

ALEXANDER CHUBARYAN: HISTORY IS NO BATTLEFIELD

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH CO-CHAIR
OF THE RUSSIAN-LATVIAN COMMISSION OF HISTORIANS

Academician Alexander Chubaryan is the director of the General History Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is an encyclopedist, a legend, and a wise man. History is an open book for him in which the future shapes out behind interlaces of history.

Academician Chubaryan is keen in drawing parallels between past centuries and XXI century realities and abides by Hippocrates' First, Do No Harm! principle. He is convinced that no historic concept should trigger negative attitude to other countries and peoples. Instead of accumulating hard feelings against each other it is necessary to frankly discuss even the most painstaking issues. "There are no banned issues for Russia", Chubaryan likes to say.

He objects viewing history as a battlefield however he constantly stays on the ideological frontline. A skilled negotiator he exposes myths and shows a path to reconciliation and mutual understanding to those who use historic facts of our common past for fighting. Reconciliation is absolutely necessary for a peaceful life.



QUOTING PRIMARY SOURCES

Russia has for the first time declared 2012 the Year of History. Why did it happen now?

It was the initiative of young historians supported at a meeting with Dmitry Medvedev. The Year of History in Russia is unique and unprecedented. Several historical dates in the outgoing year were the reason. Firstly, together with Ukrainian colleagues we celebrated 1150 years of the ancient Russian state. We have many disagreements in assessing history, but approaches to Kievan Rus have come closer.

Secondly, it was the bicentennial of the 1812 war and 150 years since the birth of outstanding Russian statesman and reformer Petr Stolypin. Naturally, it does not mean the interest in history ends up on December 31, 2012. The proclamation of 2012 as the Year of History is a sign related to common interest in past events which is typical for the whole world. It reached down to ordinary people and became a major public phenomenon.

People are looking for answers to modern questions in the past and draw similarities with current developments. The interest differs from what it used to be as it now pays more attention to historic personalities and their everyday relations. It is not accidental that Russia saw a surge in historic belle-lettres which experts assess differently. I am positive about such literature as it anyway promotes public interest in past developments. But there is yet another important layer of the problem. Historic issues occupy a major place in political life and the formation of ideology.

The Russian Historical Society was re-established this year under the leadership of State Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin...

I believe it is one of the main achievements of the Year of History and a major public development. The Russian Empire had the Imperial Historical Society which published numerous books, including dozens of volumes of documents. The succession is very important. We are pleased to have such an intelligent man as Mr. Naryshkin at the helm of the society as he has a great interest in history. The co-chairs are the director of the Moscow Institute of International Relations, Anatoly Torkunov, Academician Anatoly Derevyanko, and me.

This year your General History Institute published the first two volumes of the new six-volume World History academic publication. Nothing of the kind has happened in Russia in the past fifty years! The famous Cambridge Histories - The Cambridge Ancient History, The

Cambridge Medieval History, The Cambridge Modern History - are very popular. Does your institute plan to restore the universal approach in reconstructing the past?

The publication of the World History is a major event which crowned major changes in our history science. English historian and major expert in Russian and Soviet history Edward Carr once said there are as many histories as historians. I would not overemphasize the approach but I have to admit there is a share of truth in his words. There are millions of facts and their selection presupposes subjectivism as it goes through the mind of historians. The previous Soviet 10-volume publication in the '60s of the past century contained numerous facts, but their interpretation was heavily ideological. Totalitarian regimes instructed scholars which facts were necessary to support the official ideology. A free society allows various interpretations.

It is time to create a new Russian concept of the global history. The six-volume publication prepared by the General History Institute is the first work which is not based on Marxism-Leninism but on a completely different approach. The first two volumes caused major interest and the rest will come out soon.

Changes in society cause another problem. Today Russia suffers not from a lack of history schoolbooks, but because of their excessive number. There are over a hundred of them! The choice of a textbook is often accidental. I am in charge of schoolbooks in the Russian education ministry and I believe we should not ban any of them but the ministry should definitely provide recommendations to teachers on each textbook.

It is to be remembered that history teaching in schools is influenced not only by textbooks, teachers, and parents, but also by Internet where children find additional information and more knowledge than a teacher can offer.

The contents of schoolbooks is a common problem for the world. Two approaches collided at meetings of the Council of Europe in Istanbul and Oslo in which I participated. Some scholars said a schoolbook has to offer only basic knowledge while other insisted it should teach young people to think and compare facts. An overwhelming majority backed the second option, me too. But the most important thing is to find a proper balance.

All the issues will be on the agenda of the Second Congress of History Teachers in December. The first one was held last year and gathered over a thousand participants. The house will be full also this time.

PENANCE OR OBLIVION?

Did attempts to use history for political goals exist always or they appeared only after World War Two?

new aspect emerged there in assessing the results of the war. German soldiers are now viewed as victims of the Nazi regime and the German people as victims of unfounded bombings also by Great Britain which wiped several cities off the map - Dresden and others. The viewpoint was reflected in a school manual which is being prepared by our institute together with German authors.

Historians and the public continue to look for an answer to the question: what can be the

ethnic character and the Russian people suffered most. It is impossible to equate the regimes and the trend will subside soon. Today historians in the world, including in the West, are revising the very notion of totalitarian regime, its essence and characteristics. There is no talk about justifying autocracies. Such totalitarian characteristics as violence, repressions, persecution of dissent have to be definitely condemned. But other things are much more complicated and discussions of the seemingly closed issue have resumed.

1914. It is not by chance that all European cities have monuments devoted to the times while Russia has practically forgotten the First World War.

New understanding of the developments is necessary to take into account all realities of the XX century history and a new look on the history of the past century will soon emerge. It was the issue of a recent conference Russia of Late XX Century in Global Context held in Moscow.



They always existed however the trend intensified after 1945. It became specifically vital for Russia in the past decades when history science broke free from ideological bias and stereotypes and offered a broad space for conclusions, reasoning, and interpretations. Russian society is deeply polarized in views which cannot but affect the interpretation of the past. Our veterans are displeased with the way history is offered and the war is described. They have their own views of developments in which they participated.

As experts we work hard to free history from ideology and politics, but it is very difficult to achieve it. We can speak only about minimizing the negative use of history in speculative political approaches.

Seventy years have passed since World War Two but there are still loud voices calling to revise its results. What do you think about it?

The more time passes away the clearer it becomes that those developments cannot be described only in black and white. The picture was much more complicated. Germany seemed to have dotted all the "i", however a

basis for reconciliation - penance or oblivion? Germany repented before the mankind after 1945. Now France repents before African peoples for its colonial policy. Russia is also heavily pressured to repent by Baltic countries and Poland.

I am against historic penance! It is a process which can lead too far. Besides, generations have to repent which had nothing to do with the developments. My students were born after 1991. What do they have to repent? Demands to repent pursue political and ideological aims. In Christian values the very notion of repentance is closely linked to sin and forms a negative image. You are guilty if you repent - the logic is valid not only in everyday conscience, but in global politics as well. However oblivion is no good remedy for historic wounds either.

The European Parliament has equated Stalinism to Nazism and western nations urge Russia to do the same. How far can it go?

German totalitarianism was based on racial hatred and racial exclusiveness. There was nothing of the kind in Russia. Stalinist repressions had no

Some authors refuse to call Nazi Germany totalitarian as market economy developed in the country under Hitler. In its early days the Franco regime in Spain could be described as totalitarian however it later got liberalized and can be characterized as authoritarian. However in Romania and Hungary, as well as Poland and Latvia the regimes were truly totalitarian at the time.

I am no supporter of Bolsheviks however their negative experiment - the Great October Socialist Revolution - was a vaccination for other countries. The immunity lasted for a century although socialism is a multi-faceted alternative to human development. The popular European Social Democracy is a variant of it. Lenin and his supporters represented the extreme blanket wing which still does exist.

The attitude to colonialism is also being revised as industrialized nations promoted the development of colonies. Thus, India received from the British Empire advanced technologies and all of its professors studied in London.

It is often said that all European cataclysms of the XX century originated in

Is it true that classified archives impede the work of historians? They claim the Lenin Fund has been closed for researchers for a long time...

All documents related to Lenin have long been declassified, as well as documents about Stalin.

It is another question that declassification process is a complicated business in Russia. Everything was classified before. Minutes of Communist Party Politburo meetings were top secret even if they discussed nail production at Penza works.

But it is typical not only of Russia. For example, in England all materials related to the mission of Hitler's comrade-in-arms Hess who visited England on May 11, 1941 are classified up to 2030.

NO HARD FEELINGS

Eastern Europe often times the beginning of World War Two to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Is it correct from the historic point of view?

I once told my colleagues from Latvia: "You think as if Molotov-Ribbentrop was one person who lived in the Soviet Union. But the USSR signed the treaty not with itself, but with Germany. Why don't you advance claims to Germany?" The same concerns the division of Poland in which not only the USSR participated. It is absolutely clear that while considering the developments of the XX century it is necessary to be less ideological and more objective.

As for the 1939 and 1940 developments in Baltic countries it is necessary to study complicated domestic processes which took place at the time there. Estonia already has a research which also blames Baltic countries, specifically Latvia, for the developments. It is another issue that after so many years the problem of responsibility should be more academic rather than political or ideological otherwise the whole history will become account settlement and showdown. The situation specifically aggravates when historic account settlement become material and financial. It is scary to think what the result can be as the whole history of Europe is a history of wars and territorial redistribution.

A Latvian commission has resumed evaluation of occupation damage...

That is what I am speaking about! Baltic countries will calculate one thing while Russia will invoice them for the enterprises, roads and terminals it built which comprise the economic basis of independent Latvia.

But Riga has an answer: did it ask for the industry?

In the Soviet years Latvia was governed by Latvians who worked in Moscow.

History shall be interpreted in a way so that contemporary people do not have negative perceptions of another country. Historians like doctors shall abide by the main principle: First, do no harm!

Peoples should not accumulate hard feelings of the past. The 1812 war did not cause anti-French moods in Russia. The aristocracy continued to speak French. Opinion polls show most positive image of Russia exists in Germany, a country which waged two wars with us. At present 1.5 million Russians live there and German colleagues agree they adapt much better in the country than Turks, for example.

Joint history research is a good remedy for past offenses. It is a great success that German and Russian historians jointly produced a school manual of XX century history (it will come out in early 2013). If no common approach was reached on that or another issue two opinions were published for the reader to decide himself. We plan a similar publication on the history of XVIII and XIX centuries.

What were the differences?

Regarding the Stalingrad battle, for example. A German historian claimed Russian soldiers fought to death in Stalingrad because there were retreat-blocking detachments behind them. Such detachments did exist, there is no doubt about it. But they were not the reason for the audacious fight against the enemy.

With Finland we succeeded to produce a book about Russian-Finnish war. Strange as it may seem mostly our war veterans opposed it. Despite their Nordic character the Finns are more tolerant and pragmatic. It is easy to deal with them as they understand the language of facts. An example is offered by their attitude to national minorities and the existence of two state languages in the country.

Talks are underway with Poland on a similar school manual. There is also a proposal from Austria.

A schoolbook produced by Russian and Ukrainian historians has recently come out. A collection of documents related to Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) activities during the war was published. The organization called for independent Ukraine but collaborated with Nazis and participated in repressions. How should we treat it? The answer shall be looked for in the facts.

Which Baltic country did you succeed most in progress towards historic mutual understanding?

Commissions of historians continue to work in Latvia and Lithuania. The first joint collection of documents by Russian and Lithuanian historians about 1939-1940 developments came out, the second is being prepared for publication.

So you are between two fires...

In Baltic countries some say I am too tough but in Russia I am too soft.

When the former Latvian commission chair made several tough statements many people thought I would slam the door and leave. However the chairman was replaced and the dialogue continued which is the most important thing as the past should not impede progress.

UNCLE VANYA IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Your institute held in autumn the conference Ancient Rus and Mediaeval Europe: Emergence of a State. When did Rus become a cultural part of Europe?

In the times of Kievan Rus. However the breakthrough occurred in the XVIII century. Peter the Great launched business ties with Europe while Catherine the Second and Elizabeth Petrovna opened intellectual Europe to Russia and opened Russia to Europe. There is an idea to gather full correspondence between Catherine and Voltaire which was only published in parts before.

The 1812 war was a catalyst of numerous public processes in Russia. Serfdom soldiers returned from the march on Paris with completely different views. Officers shared the ideas of French Enlightenment and later revolted in Senate Square.

What do you think about specific Russian way? Who is right in the dispute between Slavophiles and Westerners?

Each country goes its specific way. However it should be in the common civilization fairway and not result in isolation. Messiahship is unproductive as well as advocating exclusive Russian spirituality. It triggers negative attitude in other countries.

I believe it is important to study Russia in historic aspect so that a schoolboy who studies world history understands what was happening all the time in Russia. Such parallels help make correct conclusions.

Now Russia is the same consumer society as the West. It has the same power of money, technocracy, and decreased humanitarian potential. I am very much concerned by decreasing number of educated people and simply literate and cultural people in the country.

By definition Russia is a great power by territory and population. It is the only country located on two continents - Europe and Asia, and its experience can be useful for the West. Europe is currently progressing to a multicultural society which has been long and organically existing in our country. Our culture offers an inexhaustible resource of general human values. Here is an example. The Vakhtangov Theater has recently toured London with Uncle Vanya play. The same play is performed by an English theater. Tickets were sold out... Intelligentsia is likely disillusioned in consumer society while Chekhov wrote about spirituality.

In 2012-2013 Russia chairs the Council of the Baltic Sea States. What are its priorities?

Russia views the CBSS as an institution capable of reviving cohesion of Baltic Sea countries on the basis of cooperation and trust as quite recently they were on the different sides of the Iron Curtain. They are closely linked among themselves. If there is the Black Sea and Mediterranean civilizations why can't there be a Baltic one? Moreover, there was a unique entity called Hansa alliance.

It is exactly the case when historic parallels are appropriate and even necessary as the Baltic Sea countries have common interests in many spheres, including security, not military, but mostly in the environmental and information sense.

You are the Honorary President of the Baltic Civilization Institute created by the Amber Bridge Fund. What are its goals?

I highly appreciate the activities of the Amber Bridge Fund not only due to its support to material projects, but as its activities target interaction between countries and peoples. The Amber Bridge moves us to broader dimensions where we operate by civilization categories and promote dialogue of cultures. Other European regions can also benefit from the good example. People spanning the Amber Bridge deserve respect. We understand it in Moscow pretty well...

Thank you!

Ksenija Oshkaja,
Riga