

Международные отношения: история и социокультурная практика

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1938/39 in Soviet and Russian historiography and historical memory

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the comparison of the Soviet and Russian historiography of the Anschluss of Austria in 1938. In the approach of Soviet and Russian historians, there are significant differences in the study of the Anschluss. The article examines in detail not only the works of Soviet historians, but also the main publications of the archival documents prepared in the second half of the 1940s–1950s by the NKID / USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the principle of selecting documents, analyzing published materials, etc.). At the heart of the Soviet interpretation there was the thesis of the diplomatic isolation of the USSR in the pre-war period, which prevented the Anschluss from being averted. In addition, it was stressed that Austria was the victim of German National Socialism. But, of course, the fact of supporting the Anschluss by the majority of the Austrians was not denied. The study of the Austrian resistance movement was important.

However, based on the research of Russian historians in the 1990s – 2000s it becomes obvious that one can not unequivocally speak of the diplomatic isolation of Moscow in the late 1930s. The situation was much more complicated. The key to further research was the declassification by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service of the archival material concerning the events of 1938–1939. More attention in recent years' studies has been given to the role of the Polish factor, to the interests and ambitions of Warsaw.

Keywords: Anschluss, international relations, USSR, Austria, Germany, Poland

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1938/39 в советской и российской историографии и в исторической памяти

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена сопоставлению советской и российской историографии аншлюса Австрии 1938 г. В подходе советских и российских историков имеются существенные различия в изучении аншлюса. В статье подробно рассматриваются не только труды советских историков, но и основные публикации архивных документов, подготовленных во второй половине 1940–1950-х годов НКВД / МИД СССР (принцип отбора документов, анализ опубликованных материалов и т. д.). В основе Советской интерпретации лежал тезис о дипломатической изоляции СССР в довоенный период, что не позволило предотвратить аншлюс. Кроме того, подчеркивалось, что Австрия являлась жертвой немецкого национал-социализма. Но, конечно, факт поддержки аншлюса большинством австрийцев не отрицался. Большое значение имело изучение австрийского движения сопротивления.

Однако на основе исследований российских историков 1990–2000-х годов становится очевидным, что нельзя однозначно говорить о дипломатической изоляции Москвы в конце 1930-х годов. Ситуация была намного сложнее. Ключом к дальнейшим исследованиям стало рассекречивание российской Службой внешней разведки архивных материалов о событиях 1938–1939 гг. В последние годы больше внимания в исследованиях уделяется роли польского фактора, интересам и амбициям Варшавы.

Ключевые слова: Аншлюс, международные отношения, СССР, Австрия, Германия, Польша

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Introduction

A new round of the systemic diplomatic crisis, which started with the Annexation of Austria and ended with the World War Two, revealed a huge gap between the official discourse of political leaders and their behind-the-scene manipulations. Historians are still unable of piecing all elements together. There are so many things left unsaid or unsolved, so many direct or indirect contradictions.

It is a well-known fact that the system of international regulation suffered a global system failure in the thirties of the last century. The time came for epic improvisations and major political gambling. Diplomatic coalitions were predominantly created on a case-by-case basis with every country striving to maneuver in its own best interests. Against this background of overall political distrust, a new international reality came to life, fraught with a potential world tragedy. Who were the “victims” and who were the “butchers”? Historians know just how rigoristic this question is when it comes to analyzing a global process of the genesis of war with a multitude of human egos, vengeful ambitions, pragmatic plans, successful and ill-judged diplomatic moves; a multifaceted and highly intricate system of mutual talks, cynical exchanges, promises kept and broken.

The historical distance of eighty years that lies between the present and the events of the thirties has created a special retrospective image of the Anschluss. This image is compressed in time, with all emotions, pain and clarity of perception faded. But the key “ties” that bind the storyline together remain. They constantly resurface in the historical memory through the combined efforts of scholars, politicians and journalists, as some sort of markers for the national consciousness of modern societies.

The issue of historical interpretations, the relation between the “impression” of the collective memory and academic studies are now seen in a new perspective. The singularity of memorization lies in the fact that it introduces in the collective imagination the so-called “conflict zones” that subsequently transpire not only in research papers and mass media, but also in the official discourse on the highest political level.

The latest major studies urge the international scientific community to create a new methodological culture that would be able to rise above

national and historical stereotypes, to develop a new meta language and explanatory constructs. The book of Alexander Chubaryan *Kamun tragedii. Stalin i mezhdunarodnyj krizis: sentyabr' 1939 – iyun' 1941* (The eve of the tragedy. Stalin and the International Crisis: September of 1939 – June of 1941) presented a kind of diagnosis of the existing historiographical situation “where, in terms of methodology, the idea is to break up the big picture, very complex and controversial, into separate pieces, to highlight a particular party and a special historical trend, which is fraught with danger of either distorting the reality, or exaggerating a particular narrative at the expense of others” [1 p. 14-16].

Chubaryan suggests using a multi factor analysis that would perfectly make it possible to take into account various, sometimes clearly contradictory trends and events by providing insight into dictatorships or democracies, by examining the nature and mechanism of a decision-making process. The method that he successfully used to analyze the state of international affairs in 1939 is vital in understanding the realities of the 1938 crisis. It is true that one has to have a clear idea of “ideological filters” existing in the minds of the elite and the internal trends of the analyzed political environment when reconstructing the motives of political decisions. It is also highly important to study the procedures of data processing and transmission via government channels from the bottom upwards.

In this regard, the comprehensive research on “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes in Europe” initiated by two historians Jerzy W. Borejszas (Poland) and Klaus Ziemer (Germany) holds a considerable scientific potential for a multiple factor analysis. This study examines totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, as well as the various transitional political forms of the thirties on several layers of historical perception:

- predictive (genesis level – would-be);
- simultaneous (from the perspective of actual political developments);
- retrospective (the fact of scientific analysis and the fact of collective memory, memorization process) [2].

The emergence of such a study is a perfect example of multiple factor analysis of the history of the thirties, where the research is focused not only on the interpretations of the totalitarian past by the relevant national historiographies, but also on the “memory policies and the culture of recollections” in modern societies.

There is a certain paradox surrounding the topic of the Anschluss with Austria. Dozens of sources from the archives of various countries have been published. Hundreds of valuable research papers and comprehensive studies have been written. National historiographies have

established their own reference points and research perspectives, there is now a relatively well-established narrative and there are conceptual frameworks for presenting the outline of the 1938 events. Yet, there is still no consensus among historians from different countries regarding a number of fundamental issues. The representatives of each country have their own versions of the answer. Who helped Hitler revise the international setup? Which countries were ready to support this revision, and which ones, according to one German historian, were ready to pick up the bigger and bigger pieces falling from the collapsing Versailles system like “hyenas on a battlefield”?

These questions were raised as early as the end of World War II, when politicians and diplomats were discussing the political and the legal aspects of the “blame attribution” for the allies of the Third Reich. But they are just as relevant today. There are regular outbreaks of the discussions on the topic, new interpretations of the events keep on coming into light. Yet, any scientific analysis based on the “criminal-victim” or “guilty and wrongly accused” approach usually yields no real results, thus reducing the historical analysis to the ideological motivation of current political interests. Such approach remains highly tempting for modern historiography that has not yet been able to fully grow out of the “methodological nationalism”.

This article does not pretend to cover a wide range of references. It only tries to outline the development of historiographical representations of the Anschluss in the Russian historiography and to highlight some new trends in its modern interpretations.

Soviet Vision of the Anschluss, 1938

The progress of Soviet research is in line with the overall evolution of historical studies in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the realities of the Cold War have directly affected the academic interpretations of the subject. The more violent the confrontation between the USSR and the USA was, the more rigoristic the opinions in scientific papers were¹.

Already at the end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties, there were two basic philosophies. One, for the purpose of this discussion, can be defined as “pro-Soviet”, the other one – “pro-Western”. In a very valuable research on the German-Soviet cooperation in September 1939 and the dissolution of the Polish State, its author,

¹ The development of the Soviet / Russian historiography of Munich is considered in a number of studies (see details: [4, 5 p. 169-176, 6 p. 15-38]).

Natalya Lebedeva, emphasizes that “the Soviet historiography invariably followed the official line presented on the same occasion, in September 1939, by the government of the USSR itself” [3 p. 170]. As for the Soviet interpretation of the Annexation of Austria, that was a different story.

The early versions of the Soviet concept were already missing Stalin’s pre-war outspoken remarks made throughout 1938. The outlines of the big picture were elaborated in the context of the Cold War, which is why the image of the Anschluss in the Soviet historiography had a clear ideological focus from the very beginning. It was meant to obscure the events that followed in 1939.

For Soviet academic papers, the year of 1938 was of a crucial significance, it was seen as the key event of the global international crisis on the eve of World War II. The Soviet concept “from Anschluss to Munich” was instrumental from the very beginning. It was used to explain the reasons for the subsequent reluctant rapprochement of the USSR with Germany. It was one of the most sensitive topics for the Stalin government. It had to respond to the information campaign concerning the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, launched in the West, and to make its case before the Soviet people. The academic field of the non-fiction papers and research was gradually turning into an ideological front, in both the Soviet Union and the West.

The formulation of the Soviet version of this topic began as early as the end of the war and the task was confined to Academician V. Potemkin, Deputy Director of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID), who had personally taken part in the negotiations, had an insider’s knowledge of the situation and access to a wide range of information. The third volume of the *“History of Diplomacy”*, published in 1945 under his editorship, includes the chapter covering the events of 1938–1939 that he wrote together with Prof. A. Pankratova. These texts are particularly valuable, since they were written shortly after the facts, when the Soviet concept was yet to become a solid ideological construct. They still contain the echoes of “living history”, individual opinions about the analyzed process.

The text mentions Hitler’s failed project to create a fascist Ukrainian state of Carpatho-Ukraine, which was to be used for the “subsequent takeover” of the Soviet Ukraine and the “reunification with Kiev” [7 p. 655]. This topic was never considered separately in the later Soviet studies. A postscript, seemingly extraneous in both style and structure, was added at the very end of the text: “It was rumored that the French and the British governments had talks with the Soviet representatives while dealing with the Czech crisis, that even the Munich agreements were supposedly pre-approved by the Soviet government. In support

of this statement, it was pointed out that Bonnet had meetings with the Soviet ambassador in Paris, whereas Halifax and Cadogan – with Soviet representatives in London. Then on November 4, the TASS declared this information to be completely unfounded. In their talks with the Soviet delegation, the British Foreign minister and his French counterpart only shared some newspaper materials. As for the Munich conference and its resolutions, the Soviet government never ever had anything to do with it” [7 p. 646]. This opaque reference to the attempts to reconcile the positions of the USSR, Great Britain and France also disappeared from the Soviet studies in the fifties and the sixties.

In fact, it was another version that became firmly established, according to which the USSR remained politically isolated during the Annexation of Austria, as well as afterwards, because of the “confusion and turmoil” in the European democracies and the “policy of collusion with the aggressor” pursued by London. The essence of the Soviet concept can be summed up with a phrase from the *History of Diplomacy* in 1946: “Virtually alone, the Soviet Union continued to defend the international rights of democracy. For instance, its diplomacy took upon itself to defend the Covenant of the League of Nations that could still be used to organize a collective response to the aggressors” [7 p. 624]. In the fifties through the eighties, the analysis of the intensification of the international crisis in Europe on the eve of World War II was based on this particular statement.

The second equally important standpoint that defended the Soviet historiography consisted in the idea that Austria fell victim to the German national socialism. The Soviet diplomatic documents of the second half of the thirties show that great attention was paid to the Austrian crisis. Moscow knew that it had had a decisive influence on the state of international affairs, having fundamentally shifted the balance of power in favor of Germany. The note of March 14, 1938, written by Maksim Litvinov, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, to the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) emphasized: “The takeover of Austria is the most important event after the end of the world war that is fraught with the greatest dangers, not least of all for our Union” [8 p. 2]. Litvinov’s strategy to put in motion the mechanisms of collective security of the League of Nations was supported by neither England, nor France, or any small European country.

Litvinov knew that the Austrian and Czechoslovakian issues constituted links in the same chain. His records often contain such notions as “violation of Austria”, “violation of Czechoslovakia”, “takeover of Austria by Germany” [8 p. 2]. It was essentially the Anschluss with Austria that became the point of no return for the Versailles order. The Soviet diplomatic and later on historiographical traditions

interpreted the Anschluss as a “violence against Austria” and a preface to the 1938 Munich. In the *History of Diplomacy* of 1945, there was a separate chapter called “Takeover of Austria and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany”². It was used as a guide for the first selections of diplomatic documents and numerous academic papers [9,10,11]. Diplomatic records show that starting with March 17, 1938, the USSR stated its willingness to fulfill its obligations on 10 occasions. As for the bilateral relations, Moscow appealed six times to France, four times to the Czech government, three times to Britain, asking them to repel the Nazis together.

Thus, from the very beginning the official Soviet version presented Austria as a “victim of Nazis” along with Czechoslovakia. Afterwards, there appeared a series of papers examining in detail the forms of resistance against the Nazis in Austria during the Third Reich.

The Soviet historians agreed that the majority of the Austrian population were in favor of the Anschluss, yet they emphasized the fact that Austrians were turned into “the slaves of the empire obedient to fascism and the Fuhrer” and that the most “cruel measures were taken to annihilate any trace of the country’s independence” [12 p. 108]. A particular attention was paid to the anti-Hitler resistance of Austrian communists

² Subsequently, the documents of the NKID were published in an extensive edition – Documents on the Foreign Policy of the USSR. V. XVIII–XXII. In response to a documentary publication in Washington on the Soviet-German negotiations of 1939, a pamphlet “Falsifiers of History. Historical reference” was published in Moscow in a huge circulation. In the same year of 1948, the first edition of diplomatic documents was prepared in two volumes, which served as an actual confirmation of the conclusions of this book. It was personally edited by Stalin and based on a clear logical scheme for describing the negotiations around the Munich agreement (for more details, see: [7 p. 613]). The publication of the “Falsifiers of History” laid the foundation of the Soviet concept. It included a number of key positions: first, the thesis of the diplomatic isolation in which the USSR found itself as a result of the events of 1938; secondly, the method of sharp opposition of the diplomatic strategies of the USSR (fidelity to the principles of collective security) and England-France-the USA (pacification of the aggressor); thirdly, a rigid interpretation of the “problem of guilt” for Munich, and as a consequence, for the time-unleashing of World War II. The charge was openly addressed to the Western powers. Finally, the idea was especially emphasized that the USSR was the only true ally of the torn Czechoslovakia. It was ready to provide military assistance, if not for the “bourgeois governments” of Poland and Hungary, who were maneuvering between Hitler and the West.

in Lower Austria, Carinthia, Upper Austria, the catholic organization of Karl Stolz and socialist resistance groups [12 p. 136-158]. The overall conclusion was straightforward: the Anschluss was a “great tragedy for the Austrian people” [12 p. 167].

Interpretations of the Anschluss in Contemporary Russian Historiography

Over the last 25 years, the Soviet version has been considerably revised by Russian scientists. There are four key trends that can be singled out in the analysis of the Anschluss:

First. The idea of the Soviet diplomatic isolation underwent a considerable revision. At first, V. Volkov advanced the idea concerning Stalin’s attempts to build a close relationship with Germany. The ambitious projects of economic cooperation in 1934–1936 and at the beginning of 1938 failed. But the Soviet party continued to contact Germans with Soviet military orders. Volkov suggested that “against the background of a violent political unrest in Europe and a considerable international isolation of the USSR, Stalin tried to be a servant to two masters, so to speak, in order to be able to maneuver at his discretion depending on the latest developments on the global scene” [3 p. 49,13]. However, in the absence of solid sources that would make it possible to shed light on the Kremlin behind-the-scene secrets, Volkov only made a reserved statement that “if one got rid of all the extravagances, the range of plausible assumptions would be relatively limited”.

Later, D. Nadzhafov published *Podlinnoe tolkovanie Myunkhena* (The truthful interpretation of Munich) in Russian accompanied by his own comments. In this publication, he did not rule out the possibility that the secret German-Soviet contacts could have taken place after the Anschluss and during the Munich situation. In his opinion, Moscow had turned into a diplomatic Mecca in the pre-war Europe. He believed that the events of 1938 gave a powerful impulse to the rapprochement of the USSR and Germany. But similar to Volkov, Nadzhafov had nothing but indirect evidence to confirm the existence of the secret Soviet-German contacts [14 p. 67-88, 90].

In current Russian studies, the question of rapprochement between Stalin and Hitler is tied in with his analysis of international situation formulated during and after the Munich events.

Second. In 2008, the Russian Foreign Intelligence (SVR) declassified its archives for 1937–38. We are talking about all kinds of information that was received via the Soviet agent positions in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin and other European capitals. It includes documents from

diplomatic missions, correspondence of ambassadors with their centers, analytical notes, data from the highest military and political circles. All these materials were summarized for the Soviet political government in real time. According to the SVR veteran Lev Sotskov who had prepared this set of documents, the key Munich parties had an ultimate priority “to make Hitler make a move to the East”.

In his analysis of the content of the declassified documents, Sotskov points out that “some observers and participants of the political process knew that an agreement with Hitler would push the Soviet Union to look for its own way out of the crisis. It was quite possible that it would make the Kremlin try to come to an agreement with the Germans. There were also warnings that there was absolutely no guarantee that Hitler would choose to move to the East”. For instance, the dispatch of a French ambassador in Berlin to his Ministry of Foreign Affairs read: “bear in mind that what frightens Berlin the most at the moment is a possible alliance between Russia, England and France”. But this union was most likely impossible due to a very strong aversion to the Communist state. In November 1938, the Soviet secret service informed the Center that “England and France will no longer stand in the way of the German expansionism to the East” [15 p. 1-2].

The general analysis of the documents is in line with the article by V. Karpov *Vneshnyaya razvedka i myunkhenskiy sgovor* (Foreign intelligence and the Munich conspiracy) [16 p. 134-146]. Its author states that the Kremlin was aware of the pro-fascist tendencies within the French General Staff and the appeal that stable relations with the Nazi Reich held for the major British lobby of industrialists, financiers and merchants. But the repressions that suffered the state security agencies in 1937–38 resulted in a virtual dismantling of the Soviet intelligence service. There were no competent leaders left in the Center. Despite a flow of data coming from the European stations, by autumn 1938, the foreign intelligence bodies had no direct access to Stalin. Another researcher, M. Meltyukhov, also points out the incoherence of intelligence data regarding Germany and a very poor quality of the analytical material sent by the stations, which was a “tribute to the existing oppressive environment” [17 p. 109]. Needless to say that the declassified documents await their researcher, for they contain some unique data on the state of affairs in the highest circles of the European elite and will be able to shed some light on the special aspects of the Soviet foreign-policy planning.

After all, we know Stalin’s definition of the “new imperialistic war” that he gave a year after the Anschluss in his report at the 18th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (VKP[b]) (March 1939). Back then, he repeatedly emphasized the fact that the war “had become

a factor". "The war is unrelenting. One cannot conceal it under any covers", "it is not yet global, not yet a world war. The war is waged by aggressor nations that infringe upon the interests of non-aggressive countries, above all, England, France, USA, in every possible way, whereas the latter keep on back-pedaling and retreating, making more and more concessions to the aggressors (...). One might imagine that Germans were given the Czech regions as a price for their obligation to start a war with the Soviet Union, and now Germans refuse to pay the bill and tell them to go where the sun does not shine" [18 p. 12-14].

Third. Recent studies make a special emphasis on the connection between the Polish factor and the 1938 events. It concerns very complex and highly sensitive relations within the Berlin-Warsaw-Moscow triangle. After all, only several days after the Nazi troops had invaded Austria, Poland engineered a conflict with Lithuania regarding the city of Vilnius (known in Poland as *Wilno*) and its surrounding region³. Moscow sided with Lithuania, even though the nature of the Soviet action was mostly symbolic.

At the same time, Poland was busy trying to get closer to Germany in order to ensure its Western borders, gain recognition of its interests in Lithuania and confirm the official standing of Danzig. But all it got from Germany was Teschen Silesia. Not much of a reward for an open political cooperation. The papers by M. Meltyukhov, S. Morozov, Y. Ivanov analyze the "Polish factor" from a geopolitical perspective [19,20]. The Russian and Polish historiographies share the same view that Poland tried to become a bearing structure for the new *Third Europe* coalition, in particular during the period that followed the Annexation of Austria and the preparation of dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

In this respect, it is particularly interesting to examine a document from the Archives of Foreign Affairs of the RF published by S. Sluch, an expert in the sources of the thirties. I am talking about an operational guideline that *Vladimir Potemkin*, the USSR First Deputy *People's Commissar* of Foreign Affairs, wrote to Yakov Suritz, Soviet Ambassador to France, in April 1938. Potemkin was well aware of the political situation in Paris, having himself been Soviet Ambassador to France until 1937. On the eve of the May crisis in 1938, he provided his colleague with some guidelines in order to organize "an anti-Polish campaign in the French media by describing the role of Beck the traitor and the fate that awaited Poland should it continue on the path chosen by Hitler". It was followed by a clear description of Poland's future: "Germany is counting on Danzig and Memel, Poland hopes for Lithuania, Latgale

³ Diplomatic materials on this topic were presented in detail in the historical and documentary publication (see details: [21]).

and even Libau. It is entirely plausible that Hitler whets Poland's appetite on purpose. His intentions are quite clear. Comrade Stalin used to talk about them with Laval when the latter was in Moscow. Hitler takes into account the inevitability of Poland's defeat by our troops. By carrying out the German plan, Poland as good as prepares itself for a fourth partition and a loss of its national independence" [3 p. 99]. Based on this document, S. Sluch reckons that "as early as spring 1938, Stalin already considered the Soviet-Polish war highly possible and the partition of Poland between the USSR and Germany" [3 p. 99]. But so far there has been no direct evidence in support of this claim.

Fourth. It is a well-known fact that the Austrian 1938 crisis holds a unique position in the international processes on the eve of World War II. There is a full consensus on the subject. I only wish to summarize several key points:

1) From the middle of 1937, the center of international politics has been gradually shifting from the Iberian peninsula to Central Europe, where a new focus of trouble between nations was emerging based on the German Third Reich's claims for the Austrian Republic [22 p. 58, 8 p. 23-47]. Its starting point was the "friendly" agreement between Austria and Germany of July 11, 1936.

2) The Anschluss with Austria dealt a crushing blow to the stability of the Versailles system and propelled to new heights the differences between the Western democracies and the Nazi nations. The Anschluss brought the Western democracies in a state of a "strategic paralysis". After the Austrian crisis, the only alternative London had was to focus on the pacification of the aggressor, whereas Paris had no other choice but to follow the Great Britain's lead.

3) Starting with April 1938, the Western nations had completely lost their momentum on the international scene that was then fully in Berlin's control. The events in Austria helped to resolve the last remaining differences between the Nazi Italy and Germany, having confirmed the viability of the belligerent solution. The Austrian crisis opened the way to Munich, which marked the transition from the state of crisis to the period of collapse of the Versailles order.

Conclusion

In *Uses of the Other*, Norwegian historian Iver Neumann reveals a major concern in international relations of the past and the present [23 p. 25-71]. He analyzes the mechanisms that regulate the way national societies perceive each other. It concerns various levels: historiography, global affairs, social communications. Through numerous examples,

Neumann managed to show that the perception of the Other, as a rule, happens through understanding of one's own interests. While getting to know the Other, societies try to discover their own positive differences from Others. Against the background of global politics, the perception of the Other proceeds through understanding and affirmation of one's own interests, motives and needs. Perception, but not Understanding. Unilinear interpretations in academic studies have but their own national perspectives to focus on. It manifests itself in the unwillingness to understand the motives of the Other, to appreciate the Other in terms of his/her interests and traditions. But it is very hard to understand the deep motives of the Other's political behavior. It is much easier to accept the unilinear interpretation, that is to elaborate a narrative concerning a certain event / phenomenon through a prism of one's own political interests, and nothing else.

As long as historiographies are dominated by unilinear interpretations, the historical memory will reproduce confrontational images from the past, and governments will continue to claim compensations for historical grudges. It is just possible that the way out of this situation lies in the methodology of a multi factor analysis.

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