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FINAL REPORT for the Blinken Open Society Archive

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Title: Cultures of Victory: Cold War Interventionism in the Shadow of the Second World War

Project Overview

In the broadest sense, the proposed research project asks how narratives of military victory shape a nation’s identity and perceived role in the world. It focuses on how such victory narratives fuel interventionist foreign policies and explores how political cultures rooted in myths and memories of military triumph respond to the realities of defeat and humiliation in war. After 1945, both the Soviet Union and United States crafted narratives around their triumphs over fascism to instill a sense of national pride, moral superiority, and to legitimize their actions on the global stage. These “cultures of victory,” I contend, played a crucial role in escalating Cold War tensions and continue to influence contemporary geopolitics. The project examines how these narratives were adapted over time, highlighting, for example, how American discourse equated the Soviet threat with that of Nazi Germany, while Soviet rhetoric depicted the capitalist West as a potential source of renewed fascism. The project also investigates how these historical narratives were used to gain domestic support for military and economic interventions in places like Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, framing such actions as extensions of the Second World War fight against tyranny. Additionally, it looks at how both superpowers managed the perception of military defeats, such as the U.S. experience in Vietnam and the Soviet-Afghan war, and how they utilized propaganda to sustain their images of victory. By revealing how the echoes of the Second World War continue to shape policy and national identity, this research provides new insights into the Cold War’s persistent legacy and underscores the importance of historical memory in contemporary international relations.

The Visegrad Fellows Program first came to my attention through a call for applications posted on the ASEEEES listserv. The annual program, titled “Lessons of the Cold War,” aligned

perfectly with my project. In particular, the specified subtopics, “Histories of Soviet invasions (1956, 1968, 1979)” and “The political instrumentalization and hollowing of concepts like ‘fascism,’ ‘Nazism,’ and ‘imperialism,’” were directly related to my research. It is a testament to the clarity of the call for applications that I immediately recognized the program’s relevance to my work. The scope of subtopics provided a strong foundation for my application and clearly indicated how my research would contribute to and benefit from the program's focus.

My work at the OSA as a Visegrad Fellow centered primarily on excavating the war narratives embedded in 1) Soviet and Western media, 2) internal Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty research reports, and 3) samizdat material. I am pleased to report that my findings greatly enhanced my overall project: In many cases, OSA materials reinforced and substantiated my earlier hypotheses; in others, however, it challenged my thinking, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how these victory narratives were constructed, disseminated, and contested.

Soviet and Western Media Materials

More than half of the materials consulted at the OSA included Soviet and Western media relating to the commemoration and legacy of the Second World War, the American war in Vietnam, and the Soviet-Afghan War. Although consisting mostly of published resources, including most prominently the major U.S., West German, French, and Soviet outlets, the major strength of the OSA subject files was the curated nature of these materials. Rather than search endlessly for relevant media through keyword searches and the like, the subject materials at the OSA provided a comprehensive and systematically arranged collection of media content related to key themes. These curated collections were organized chronologically and thematically, isolating relevant war narratives and historical commemorations. This systematic arrangement facilitated an efficient and focused examination of how media from both sides of the Iron Curtain portrayed victory, defeat, and ongoing conflicts. The unique organization of the materials allowed me to identify patterns, compare narratives, and gain a deeper understanding of the role these narratives played in shaping public perceptions and government policies throughout the Cold War era.

The RFE/RL and Soviet Red Archive subject files on the Second World War/Great Patriotic War, which dated from 1948 and became more abundant beginning in the early 1960s, charted the transition in Soviet and Western representations from portrayals extolling the U.S.-Soviet wartime alliance to a Cold War recalibration that equated the U.S. or Soviet Union with

the fascist enemy of the Second World War. The 1948 publication by the U.S. State Department of *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, which focused on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and a rebuttal by the Communist Information Bureau, titled *Falsifiers of History*, both of which are contained in the OSA, represent the start in earnest of the instrumentalization of the Second World War during this period. By the 1950s, according to OSA materials, the Soviets were openly blaming the outbreak of war on “reactionary circles in the United States and Great Britain,” while U.S. government officials and cultural figures were comparing the Soviet government and Nazi Germany under the rubric of “totalitarianism.” In some cases, U.S. officials downplayed the Soviet role in the 1945 victory, for instance, stating that “[t]here was no great siege of Stalingrad...it was a farce, built up to make Americans work night and day for production in the war effort.”

The RFE/RL and Soviet Red Archive subject files also substantiated the role of the historical memory of victory in the Soviet military interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan, as well as the impact of the specter of military defeat in Afghanistan on Soviet victory culture. Of particular interest were published letters by Soviet soldiers involved in these episodes. A striking example was a soldier’s drawing of the Soldier-Liberator monument from Berlin’s Treptower Park memorial, replete with Victory Day, discovered on a dead soldier’s body in Afghanistan. Increasingly, Soviet letters revealed that soldiers and civilians were drawing comparisons with the American war in Vietnam as a way to grasp the meaning of the Afghan war. Notably, many Vietnam veterans in the United States wrote letters identifying with the afgangtsy (Soviet Afghan war veterans), comparing the Soviet soldiers’ plight with their own ignoble defeat in Vietnam. By the late 1980s, news stories were charting the collapse of the Vietnam and Afghanistan defeat narratives and covering delegations of Vietnam veterans who were visiting Moscow to pay homage to their afgangtsy counterparts. At the same time, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan enabled a widespread revisionist discourse in the United States that sought to disentangle Vietnam from Afghanistan, treating Vietnam as a heroic lost cause. In the words of one letter to the editor: “The United States ‘invaded’ Vietnam in the same sense that it ‘invaded’ France in World War II: to resist the invasion of an outside force. Russia’s blitzkrieg entry into Afghanistan was a true invasion of a sovereign nation.” The WWII imagery is palpable. Indeed, the U.S. culture of victory made a striking return by the end of the Cold War.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Reports and Samizdat Materials

Arguably more valuable for my project's component on the impact of military defeats were the RFE/RL reports and samizdat holdings. Among the former, were materials detailing RFE/RL objectives during key Soviet interventions. What was most striking was the way RFE/RL structured their broadcasts to the region amid these events by specifically targeting the Soviet narratives of the Second World War. To take just one example, during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, RFE/RL orchestrated radio reports to Soviet soldiers that positioned them in the role of the Nazi invaders while treating the Afghan resistance as waging a "Great Patriotic War." In the words of a report, "In the broadcasts, we constantly compare this war with the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union, its atrocities, and its consequences ... Soviet troops in Afghanistan spend much of their time confined to barracks, where radio receivers are available, and you can really work on them in propaganda terms." This seems to have been a larger campaign, with the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, noting that "the Soviets refer to [WWII] as the Great Patriotic War ... The fact that the Afghan people have been able to resist an adversary so much more powerful militarily [means that] the Afghan war is truly Afghanistan's Great Patriotic War, against the Soviet Union."

The impact of these Western media campaigns is difficult to discern; however, the question of reception is aided by the OSA's samizdat materials. This evidence suggests that Western attempts to undermine the Soviet victory narrative amid foreign interventions were highly effective, although in the case of Afghanistan the weakening of the victory narrative was also connected to glasnost-era revelations, as Gorbachev was simultaneously encouraging journalists and historians to fill in the "blank spots" of Soviet history. In addition to opinion surveys conducted by RFE/RL on public perceptions of the Afghan war, samizdat frequently contrasted the role of the Red Army and Soviet society during the Great Patriotic War and the motives and actions of Soviet troops in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. Public protests that were not reported on in Soviet media nevertheless filtered through RFE/RL monitors, revealing, for example, protestors identifying Soviet interventions with the Nazi invasion of their own country in 1941: "There is very little difference," one protestor commented, "between the way the Nazi enemy was behaving in our country in World War II and the way we were behaving in Afghanistan."

This inversion of the Soviet victory narrative is also evident in letters contained in the OSA, for example the mother of a soldier in Afghanistan who remarked on the constant Soviet media comparisons between Afghanistan and WWII. “This is not the Great Patriotic War,” she wrote, “where our people died defending their lands ... Soviet soldiers don’t defend their homeland, but devastate the land of another, they destroy another people.” By 1990, even the Soviet press was reporting that a strong plurality of afgantsy was identifying more with the Americans who fought in Vietnam than fighters of the Great Patriotic War. According to Soviet survey data, only the elderly still bought into the idea that the soldiers in Afghanistan resembled heroes of the Great Patriotic War.

Alterations to Project Based on OSA Research

One important change I will implement in my project is the reevaluation of how WWII narratives were used, not solely as instruments of Cold War hostility, but also as tools for fostering common ground during periods of détente. My findings at the OSA indicate that at times when the U.S. and the Soviet Union sought to ease tensions, the shared memory of their WWII victories served as a bridge, highlighting mutual interests and cooperation. For example, during the détente of the early and mid-1970s, both Soviet and Western media frequently emphasized the collaborative effort in defeating Germany and Japan, suggesting that these narratives had the potential to reconcile differences and reduce Cold War antagonisms. This discovery challenges my earlier conception that WWII victory narratives were exclusively divisive and suggests that the current use of WWII rhetoric by Russia, to justify its actions in Ukraine and demonize NATO and the West, is not an inevitable consequence of a revived victory culture. Instead, it underscores that these narratives can be harnessed for constructive diplomacy and peacemaking, offering an alternative path to the antagonistic rhetoric seen under the current Russian government.

Conclusion

My time as a Visegrad fellow at the Blinken Open Society Archive has been instrumental in advancing this project. The unique materials at OSA have enriched my understanding of how narratives of WWII victories were constructed, adapted, and contested by both the United States and Soviet Union. As detailed above, this research attempts to shed light on how these narratives

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have influenced national identities and geopolitics during and after the Cold War. By enabling access to such its rich collection of sources, the OSA has allowed for a deeper exploration of Cold War era historical narratives and their continued impact on the contemporary world.

Boxes Consulted

Date Range	Box Number	Name	Contents
1948-1989	HU OSA 300-85-12 (13)	Subject Files: Wars: The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945	Soviet and RFE/RL publications and reports / press clippings: veterans' materials; reports and reporting on legacy of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Vlasov movement, Nuremburg Trials, and Afghan war
1981-1989	HU OSA 300-85-12 (14)	Subject Files: Wars: The GPW; Afghan war; post-1945 Soviet wars (general)	Soviet and RFE/RL publications and reports / press clippings: Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact debates; war losses; penalty battalions; letters on Afghan war; reports/articles on Soviet involvement in Korea, Cuba, Middle East, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan
1982-1985	HU OSA 300-85-12 (15)	Subject Files: Wars: The GPW; Afghan war	Soviet and RFE/RL publications and reports / press clippings: Baltic states' responses to Afghan war, to glasnost revelations on GPW; Vietnam comparisons; war crimes debates; samizdat materials related to above; responses to Western commemorations
1985-1987	HU OSA 300-85-12 (16)	Subject Files: Wars: Afghanistan	Soviet and RFE/RL publications and reports / press clippings: War crimes debates and counterpropaganda; human rights debates; public protests
1988	HU OSA 300-85-12 (17)	Subject Files: Wars: Afghanistan	Soviet and RFE/RL publications and reports / press clippings: "Afgantsy" – veterans issues; debates over Afghanistan pullout; commemorations

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1955-1988	HU OSA 300-80-1 (186)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on the public commemoration of WWII
1964-1975	HU OSA 300-80-1 (187)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on Victory Day celebrations and WWII commemoration (general); counterpropaganda against “Communist Myths of WWII”; Vietnam War materials
1975-1982	HU OSA 300-80-1 (188)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on commemorations of Stalingrad, Yalta, Holocaust; issues of repatriation; CZ invasion 1968; Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
1983-1985	HU OSA 300-80-1 (189)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on commemorations of D-Day, Yalta; debates over war crimes, Afghan war; 40 th anniversary of Victory Day
1986-1989	HU OSA 300-80-1 (190)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on commemorations of Yalta, Holocaust, Munich Conference; Glasnost revelations and debates
1990-1991	HU OSA 300-80-1 (191)	Soviet Red Archives: Old Code Subject Files	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on commemorations GPW; revelations about Stalin’s crimes during GPW and war losses
1967-1973	HU OSA 300-4-3 (33)	Communist Area Analysis Department: Subject Files: USSR	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on Soviet military intervention in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan

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1979-1980	HU OSA 300-4-3 (34)	Communist Area Analysis Department: Subject Files: USSR	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan
1980	HU OSA 300-4-3 (35)	Communist Area Analysis Department: Subject Files: USSR	Soviet and Western publications/press clippings/reports on Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan
1968-1972	HU OSA 300-85-48 (37)	Samizdat Archives: New York Office Files	Dissident letter condemning the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia 1968
1968-1969	HU OSA 300-85-9 (2)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Samizdat criticizing Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia 1968, comparisons with invasion of Hungary 1956
1960-1971	HU OSA 300-85-9 (17)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Samizdat criticizing Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia 1968, comparisons with invasion of GDR 1953 and Hungary 1956
1971	HU OSA 300-85-9 (27)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Protest letters to Izvestiia condemning Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia 1968
1980-1984	HU OSA 300-85-9 (130)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Interview and protest letters condemning Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
1983	HU OSA 300-85-9 (131)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Protest letter comparing invasion of Afghanistan with annexation of Estonia/Baltic
1988	HU OSA 300-85-9 (147)	Samizdat Archives: Published Samizdat	Samizdat condemning Soviet invasion/occupation of Afghanistan
1981-1982	HU OSA 300-6-3 (1)	Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research	Opinion research on Soviet RFE/RL audiences and responses to strikes/Solidarity in Poland
1982-1983	HU OSA 300-6-3 (2)	Soviet Area Audience and	Opinion research on responses to war in Afghanistan

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		Opinion Research	
1956	HU OSA 300-40-16 (1)	Hungarian Unit: Hungary 1956 Revolution Photographs	Protestors removing star from Soviet war memorial (photo)
1968	HU OSA FL Record 0267	Film Collection	Communist anti-war film, <i>A Time To Live</i> , criticizing the U.S. war in Vietnam