Soviet Union with countries that truly defended these freedoms (and their own independence).

This interpretation distorts the circumstances of the Soviet Union’s participation in the outbreak and course of World War II, the essence of Soviet war goals, and the direct effects of the war on the countries and nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

The participation of the Soviet Union in starting the chain of events that led to the outbreak of the war is indisputable and intentional. It was not by the Soviets’ doing that one of the belligerent “hostile camps of the capitalist world” turned against the Soviet Union, despite having previously agreed on the division of “spheres of influence” with it and using its help. It cannot be said that the Soviet Union joined the coalition of states fighting Nazi Germany and its allies to consciously defend democratic freedoms.

One can hardly claim that the Soviet Union was a state capable of liberating anyone – the removal of the German occupation or the domestic authoritarian regime (as in the case of Romania and Hungary) did not result in the restoration or establishment of political sovereignty and democratic freedoms for those nations. The Soviet Union itself was neither democratic at its core, nor did it respect the freedoms of its citizens.

From the point of view of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet-style “liberation” was a conquest, whether direct or expressed in the abrogation of their internal and external sovereignty and the democratic legitimacy of the authorities. The borders, political system and scope of civil and human freedoms of Central European countries were no longer decided by their nations; instead, they were determined by the Soviet *raison d’état*. Stalin, in 1946, criticised the construction of “spheres of influence” and tools of economic exploitation as instruments specific to the “capitalist world”, yet he himself successfully built such spheres of influence and structures of exploitation – not only economic but also military and political.

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This issue consists of essays and case studies devoted to the history of the Soviet Union’s participation in World War II, topics that have been intentionally underrepresented in Soviet and communist historiography and often misinterpreted by propaganda.

The opening essay by Professor Marek Kornat addresses the Soviet Union’s political attitude towards the European conflict from 1938 to 1945 and its parties, and the strategies adopted by the Soviet state towards countries within its sphere of influence. The second essay, by Rafał Opulski, PhD, from the IPN’s Cracow branch, explores the origins and foundations of the propaganda myth surrounding the “Great Patriotic War”.

Professor Ihor Il’yushin, in his study, examines the political and propaganda dynamics concerning the territory of Czechoslovakia inhabited by Ruthenians – Transcarpathian Ruthenia

(Ukraine) – from the Munich Agreement to its incorporation by Hungary. The next section, concerning the circumstances surrounding the dismantling of the sovereignty of the Baltic States, includes studies by Ainārs Lerhis, PhD, and Grete Grumolte-Lerhe, PhD, on the functioning of the Latvian diplomatic service in the face of Latvia's loss of independence; a study by Gints Zelmenis on the process of Latvia's incorporation into the USSR; and a study by Algimantas Kasparavičius on the circumstances and context of Lithuania's loss of independence in 1940.

The article by the prominent Polish military historian, Professor Aleksander Smoliński, discusses the condition of Soviet armoured and cavalry forces immediately before the outbreak of the Soviet-German war. The military history researchers from the Slovak Vojenský historický ústav (the Institute of Military History in Bratislava, VHU), Igor Baka, PhD, and Matej Medvecký, PhD, devoted their study to the participation of the Slovak army in the German attack on the USSR in 1941. The Czech historian from USD AV ČR (the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic), Doc. PhDr Vít Smetana, PhD, presented the relations between the Czechoslovak government in exile in Great Britain and the USSR. An independent Russian researcher, Prof. Boris Sokolov, reported his experience in researching and presenting the issue of the amount and estimate of losses suffered by the Soviet armed forces during the "Great Patriotic War" (a topic that he presented in more detail in his monographs on the losses of the Russian and Soviet armed forces in the 20th century and the losses of the Soviet Army during World War II). Ukrainian researchers, Prof. Tamara

Vrons'ka and Tetiana Pastushenko, PhD, in their article, drew attention to the repressive measures and discrimination that affected the Soviet soldiers who found themselves surrounded by German forces or cut off behind the enemy lines. Renata Kobylarz-Buła, PhD, a researcher at the Polish Central Museum of Prisoners-of-War in Opole-Łambinowice, addressed the fate of Soviet prisoners of war captured by the German armed forces. The fate of prisoners of war is also the subject of the article by Antti Kujala, PhD, from the University of Helsinki, which examines the Soviet prisoners of war in Finnish captivity and Finnish prisoners of war in Soviet captivity from 1941 to 1944. Ryszard Sodel from the IPN Archives in Warsaw, the author of the source publication on the Kalmyk Cavalry Corps in the service to the German armed forces, presented the history of the establishment and activities of this unit, formed by the Germans from among Soviet citizens in occupied territory. Robert Rochowicz from the Military Institute of Armament Technology in Zielonka briefly outlined the general details of the Allied assistance to the Soviet naval forces. Bogusław Tracz, PhD, a historian from the IPN's branch in Katowice, described the circumstances and direct effects of the Soviet Army's entry into Upper Silesia, a province that had been divided between Poland and Germany before the war and was fully incorporated into the Reich during the conflict. The topic of the economic exploitation of the formally "liberated" territory by the Soviet armed forces on a micro scale was addressed by Robert Piwko, PhD, a historian from the IPN's branch in Kielce, who described the Soviet military administration's rule at the bridgehead on the western bank of the Vistula near Sandomierz,

created in the summer of 1944. The series of case studies concludes with two articles by researchers from the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, Toomas Hiio and Peeter Kaasik, PhD, describing the circumstances of the entry and re-establishment of the Soviet rule in Estonia from 1944 to 1946, along with an article by Prof. László Borhi from Indiana University on the complex of economic exploitation in Hungary following the occupation by Soviet armed forces.

An important element of the issue is the presentation of a remembrance institution: the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic, written by Prof. Filip Musiał, who served as the museum's director from 2022 to 2023. The museum is located in a historic prison in Warsaw, where numerous political prisoners were incarcerated between 1945 and 1989 for their participation in political and armed resistance against the communist dictatorship; many of them were executed there.

The year 2023 brought significant changes in the Editorial and Academic Board of the journal.

Ms. Anna Karolina Piekarska, who came up with the idea for the journal, and acted as its first editor-in-chief, left the Editorial Board. She has supervised the edition of the current - fifth - issue of the "Institute of National Remembrance Review" and co-edited it with Dr. Franciszek Dąbrowski, the deputy editor-in-chief.

At this point, I would like to sincerely thank Anna for her initiative, commitment, and work.

Starting in 2024, the following members will serve on the Editorial Board: Franciszek Dąbrowski, PhD (editor-in-chief) and editors: Filip Gańczak, PhD (IPN in Warsaw), Maciej Korkuć, PhD (IPN Branch in Cracow), Tomasz S. Gałązka (IPN Branch in Gdańsk), and Bogusław Wójcik, PhD (IPN Branch in Rzeszów).

In 2023, Prof. Norman Naimark (Stanford University), Prof. Mark Kramer (Harvard University), Prof. Vladimir Tismaneanu (University of Maryland), Karol Polejowski PhD, DSc, and Prof. Stephane Courtois (CNRS) agreed to join the Academic Board of the journal. I hope that the enhancement of the Academic Board will contribute to the development of the journal – I would like to thank the readers for the trust placed in the journal and its publisher.

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