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Slaveski, Filip 2014, Academics and 'barbarians': why one article aroused Russian ire, The Conversation.

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It’s not easy for Australians to become famous in Russia. It would seem harder still to become a figure of loathing in Russian print and online media. But Associate Professor Timothy Lynch, who teaches politics at Melbourne University, has achieved just that with one newspaper article that made some carelessly worded claims about Russia’s role in World War Two.

Most of the article was a reflection on Russia’s weakness as a great power, but what struck a nerve was this sentence:

> From the terror of the Stalinist purges and the barbarity of the Russian invasion of Germany in 1944-45 [my bolding], through the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the laying waste of Chechnya in the 2000s, to the propping up of the Syrian regime today, Russia has been far more effective at suppressing civil society than facilitating it.

Within days, the article was at the epicentre of a furore spreading outwards from Australia’s Russian community. More than 10,000 people signed a petition on change.org that accused...
Lynch of suggesting that the people of the Soviet Union were barbarians and of denigrating the memory of those who had liberated Europe from fascism. It claimed the article was:

…false, discriminatory and inflammatory to a great many members of the Russian-speaking population in Australia and around the world and potentially psychologically traumatic to some.

From Russia with loathing

Perhaps more serious are the reverberations in Russia itself. The controversy was featured by Russia Today (RT), the flagship of the Russian state's external broadcasting network. An article on RT's website misquoted Lynch in its very title:

Australian professor called Soviet forces 'barbarians who invaded Germany in 1944'.

Repeating RT's misquotation, the conservative business newspaper, Vzglyad (Viewpoint), published a long article:

Internet users demand apology from Australian Russophobic professor.

The “Russophobic professor” attracted much attention in the nationalist blogosphere. Unregistered party Velikaya Rossiya (Great Russia) posted an article with an image of a man with a pained expression over the words:

Can someone give this guy a history textbook?

How did an opinion piece in a Melbourne newspaper provoke this?

Well, not by calling the Russian barbarians. Lynch did not make any generalisations about Russians as an ethnic group. But he demonstrated little awareness of how sensitive a topic World War Two remains for most Russians today.

Why such sensitivity?

Russians are sensitive for good reason. Never before in human history had the victors lost so much more in victory than the vanquished in defeat. The Soviet Union lost roughly 30 million dead, including 20 million civilians, most of whom perished under German occupation or as a result of it.

It is difficult for inhabitants of English-speaking democracies to fathom the scale of this “war of annihilation”. We were spared the trauma of wartime occupation and the slavery, rape, murder and starvation that it inflicted on nearly every family in what is today Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia.

Millions of soldiers had fought to protect their loved ones and their homes, only to find after the war that these very things were the price of victory. Can we understand how this continues to haunt generation after generation?
Lynch doesn’t seem to. Including the “barbarous invasion of Germany” in a litany of Soviet crimes against civil society is provocative for several reasons. First, he omits the crucial context that the invasion of Nazi Germany was the culmination of a defensive war and helped to deliver the world from Nazi tyranny and genocide.

This deliverance was costly for all concerned. The Red Army wrought horrible violence on civilians during its invasion and subsequent occupation of Germany, but countless millions owe their lives to the sacrifices of Russians and other Soviet soldiers in defeating Hitler. Some would subsequently suffer terribly under Soviet occupation and the regimes foisted upon their countries by Stalin.

Second, Lynch conflates Russia and the Soviet Union. While Stalin made some concessions to Russian national sentiment during the war, it is highly misleading to treat the Soviet Union as some kind of Russian national state.

Third, it is bizarre to portray the invasion of Germany as an example of the suppression of civil society, the sphere of social organisation between the state and the private life of individuals. Nazi Germany was a highly regimented and terroristic totalitarian state, which shared the Soviet regime’s hostility to independent activity. There was no civil society to destroy.

Lynch does acknowledge eventually that the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany was one of history’s greatest and costliest feats of resistance. By this stage, I assume many readers were so incensed that they hardly noticed.

They certainly would have noticed this statement:

*Most states that lose wars are obliged to atone for them. German society was remade - not least by Germans themselves - in the wake of World War II. But Russia? There has been no redemption for the millions killed in the pursuit of communism.*

This is a gross oversimplification. It is true that Russian governments have confronted the Soviet past for different purposes and with different degrees of sincerity. Yet it is inaccurate to claim there has been no redemption for the victims.

Ever since Gorbachev’s reforms in the mid-1980s, organisations such as Memorial, the Russian Orthodox Church and victims’ families have also sought to commemorate the millions killed in the pursuit of communism. The concern is not the lack of commemoration, but its nature. The Putin regime seems to be monopolising the space of public remembrances, pushing its dual narrative of criticism of Stalin’s “excesses” and admiration of his
achievements.

These crooked paths to redemption run parallel and across one another, but they continue. Lynch should be aware of them if he claims that ignorance of Soviet crimes has led to a misplaced nostalgia and contemporary nationalism, which explains Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Academic malaise is showing

The controversy about the article testifies to a deeper malaise in our academic system. As the rise of non-Western states is transforming the world, as bitter struggles and unexpected conflicts erupt in new crisis zones, our government, media and public desperately need area-specific expertise. But our universities are cutting the area studies that could provide that knowledge.

We have fewer scholars with foreign language skills and deep knowledge of non-English-speaking societies. We have fewer courses at undergraduate level that provide students with a deep understanding of specific foreign societies.

One result is media commentary by non-specialists who inflame rather than illuminate societies they do not understand.