



Question: On June 6, 2021, Western countries commemorated the 77th anniversary of D-DAY. Could you first introduce D-DAY, provide some facts about it, and then talk about the American and Russian versions?

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Peter Kuznick: Well, I'll give you the American perception of D-Day, D-Day is the day World War II started. D-Day is when the United States landed in Europe and then marched to Berlin, defeated Germany single handedly and won the war. That is the perception. D-Day, seriously, is when the US troops landed at Normandy, they fought a bloody battle at several beaches. The Germans had the machine guns in place, the troops were being mowed down. There were heavy casualties. It was a day of great sacrifice, great heroism, and a day that's exalted in the US historical memory, one of the great days in American history.

But the odd thing about it is that World War II, of course, really starts much earlier. And when we look at the American perception of World War II versus the Russian perception of World War II we've got entirely different narratives.

The Russian perception of World War II begins on June 22nd, 1941, when Germany invades the Soviet Union with their blitzkrieg and the Soviets are almost militarily defeated. The Germans are pushing toward Moscow, and the Soviets were just not prepared for this attack, even though they've been warned by the West that something was imminent. But the Soviets, especially Stalin, did not trust Western intelligence sources. And so for the Soviets and for the Russians, the war begins in June of 1941.

The US war narrative starts December 7th 1941, with the attack at Pearl Harbor. So the Japanese are the ones who start the war, not the Germans, which is ironic also. But then Germany declares war on the United States and the United States then has the two-front war that it wanted all along. So then the United States does not get involved militarily very, very quickly. Much of the American fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbor, and then it's not till the Battle of Midway that the United States begins its island-hopping campaign, months later. But the priority for the U.S. was to go after Germany first, go after Germany and its allies in

Europe, and hold off on the war against Japan.

However, the Soviet Union was in a very weakened position, and the Americans and the British feared that the Soviet Union would cut a deal with Germany and opt out of the war. Stalin did not want to do that. Stalin assured Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's emissary, that if the U.S. and the British gave the Soviet Union the wherewithal to resist, the material for the planes and the tanks, that the Soviets would resist the Germans and stay in the war. So the United States decides to do that. Roosevelt has to maneuver because there was still a lot of hostile opinion toward the Soviet Union in the United States. So the diplomatic maneuvering that Roosevelt does is successful and the US is able to extend Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union and the Soviets are able to resist and fight off the German onslaught.

But to do so, first of all, the reality was that throughout most of the war, the US and Britain were facing 10 German divisions between us, while the Soviets were facing more than two hundred German divisions. So, as Churchill says, the Red Army tore the guts out of the German war machine. The Red Army almost single handedly, with a lot of help, we could say, was defeating the Germans, which Roosevelt knew and said over and over again.

So in May 1942, Roosevelt writes to Stalin and asks Stalin to send foreign minister Molotov and a trusted general to Washington, D.C. And they arrive in May and during that meeting, Roosevelt turns to General Marshall and says, can we open up the second front before the end of World War II if necessary? Marshall assures Roosevelt that the U.S. military is ready to open up the second front before the end of World War II. That was what Stalin really beseeched the United States to do because the Soviets were almost single handedly fighting off the Germans. And he knew if we could open up a second front that Germany would have to fight a two-front war and some of the pressure would be taken off the Soviet Union. So the US promises to do so.

However, Churchill then reneges and says we don't have enough transport and we're not militarily ready to do that. And he gets Roosevelt to agree instead to opening up the invasion of North Africa. Eisenhower, who led that operation, said when the U.S. invades North Africa, it'll be the blackest day in history, because he knew that that was a diversion, that it was diverting from what was necessary, which was taking on the Germans in Europe. Marshall dismisses this as periphery packing. And Marshall was so furious with the Brits that he said maybe we should not even invade Europe now. We should fight the war against Japan first.

The American military leaders were furious that Roosevelt, wanting to get the US engaged somewhere in 1943, goes along with this policy. And what was it about? Largely, it was about the British fear of the land battles against the German war machine and the British desire to maintain the British Empire. So the British are going to defend their material, colonial interests in the Pacific and in India and in the Middle East, and not do what was necessary,

which was opening up the second front.

So then the US gets really involved finally in Normandy and D-Day. That's the significance of D-Day. But if you look at American films about World War II, almost all of them focus on D-Day, the time of American heroism, the time we can point to the Americans going out to win the war. The reality, of course, was that the war turns with the battle of Stalingrad. Stalingrad begins in August 23rd 1942 and ends February 2nd 1943, and the Soviets defeat the Germans at Stalingrad. Hitler says the gods of war have gone over to the other side. And that's followed up by the tremendous tank battle at Kursk, where the Soviets defeat the Germans in the tank battle. And finally, the siege of Leningrad comes to an end.

The horrific siege of Leningrad begins September 8th 1941, and finally ends January 27th 1944 - 872 days, a million people might have died there. People were reduced to cannibalism, reduced to eating the glue off the wallpaper, and what they sacrificed and suffered there is unbelievable. So that's a different narrative of the war.

But the thing about it that's so troubling and perverse - for the Russians, the defeat of Germany in World War II is the high point of their identity and the great contribution of the Soviet Union to world history. But now, only 13% of Europeans, according to some of the polls, credit the Soviets with a major role in defeating Germany. In Germany itself, 17% according to the polls I saw, say that the Soviets played a major role. In France, only 8% say the Soviets played a major role in defeating Germany, and across Europe, it's 13%.

That is very, very infuriating to Vladimir Putin and to the Russians who were very proud of the Russian contribution. And the reality is that the Soviets lost 27 million people in the fight against Germany, 27 million people! The U.S. lost a little more than 300 000 in combat, 400 000 overall, and the Brits more in that same range as the Americans. But the Soviets lost 27 million. And I did an anonymous survey with college students and I asked them how many Americans died in World War II. And the median answer I got was 90 000. So they were only 300 000 off. But I asked, how many Soviets died in World War II? And the median answer I got was 100 000. So they are only 27 million off. These kids, they're all A-students in high school and they know nothing about history. So they don't know what World War II was about. They don't know what the Cold War was about. They don't know what the conflict in Ukraine is about. They have no understanding.

As Zhou Enlai said, the charming thing about Americans is they've got absolutely no historical memory. And it's sad, but it's true that the American college students, older American people as well, just have no understanding of history and therefore little understanding of what's going on in the world today. The Russians every year have a big commemoration of the end of the war. Victory Day is a huge holiday in Russia. And they've got the Immortal Regiment, they've got the military parades and they've got public parades. For three years in a row, I was able to bring students there for May 9th. The Commemoration Foundation in Russia actually paid for my students and me to come over there and to

participate in these events.

On the 75th anniversary, we weren't able to go because of the pandemic but Putin gave a very important address. In the United States, people assume that Putin is this unfeeling automaton. He's always portrayed as this tough, calculating person, they always refer to him as a Soviet spy, KGB agent - you know, KGB operative Vladimir Putin, who has no human feelings whatsoever. But in this speech, he says, "So why does Russia celebrate the 9th of May as the biggest holiday? Why does life almost come to a halt on June 22? And why does one feel a lump rise in their throat? They usually say that the war has left a deep imprint on every family's history. Behind these words, there are fates of millions of people, their sufferings and the pain of loss. Behind these words, there is also the pride, the truth and the memory."

He says, "For my parents, the war meant the terrible ordeals of the Siege of Leningrad where my two-year old brother Vitya died. It was the place where my mother miraculously managed to survive. My father, despite being exempt from active duty, volunteered to defend his hometown. He made the same decision as millions of Soviet citizens. He fought at the Nevsky Pyatachok bridgehead and was severely wounded. And the more years pass, the more I feel the need to talk to my parents and learn more about the war period of their lives. But I no longer have the opportunity to do so."

It's interesting because Americans dismiss this idea of the source of Putin's nationalism, Putin is deeply nationalistic and in some ways very conservative; a lot of ideas that I don't agree with. But this sincere Russian nationalism and sense of pride and sense of achievement for World War II is something that Americans and Europeans need to understand, if we're going to understand the way the Russians see the world now. And I think that's something that's often left out of American calculation. So when the United States and the Europeans downplay the Russian contribution to the victory over the Nazis, they are doing something that is deeply, deeply offensive to the Russian people overall, and to Putin and the Russian leaders. I think it's an important point that often gets missed in the West, but needs to be understood.

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