In my opinion everything started from the Munich Agreement. This story is so typical in terms of political traditions of betrayal and double crossings, for the modern West as well.

Russian TV-journalist and Moscow Duma deputy Andrei Medvedev, 2019

If Europe began to plunge into darkness, it happened not on August 23rd of 1939 but a bit earlier when Western capitals made a choice in favour of appeasement and the Munich Betrayal was the apotheosis of this policy.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, 2020

In December 1989 the Second Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union officially condemned the secret protocols to the 1939 Soviet-German non-aggression treaty, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Two years before its collapse the Soviet Union admitted that the protocols were “legally untenable and invalid from the moment they were signed”. This stance was initially inherited by the main successor of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, but not for long. Elements of anti-Western resentment were already obvious during Boris Yeltsin’s

1 MEDVEDEV, Andrei [no title]. In: Telegram [online], 03. 09. 2019. [Accessed 2022-09-09.] Available at: https://t.me/MedvedevVesti/1258.


presidency, which became much stronger under Vladimir Putin. Very soon, it was quite clear that the Russian regime perceives any Western judgement of the pact as an attempt to challenge the whole glorious narrative of the so-called Great Patriotic War (Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina). “The victory is now the principal element in Russia’s memory politics, with corresponding ideology used to legitimize militarism and great power ambitions,” the Armenian political scientist Armen Grigoryan reminds in his recent article for New Eastern Europe.\(^4\)

The pivotal moments for the Russian government were in 2008 when the European Parliament adopted the “Declaration on the Proclamation of 23 August as European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism” and in 2009 when the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly voted in favour of the “Resolution on Divided Europe Re-united: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21\(^{st}\) century”.\(^5\) Konstantin Kosachev, then a parliamentarian for Putin’s United Russia (Edinaia Rossiia) party and chairman of the Russian State Duma’s foreign relations committee (and current vice-chairman of the Federation Council) defined it as “nothing but an attempt to re-write the history of World War Two”.\(^6\) A joint statement by both chambers of the Russian Parliament described the Declaration as an attempt to equate the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and labeled it as “absolutely groundless”.\(^7\) Ever since then, the very mention of


\(^{7}\) [Anonymous:] Sovet palaty Soveta Federatsii i Sovet Gosudarstvennoi Dumy priniali sovmestnoe zaiavljenie v sviazi s priniatiem Parlamentskoj assambleei OBSE rezoliutsii „Vossoedinenie razdelennoi Evropy: pooshchrenie prav cheloveka i grazhdanskikh svobod v regione OBSE v XXI veke” [The Council of the Houses of the Federation Council and the Council of the State Duma Adopted a Joint Statement on the Adoption by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly of the Resolution “Reuniting a Divided Europe: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the Twenty-First Century”]. In: Gosudarstvennaia Duma Federalnogo
the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was and still remains a very sensitive topic in Russian public debates.

Generally speaking, the Russian official and semi-official response was split into two main categories. The first tried to justify the whole case and white-wash Soviet policy by describing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact as a casual non-aggression treaty. “The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was one of thousands of unjust agreements which look at us from each page of European History,” wrote Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov in 2009.8 “The Soviet Union signed a non-aggression agreement with Germany. They say, ‘Oh, how bad’. But what is so bad about it, if the Soviet Union did not want to fight? What is so bad?,” asked Vladimir Putin during his meeting with young academics and history teachers in 2014.9 “This pact didn’t generally differ from plenty of similar documents, signed by other countries at the same time,” said the Russian pro-Kremlin historian and political analyst Oleg Nemenskii in 2019, when the European Parliament adopted another resolution condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.10 The Russian journalist Nikolai Dolgopolov, an author close to the Russian intelligence services, wrote that the pact is not a “reason for self-flagellation”, while the former Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov even said that the Soviet Union “didn’t have

8 KARAGANOV, Sergei: Bolshaia chast Evropy – eto kontinent proigravshikh [Much of Europe Is a Continent of Losers]. In: Rossiiskaia Gazeta [online], 21. 08. 2009. [Accessed 2022-09-13.] Available at: https://rg.ru/2009/08/21/karaganov-pakt.html. Rossiiskaia Gazeta is the official newspaper of the Russian government and thus has a huge audience. In June 2022, it was the fourth Russian newspaper by number of citations in other media and sixth by number of citations in social networks. For the details of its estimated impact (also regarding cases stated further in the text), see the Russian media market research body Medialogiia: https://www.mlg.ru.


plans to participate in the partition of Poland”.\textsuperscript{11} Russian officials including Putin himself, would sometimes express a mild condemnation, although in a very sly “yes, but…” manner. That is why the experts of \textit{EUvsDisinfo} have called this policy a “ping-pong rally”: “Denouncement (ping) – praise (pong) – denouncement (ping) – praise (pong)”\textsuperscript{12}

The second significant part of Russian propaganda efforts in this area is a whataboutist rhetoric aimed at blaming Western powers for their friendly policy toward Nazi Germany. The \textit{Merriam-Webster} dictionary defines whataboutism as “the act or practice of responding to an accusation of wrongdoing by claiming that an offense committed by another is similar or worse”.\textsuperscript{13} Though it is obvious that this phenomenon is very old and ubiquitous in different societies, the term itself is usually linked to the Soviet anti-Western information wars, especially relating to the Soviet Union’s aggressive policy and human rights violations. As Aleksandra Srdanovic, a researcher with Harvard University’s Russia Matters Initiative, reminds us, “by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, accusations of America ‘lynching Negroes’ had become a punchline for irreverent jokes about Soviet officialdom’s own hypocrisy and [...] a synecdoche for Soviet propaganda as a whole”.\textsuperscript{14}

Of course, the question must be asked at this point as to what propaganda is and what makes someone a voice of it. The neutral definition of a propagandist is: “someone who spreads ideas, facts, or allegations deliberately to further a cause or to damage an opposing cause.”\textsuperscript{15}

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or share their information intentionally, but they also know its [sic] propaganda specifically designed to further an aim. In this article, I put together a relatively broad range of people as propagandists, such as officials, journalists of state-controlled media, and regime-affiliated pundits.

It comes as no surprise that Putin’s regime wishes to place the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact story into this whataboutist frame. For example, Putin wrote already on 7 May 2005 in a *Le Figaro* article, that the pact “was in no way different to the idea of the Munich Agreement. Both of them alienated objective allies in the fight against Nazism and evoked reciprocal mistrust and suspicion. Soviet leaders had the impression that Munich not only meant the division of Czechoslovakia, but also the isolation of the USSR, and pushed Hitler towards aggression in the east.”

This deserves a little digression. The *Le Figaro* article is remarkable as it is perhaps the first of Putin’s performances as a historian. After almost two decades and several long articles, it is still unclear who is doing the main research and analysis here. The foreign policy experts Fiona Hill and Angela Stent claim that one of Putin’s main assistants is Vladimir Medinskii – whose own reputation is more than controversial – but there is no explicit evidence for this. Putin himself simply claims that he asks his colleagues to select archival materials for him. It is obvious that the approach of Putin and his anonymous co-authors is selective. The majority of professional historians prefer to keep silent about Putin’s historical texts and public comments, although sometimes there are some very critical notes. For example, the historian and journalist Stas Kuvaldin defines them as “neophyte revelations.”

20 KUVALDIN, Stanislav: Nash staryi prezident: Chto my uznali iz bolshoi press-konferentsii 2019 goda o Vladimire Putine [Our Old President: What We Learned from the Big 2019
The following years only solidified his stance. In his 2020 article Putin underscored that the Munich Betrayal involved British and French leaders and that it “destroyed even the formal, fragile guarantees that remained on the continent”, adding that nowadays “European politicians […] wish to sweep the Munich Betrayal under the carpet”.21

Last but not least, Russian propagandists have steadily insisted that Europe should try to neglect and ignore the Munich Agreement: “The West and the former socialist countries often remember the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact but there is very little mention of the previous events of Munich 1938 when Great Britain and France de facto handed Czechoslovakia over to Nazi Germany,” wrote Russian historian and journalist Vadim Trukhachev in 2013.22 Political commentator Piotr Akopov declared in 2019 that Russophobia will not help Europe to erase its romance with Hitler from memory,23 and Alexei Pushkov, a member of Putin’s United Russia party, responsible for information policy and who later became a senator, seconded this opinion in his Telegram channel in 2020: “Precisely because of the indelible stain of Munich Agreement with Hitler and Mussolini, because of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia and then Poland, which were their allies, Western democracies zealously pass the buck to Moscow. By blaming us, these countries try to avoid responsibility for encouraging Hitler to start a war.”24 Similar arguments and statements can be found across anti-Western propaganda platforms from various political commentators,25 some of whom are historians by (original) profession. This is the case of, for example, Modest Kolerov, editor-in-chief of the staunchly pro-Kremlin Russian website Regnum, when he wrote:


24 PUSHKOV, Alexei [no title]. In: Telegram [online], 20. 06. 2020. [Accessed 2022-09-14.] Available at: https://t.me/alexey_pushkov/618.

“And if you want, for your Hitler’s advocacy, to spread his responsibility among his accomplices you have to add to them democratic England, democratic France, Poland... and Hungary,”.26

In recent years, Russia’s relations with Poland have deteriorated probably even faster than its relations with other European states. That is why the majority of pro-Kremlin contributors to the debate pay great attention to the Polish steps taken in 1938, i.e. the annexation of the contested area of Cieszyn Silesia. “Poland regularly blames the USSR and modern Russia that Moscow used Hitler’s invasion and attached significant territories to Ukraine and Belarus, [but] one year before Poland used the Munich Betrayal and annexed Těšín, which is still contested,” wrote the columnist Anton Krylov in 2018.27 (Why does he consider this area to be contested?) Other bloggers and commentators published posts in a similar vein in the following years.28 So claimed Boris Rozhin, a.k.a Colonel K/Cassade that “Poles so badly wanted to become Hitler’s allies and attack the USSR together”.29

Regarding the Munich Agreement, there is no attempt to dismiss its importance. It really was an indisputable failure of Western democracies, which led precisely to further and further Axis aggression in Europe and even beyond. And perhaps whataboutism itself is not that bad if it helps us to remember controversial things in the past and to test whether we are serious about our principles, as some intellectuals underscore.30 But at the same time, it is obvious that Russian propaganda’s Munich Agreement narrative is not about starting a real conversation. It is an attempt to shut down conversation about the Molotov-Ribbentrop


28 [ROZHIN, Boris:] [no title] In: Telegram [online], 08. 06. 2021. [Accessed 2022-13-09.] Available at: https://t.me/colonel_cassad/87884.


pact, and its target audience is a domestic one: most of the sources quoted above are from Russian-language media outlets which are one way or another under state control. And, in pursuit of such an equivocal goal, Kremlin propagandists paint an inaccurate picture of the pre-war events in Central Europe. They come to false conclusions about the faults and responsibilities of the different parties. This politically motivated narrative, amplified by state-owned media and state-controlled social networks, will be echoed in the national memory for a very long time.

But Russia also uses this historical interpretation to legitimize its geopolitical claims. And the aggression against Ukraine, especially in 2022, gives us a clue as to how dangerous such memory policy could be. Russian studies scholar Jade McGlynn underscores that, “by promoting its view of World War II – one in which the Soviet Union did not occupy but liberated Eastern Europe, one in which the West left the Russians to bleed dry, one in which only non-Russian people collaborated with the Nazis – the Kremlin also promotes its vision of how the world ought to look.”

The Russian ruling regime justifies its aggressive policy by different means and one of them is whataboutist distortion of the history of the Second World War, which challenges the European consensus interpretation and is highly confrontational, especially towards its neighbors. In February 2022 it led Russia into a bloody war against Ukraine and we cannot rule out further aggressive steps triggered by this confrontational attitude. We can hardly insist that the Czech Republic and Central Europe as a whole are under military threat right now but it is quite clear that the Kremlin will play its cards to destabilize the situation in the region and prepare its intervention, though rather indirectly.

Abstract
Under Vladimir Putin’s regime Russia seeks to whitewash Soviet history and promote an anti-Western narrative in order to legitimize its territorial claims and political demands in Eastern Europe. Drawing on electronic sources such as social media posts, articles from the Russian media, newspaper comments and media statements, the author demonstrates that one of its tools is the exaggerated condemnation of

the Munich Agreement of September 1938 and the emphasis on the historical guilt of the Western powers in the Nazi expansion, made to avoid discussion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed less than a year later.

Keywords:
Russia; Soviet Union; Vladimir Putin; Munich Agreement; Molotov-Ribbentrop pact; politics of history; memory wars; propaganda.

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