



## BOOK REVIEW

# The Past Bursts into the Present

Review of Ivan I. Kurilla (2022). *Bitva za proshloe. Kak politika meniaet istoriiu* [Battle for the Past: How Politics Changes History]. Alpina Publisher.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses his deep gratitude to Mikhail Brodsky for a thoughtful translation and careful revision of the work.

The research boom in the field of memory studies, which began about thirty years ago, eventually reached Russia and, in some ways, absorbed the minds of Russian social scientists. Today in Russia, memory studies is one of the most fashionable areas of humanities. Every year, dozens of conferences are held, and hundreds of books and articles are published, in which the memory of the past is the main focus of attention. Curiously, historians are not the leaders in this field. Anthropologists, sociologists, and experts in other fields have taken up the lead, for it has become clear that historical science is only one of many forms of knowledge about the past and is more of an intellectual exercise whose goal is to recreate a consistent and comprehensive picture of the past. Memory, on the other hand, if we discuss it not just as a psychological process but as a social phenomenon, is a sociocultural practice with its own—sometimes highly selective, inconsistent, or even controversial—ways of perceiving the past. Simply put, the watershed between historical studies and memory of the past is not *how*, *when*, and *why* events occurred or how they were connected, but *what*, *how* and *why* we remember them, retain some of them in our collective memory and forget others.

The book *Battle for the Past: How Politics Changes History* by Ivan Kurilla, a professor at the European University at St. Petersburg, was published by Alpina Publisher in 2022, and immediately attracted attention of the Russian memory studies community. This is a very unusual book; truth be told, it is nothing like I have ever read before. To begin with, it is not so easy to define its genre. Written

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by an academic, the book is not a traditional scientific research, filled with hard-to-understand paragraphs and whole chapters dedicated to nuances of terminology, reading which you catch yourself thinking that the author wants to show off his erudition rather than tackle the essence of the problem. Conversely, Ivan Kurilla's book is a true scientific page-turner. The author provides no methodological framework for the research but, instead, from page one he sweeps you away into an intricate maze of "cultural wars" and "memory wars" that have erupted all around the world. This makes the book somewhat eclectic, but such a "non-academic" approach works fine. Using lots of examples, Dr. Kurilla shows how in different countries—in different ways, but invariably—the past intrudes into the present because people need the past to rely on and do not accept the history that has been created without their participation (p. 6). The essence of conflicts over memory is exposed immediately and in its entirety, and therefore the usual argument about the accuracy of definitions simply becomes redundant. At the same time, the book does not fall into the category of popular science. Unlike popular science literature, the book does not simplify complex issues. Ivan Kurilla just tells stories—and tells them masterfully and with ease. A kaleidoscope of stories, and the author's outstanding erudition and impeccable style capture and hold the reader's attention to the last page.

The structure of the book is also somewhat unusual. The book consists of an introduction (called *Prehistory*), a conclusion (*The End of Stories*), and four large parts, each of which, in turn, includes a prologue as an independent narrative, three "memory wars" stories, and an epilogue—again as a separate story. In total, there are twenty-two independent stories. The research extends from Japan and Korea to South Africa, and from Russia and Ukraine to France and the USA. There are especially many American stories, which is not surprising since Ivan Kurilla is a well-known in Russia specialist in American history. Apparently, the author wanted to convey the idea that the Russia is not unique in terms of how it handles "memory wars" and that many other countries have gone through or are going through similar processes.

The book has one important feature that distinguishes it from similar researches—an "enlightenment dimension." The past has long ceased to be the domain of historians and is now a tool of politics. History is becoming a testing ground for the struggle for the minds of people, but the forces are not equal here. As a rule, the power elites and the government have the upper hand. To solve the urgent problems of the day, politicians exploit history in their own interests, dissecting it, experimenting with it, offering society the "only correct interpretation," and making it the basis for decisions that are binding on everyone. This is where the ideas of a single school history textbook, the fight against "falsification of history," imposed commemorative practices, and many other things that make up government historical policy are born. However, the government does not and cannot have a monopoly on historical memory, and therefore dealing with our past is not so much the task of the government, but the task of the entire society, of all the people and groups that make it up. Ivan Kurilla's book is just about that. On more than two hundred pages, he shows how this happens in other countries, what contributes and what does not contribute to the reconciliation of the parties in the "wars of memory," and what lessons we can and should learn from other countries'

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experience. Civic education through the prism of memory politics seems to be the overarching goal of the book.

It is no surprise that Ivan Kurilla begins his research with discussions about teaching history in school, for historical education serves as the most important socializing force, establishing an interpretation of the past that makes children real citizens (p. 28). The seemingly simple question of *What kind of history should be taught in school?* is, in fact, incredibly difficult but fundamentally important. Many countries have gone through battles over school textbooks. Kurilla discusses the experience of Chile, Great Britain, and the USA, and recalls the plans to create a unified textbook for Russian schools. Any government will have an interest here, which is quite understandable: it seeks to present history and explain the past from the perspective of the ruling political class. Civil society, by contrast, believes that if we accept that society is heterogeneous and that there are different groups with their own interests and value systems, we must also accept that each of these groups has the right to its own interpretation of the past. Therefore, the question of the content of the school history course should be a matter of public discussion and consensus reached, where representatives of the government, historical science, teachers, and the parent community should participate on an equal footing.

Naturally, for the vast majority of people, acquaintance with history is not limited to reading a school textbook. No less important for the preservation of collective memory are museums and historical exhibitions, which always offer their own interpretation of events, and therefore become the subject of political attention and are often used as a tool of manipulation (p. 39). The author provides examples of how identity politics influence the narrative of the past in the United States, where the Museum of Native American History, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Museum of the American Latino offer their own narratives. In other words, we see fragmentation of narratives about the past based on identity of origin. In Russia, the perception of the past is split along ideological lines and the opposition of the government narrative to the narrative of freedom is most pronounced (p. 41). The government overtly dominates: numerous conservative exhibitions like “Russia. My History” are opposed by few alternative projects such as the St. Petersburg Museum of the Political History of Russia or the Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg.

The situation is similar in Russian cinematography, except that the dictate of the state is almost absolute here. Back in 2009, the Cinema Fund was created in Russia to finance the films that the government wanted, the films which were devoted mostly to historical or “military-patriotic” narratives. Kurilla points out that in the historical films produced before that year, Russia’s past was viewed quite critically, and the government was often seen as a source of violence. The films released after 2009 are more focused on the government’s struggle with internal and external enemies. According to Kurilla, Many will agree that contemporary Russian cinema uses the past to assert the narrative about the strong power of the government and weakness of society” (p. 58). After all, cinematography is an art and does not necessarily need or care about historical authenticity. A historical movie is always a kind of fiction, a man-made myth, which could be used to tell an unsophisticated audience in simple

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language about the past, to explain the present, and to plant ideological seeds for the future. Powers-that-be are well aware of this and therefore use cinema for propaganda purposes.

Kurilla is particularly concerned with the memorial landscape of cities and, above all, with monuments. By erecting monuments and other memorial objects, the ruling elite enshrines in society the historical narrative it needs and shapes public perception of the heroes and heroic events of the past. If interpretations do not change over the course of several generations, Kurilla writes, then a large part of the monuments begins to serve as a reminder of people and events whose significance society no longer feels (p. 77). They become a kind of “imposed memory,” and the ruling elite determines what society should or should not remember. In this case, memorial objects to a certain extent stabilize the dominant historical narrative and the value system associated with it. However, with a change of regime, and even more so during the years of social upheavals (wars, revolutions), a reassessment of the past inevitably takes place in society, followed by a change in value orientations. A new historical narrative begins to dominate, which materializes in a new symbolic politics and a new memorial landscape. We need not go far to find examples: the mass toppling of Lenin statues in Ukraine known as *Leninopad* (Lininfall), the dismantling of the monument to Dzerzhinsky at Moscow’s Lubyanka Square in 1991 and the heated discussion of its restoration thirty years later, in 2021. Depending on the degree of radicalism, the new elite either tears down monuments and erects new ones— alternatively, it may restore monuments demolished by the previous regime—or erects new monuments right next to the old ones (p. 78), Ivan Kurilla concludes.

Similar things happened with proper names of places (how can we forget renaming of streets, squares, and cities) and, especially, with the holiday dates of the national calendar. Before the early modern period, the church had a monopoly on space and time, establishing a religious picture of the world in proper names of places (toponyms) and the calendar. Later, politicians began to use power to put space and time at their service, and for this they reform the calendar and the calculation of time, introduce new secular holidays, change names of cities and streets, and erect monuments to the heroes in the central squares of cities (p. 105). This is especially evident in the examples of, say, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and partly in Russia in the 2000s, when politicians introduced new public holidays, changed the time zones, and first introduced and then abolished daylight saving time.

Public holidays play a special role in commemorative practices. First, they are celebrated every year, and such an annual cycle not only reminds us of past events, but also reinforces cultural traditions. Celebration of public holidays is a crucial element of commemoration. Second, every holiday should be markedly different from an ordinary day. To attain this goal, each public holiday must have its own festive rituals, festive rhetoric, visual symbols, and special values. It is important that the values be understood and accepted by people. Ivan Kurilla gives examples of attempts to add new holidays in Russia, such as Russia Day on June 12 and National Unity Day on November 4, which turned out to be unsuccessful because no common

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rituals have been developed (p. 110). Society did not accept the new holidays created by the authorities, and Russians still do not understand what they are supposed to be celebrating on these days.

However, there are also opposite examples, when a significant part of society would not mind celebrating a historical date, but the ruling elite, for one reason or another, refrains from any celebrations. This is what happened with November 7, the day of the Bolshevik Revolution, the centenary of which in 2017 the authorities simply ignored. Ivan Kurilla explains it this way: on the one hand, for the current Russian government, any revolution is an obvious evil (p. 113); on the other hand, the present-day Russia inherited a lot from the USSR, the brainchild of the Bolshevik Revolution, and therefore sees in the events of a century ago a positive start. As for Russian society, it is split over the issue of the Bolshevik Revolution and its legacy. As a result of the controversy, the Russian authorities could not solemnly celebrate the anniversary of the revolution, nor could they publicly condemn those events. It was the inability to say anything unambiguous about the revolution of 1917 that led the government and politicians to remain remarkably silent throughout the centenary year (p. 112). In a situation of ambiguity, silence was the best way out for them.

Ivan Kurilla devoted a significant part of the book to the “wars of memory” surrounding World War II. These “wars” over that war are particularly painful, since not much time has passed since its end, and its eyewitnesses, the bearers of memories, are still alive. The matter is exacerbated by the fact that each country, affected by WW II, in recent decades has formed its own historical narrative about the causes, the course of the war, and its results, and most importantly, the role and responsibility of this or that nation in the war. And here we see amazing transformations: the generally recognized aggressor country is trying to appear as a victim. According to Ivan Kurilla, in China and South Korea, many believe that Japan is using the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to portray the Japanese as victims of World War II rather than the aggressors responsible for war crimes (p. 125). Conversely, a country that was attacked by Hitler and then defeated Nazism is suddenly referred to as an aggressor. The concept of “two totalitarianisms” emerges, which holds not only Nazi Germany responsible for starting the war, but the Soviet Union too. This reassessment of WW II spread to virtually all of Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and caused, among other things, the Russian-Polish conflict, which had serious political consequences and led to cooling in relations between the two countries. The Russian government made statements about the “falsification of history” and about “belittling the role of the USSR in the defeat of fascism.” However, according to Kurilla, in this dispute, talking about the past is a manifestation of the contemporary conflict in which Russia found itself by the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 135). Having lost political control over Eastern Europe, Russia faced the threat of withdrawing from Europe and the crisis of Russia’s European identity. The former socialist allies no longer share the historical version of the outcome of WW II, asserted by the USSR and retained by Russia, but, on the contrary, while building their new non-socialist identity, they oppose it in every possible way, shutting themselves off from Russia. They feel that they are part of a European home, in which Russia has no place.

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In Russia, WW II—we prefer to call it the “Great Patriotic War”—occupies a special place in the collective memory. No other event in the recent past of Russian history has had such a striking effect on contemporary Russian identity as the Great Patriotic War. The ruling political elite of Russia is aware of this and uses it to its advantage. Since 2000,” Kurilla writes, “the Kremlin has used the memory of the Great Patriotic War as the major resource for ‘gluing’ society together and for maintaining its own legitimacy as the main custodian of that memory (p. 156). Moreover, with the departure of a generation of war participants, the Russian government becomes not only the main custodian, but also the main “manager” of the memory of the war, suppressing any attempts at undesirable interpretations of military events. Since the political and moral assessments of WW II are shared by the majority of the population, and since for many generations the war still remains an emotional part of personal and family history, the Russians easily accepted the leading role of the government in keeping the memory of the war, even though the government has exploited this memory in foreign policy and propaganda, or has used it against domestic political opponents. As a result, a peculiar “governmentalized canon” of memory about the Great Patriotic War has developed in contemporary Russia, which is mandatory for all.

In those cases, when public initiatives give rise to new commemorative practices pertaining to WW II, the Russian government rather quickly takes them under its control, making them an almost obligatory official ritual. Ivan Kurilla demonstrates this, using the Immortal Regiment campaign as an example. The movement of military reenactors, Immortal Regiment was started in the Siberian city of Tomsk by local journalists. At first, the initiative was opposed by the authorities of various levels, but was quickly picked up by civil activists throughout Russia and became extremely popular. Kurilla sees it as an attempt by people to express themselves in the only language left to them by the authorities, the language of conversation about the Great Patriotic War (p. 207). In turn, the Kremlin simply could not suppress a mass initiative that used the same language and appealed to the same legacy as the country’s leadership (p. 208). Since the movement could not be stopped, it was logical for the government to lead it. Therefore, the authorities chose to seize the popular initiative, effectively removing its activists, and made the Immortal Regiment one of the most important and spectacular official rituals of the V-day celebration. It is worth recalling here, although the author himself does not write about it, that exactly the same story happened with the “St. George Ribbon” movement. Produced by a group of enthusiasts, the movement quickly gained popularity, but was soon taken over by the authorities and placed under government patronage, while the St. George Ribbon was used almost on a par with the official state symbols. However, the “nationalization” of commemorative public initiatives led to a twofold result. On the one hand, officials managed to channel the energy of the masses into the official discourse of festive events and use it to strengthen the legitimacy of power. On the other hand, this partly has led to the emasculation of the original meaning of the people’s initiative and official profanation of historical memory.

Kurilla’s book ends with an afterword called *The End of Stories*. This is a clear allusion to Francis Fukuyama’s viral article *The End of History*, the conclusions of

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which the American philosopher himself later rejected, for history does not end, just as wars for history never end. Ivan Kurilla ends his book with these words: Disputes about the past will not disappear because their cause is in the present moment. History merely provides the material and language for current political conflicts. It is possible, however, to negotiate the boundaries of ‘historical’ conflicts. We must accept the fact that the multiplicity of the past is now with us forever and learn to live with it (pp. 230–231).

However, the question *Who shapes the memory of the past?* is still with us. Throughout the book, Kurilla repeatedly shows that national, religious, and ideological claims to ‘own’ the correct interpretation of history have long roots (p. 225). The author does not add historians to the list of those who want to “own history”, although that seems to be within their professional domain. Only twice in the text do we encounter references to the role of professional historians in the unfolding “wars of memory”, and then only in the context of their relationship with the authorities. The first mention pertains to the *Freedom of History* manifesto of French historians, who demanded the abolition of all restrictions on the freedom of scientific research. The second mention pertains to the memorial laws adopted in Russia, which made studying WW II extremely difficult for Russian historians. However, unfortunately, Ivan Kurilla does not provide an answer to the following question: What should the professional historical community do in a situation where the Russian government has unambiguously asserted the right to control the historical narrative (p. 166)? The answer, it seems, lies on the surface: we should focus on civic education on the basis of historical knowledge. Actually, the stories told by Ivan Kurilla in his book serve this task—civic education through the prism of the politics of memory.