

Moscow Distances Itself from Article Blaming Poland for Starting WWII

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Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The Defense Ministry said today that an article put on its site a few days ago that has sparked outrage with its suggestion that Poland was to blame for the start of World War II "must not be considered the official point of view of the Defense Ministry."

In a [statement](#) to journalists, the ministry's press service said that the article, "Inventions and Falsifications in the Assessment of the Role of the USSR on the Eve and at the Start of World War II" by Col. Sergei Kovalyov of the ministry's Institute of Military History, was only for discussion.

Kovalyov's article appears to have been taken down. (It was posted [here](#).) At the very least, it is not currently listed in the [section](#) where it was posted, nor could it be retrieved as of Thursday morning.

(An effort to find a cached copy on Yandex Thursday afternoon was also unsuccessful. What

appears to be [an earlier version of that article](#) &mdash it bears the same title and has the same author but is dated October 25, 2008 &mdash is available, however, on the Russian Orthodox nationalist site, "Yedinovye Otechestvo.")

The key passage in Kovalev's article is the following: World War II "was begun as a result of the refusal of Poland to satisfy ... extremely moderate demands such as including the free city of Danzig in the Third Reich [and] permission for the construction of extra-territorial highways and railroad, which would connect East Prussia with the rest of Germany."

Not surprisingly, especially given President Dmitry Medvedev's call for beginning "a struggle with falsifications of history that harm the interests of Russia," several Russian commentators jumped on Kovalyov's article as an indication of just how much of a threat to historical accuracy such a campaign will likely be.

One of the most thoughtful reactions to the article was provided by Ivan Sukhov in Thursday's issue of Russian daily Vremya Novostei in [which](#) he points out that Kovalyov not only misuses sources in order to distort the past but seeks to justify what Hitler did in ways that the German Administration for the Defense of the Constitution would see as a violation of the law. "That should not be an occasion for laughter," Sukhov notes, "especially if one keeps in mind that [Russians] live in a country that has never assessed the crimes committed by bolshevism from a legal point of view."

"The administration for the defense of the constitution works in Germany," he continues, "[while] in Russia now there is a government commission for preventing the falsification of history," at least if those "falsifications" harm the Russian state.

While complaining about Western writers who talk about "a new Cold War," Kovalyov himself writes in a spirit of precisely that kind of conflict without appearing to recognize he is doing so, the Vremya Novostei commentator continues. Although if he doesn't recognize this, many Russians and those living in neighboring countries certainly do.

Indeed, Sukhov says, Kovalyov's argument fits into the pattern of "hysteria" in certain Russian quarters about the removal of the Soviet war memorial from the center of Tallinn, even as Russian companies move similar monuments within Russia in order to make profits from the real estate beneath them.

The military writer's argument also fits with the notion, now enshrined in a Russian history textbook, that "Joseph Stalin was 'an effective manager.'" According to Sukhov, texts like Kovalev's suggest that the time may come when some in Russia will decide to describe Adolf Hitler as "'an effective manager'" too.

But even before that happens, Sukhov suggests, the countries of Eastern Europe that experienced both "Soviet and Nazi 'effective management'" will be declared "guilty" of everything that happened to them, especially if others extend the argument of people like Colonel Kovalyov.

(Unfortunately, there are many Russian historians who are prepared to do just that.

For an example, see the [comment](#) by St. Petersburg political scientist Sergey Lebedev who came out in support of Kovalyov Thursday and argued that "Poland had conducted itself like a lion among hyenas.")

Many in Moscow are now talking about how Russia must use "soft power" to influence others, especially among its neighbors, Sukhov notes. But articles like the one authored by Kovalyov are not going to help anyone except in one respect: They show that "the struggle with the falsification of history at the expense of Russia will take place again at the expense of Russia."

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