

Forging Post-Soviet Regional Identities: The Politics of War Memory in Smolensk

Joonseo Song

(Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)

Paper submitted for

The 5th East Asia Conference on Slavic-Eurasian Studies

August 9-10, 2013

Osaka University, Japan

*Please do not cite without permission from author.

During the last two decades, regional elites and governments in Russia have attempted to forge their own regional identities. One of the primary ways that they have employed to forge new local identities is using historical memories of the region. For the residents of Smolensk, located in the western borderland of Russia, memories of war consist of important elements of their regional identities. The city has experienced numerous wars against foreign invaders throughout its history. During the Napoleonic War (1812-15) the city fought against the French armies led by Napoleon who invaded Russia while during World War II, the city was occupied by German armies for two years from 1941 to 1943. Russia and the Soviet Union eventually defeated both French and German invaders. Due to the role of Smolensk during the war and its contribution to the victory of the war, the city frequently calls itself the 'Shield of Russia.' It has been well known that post-Soviet Russian leadership have used the memory of the war, especially the memory of Great Patriotic War (1941-45), for the political purpose of both promoting patriotism among its citizens and forging a new Russian identity. Focusing on regional dimension of the politics of war memory especially in a boarder land region, I will examine the ways that the local authorities and elites of Smolensk use memories of war to achieve their own goals. For this study, I will analyze not only the rhetoric of local leaders and elites but also the way that the local authorities

commemorate major wars that the region involved. The aim of this study is first, to examine the regional dimension of politics of war memory which has not been fully studied so far compared to the national dimension; second, to analyze the case of the front region which affected more by wartime battles than any other regions in Russia.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many local governments have made diligent efforts to make their region unique and distinguished from others by inventing “new traditions.” They created (or sometimes rediscovered) their local symbols to forge new local identities. By doing so, the local government could attract more tourists and promote the local economy. The local governments could receive various supports including subsidies from the central government if the local symbols and traditions, such as historical figure and events, that the regional authorities propagandize are in accordance with the political aim (i.e., promotion of patriotism) of the central government.¹ In Smolensk the local authorities have used the region’s geographical location as a borderland region and its experiences of wars against foreign invaders, such as the Napoleonic War and World War II, as major tools for forging its new local identities and its own image for the rest of nation.

The head of local government has frequently propagandized the image of the region as a front region which has played a key role in defending motherland during the major wars against foreign invaders. During his interview with Interfax in Moscow in August 2008 Sergei Antuf’ev, governor of the Smolensk oblast, emphasized as follows:

The history and geographical location of our region is unique. Smolensk is not by chance called as a key post city(город-ключ) and a shield city(город-щит): [during the Time of Trouble] in the early 17th century the city saved the state, then the Napoleon’s excursion faced fierce battle in the Smolensk region besides in the field of Borodino...Then in September 1941 during the Great Fatherland War the Soviet Guards units was first created in El’nia [of the Smolensk region]...Today, Smolensk

has prestige title of ‘Hero City’ and El’nia received honorable title of the City of Military Glory.²

Memories of the 1812 War

For the Smolensk authorities, the memory of the Napoleonic War became especially important recently as the nation celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Napoleonic War in 2012. The local government and elite prepared and supported various local events related to the Napoleonic War. One of those events is the reenactments of the major battles of 1812 war which occurred in the territory of the Smolensk region. In September 2011, a year before the anniversary, Governor Antuf’ev pointed out during his interview with a journal that the reenactment of the Lubino battle, one of the major battles during the 1812 war has been held several years in the Kradymovskii district, the place where the battle actually occurred during the war.³ He emphasized the popularity and scale of the reenactment of the battle by indicating that about 40 military-history clubs from various regions from the Russian Federation including Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Ufa, as well as from foreign countries including Belarus, Poland, and Latvia.⁴ This reenactment started from 2003 by the support from the “Primilenie”(Reconciliation) foundation, a local-based nonprofit group. In his interview with a local newspaper held a few days before the event in August 2012 the representative of the foundation indicated that the total participants of the reenactment reached about 1,500 while he expected 10,000~15,000 spectators.⁵ He even guaranteed that the reenactment of the Lubino battle would be larger scale than that of the battle of Borodino.⁶ Igor’ Iasinskii, president of the foundation, even complained that the battle of Lubino was among 10 greatest battles during the 1812 war; but no textbook mentioned about the battle. The representative of the foundation even announced after the event, “We will write a petition about the revision of history textbooks regarding this

problem.”⁷

Besides the reenactment of the historic battle, the local authorities attempted to restore memories of the 1812 war by organizing various events. For example, in November 2012 the local authorities carried out the ceremony of reburial of the remains of 20 Russian soldiers who died during the 1812 war in the field where the battle of Lubino took place.⁸ In addition, in that month the local government held a ceremony of unveiling a new plate indicating the old street name after the Lesli, a local noble family, whose members first organized partisan detachment in 1812 and provided them with uniform and weapons by the family's own cost.⁹ In 1917 the Bolshevik government changed the street name into the “Herzen Street” name after Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), a father of Russian socialist revolutionary movement.¹⁰

Not only the local government but also the central government initiated the 1812 war related events that promoted war memories among local people in the Smolensk region. The Russian government decided to rebuild 1812 war monuments which were built in 1839-41 for the 29th anniversary of the victory over Napoleon, but destroyed in the early 1930s by the Bolshevik government which wanted to use the 26 meter high metal monument for industry.¹¹ The tsarist government of Nikolai I built total six monuments in the places including Borodino field, Maloiaroslavts, Smolensk, and Krasnyi, as well as two places in the Belarus region, where fierce battles between Russian and French armies took place. Among these places, Krasnyi along with Smolensk is located in the Smolensk region. But, the Bolshevik destroyed all monuments but the one in Smolensk during the period of the First Five Year plan. Recently the Russian government decided to rebuild them and initiated fund raising for the reconstruction of the monuments. With the financial support from both the central and local government, a monument in Krasnyi, located 45 km southwest of Smolensk, was

unveiled in September 2012. This was one of the tens of monuments built as a part of governmental project for the celebration of the 200th years of the victory in the Napoleonic war.¹² The reconstruction of the huge monument was a certainly memorable moment of the local residents who planned a fund raising to rebuild the monument but could not collect enough amount of money during the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹³

Memories of World War II

Like the memory of the 1812 war, the memory of World War II is a crucial part that forges the local identities of the Smolensk region. World War II monuments that commemorate 60,000 victims of mass murder by German troops occupying the Smolensk region from July 1941 to September 1943 are indeed key parts of city landscape. In addition to monuments for victims, a huge gold star, a symbol of “Hero City(город-герой),” a Soviet award given to the cities that contributed greatly to the war efforts displayed at the central park and square of city respectively. The city of Smolensk received the honorable title of Hero City in 1985 for Soviet armies’ fierce fighting that considerably delayed the German advance to Moscow. The fact that the city administration designated the day of city’s liberation from German occupation as Smolensk City Day (September 25) indicates the significance of war memories for the city and its residents. Accordingly, the city administration organized many events related to the memory of World War II for the City Day.¹⁴

Like Smolensk, small towns in the Smolensk oblast also commemorate the war based on their own wartime experiences. Indeed the City of Military Glory(город воинской славы) project, which the Putin administration formulated in 2006, promoted not only regional administration centers but also small towns in the region came to commemorate the war in

more public way. On May 9, 2006, President Putin announced a new decree, “On the Honorary Title of the Russian Federation ‘City of Military Glory.’” The law indicates that the government will confer this title on the cities of the Russian Federation whose inhabitants showed fortitude, endurance, and mass heroism in the fight for the freedom and the independence of the fatherland.¹⁵ The honorary title is not designated only for the wartime experiences of World War II but includes all wars during which the local residents fought against foreign enemies. But most cities and towns in the Smolensk region related the title with their experiences in World War II because that war is the most recent war which occupies many residents’ mind.

The City of Military Glory project succeeded in promoting in a great extent the interest of local population in commemoration of the war. The wartime contribution of small regional towns has not had much chance to receive attention from the central government in a national dimension. But the local town could receive 20 million rubles of financial support for cleaning towns, road repairs, and improvement of public transportation, from the oblast administration if the town receives the title of City of Military Glory.¹⁶ Thus, for the small towns receiving the title means a chance to improve its living environments, to develop tourism, and to increase self-esteem and pride on their hometown. For these reasons, local authorities and residents strove to receive the title. In August 2007 local residents of El’nia, the birth place in 1941 of the Soviet Guard (the elite unit of the Soviet army), wrote a petition that asked politicians to support for receiving the title for their town and handed the petition to Sergei Mironov, a chairman of the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian parliament) and leader of a political party, A Just Russia, who visited the Smolensk region.¹⁷ Regional newspapers’ frequent reports on status of El’nia in the selecting process and its result reflected local community’s immense interest in and wish for being a City of Military

Glory. El'nia received the title in October 2007.

Like the local community of El'nia, acquisition of the City of Military Glory title was one of the most important events for the local authorities and residents of Viaz'ma, a small town with population of 50,000 in the Smolensk oblast, which received the title in April 2009 for its heroic fight during the war which delayed German advance to Moscow in 1941. On June 7, 2009 the local authorities of Viaz'ma announced in the ceremony of the City Day that the two most important events for its town were one, the fact that 770 years ago the town's name was first appeared in the chronicle; the other, award of the title City of Military Glory.¹⁸ Regarding the city's acquisition of the title, Victor Semeikin, major of Biaz'ma, asserted, "We have a full right to have a pride about the fact that we live in the town of military glory." Claiming that living in the town is a great honor and responsibility for the residents, he called the acquisition of the title as a "memorable" event.¹⁹

Conclusion

The local authorities of the Smolensk region, a borderland that had been invaded numerous times by the foreign enemies throughout its history, the memory of wars, especially the Napoleonic War and World War II, was a key part that embodied local identities. During the post-Soviet years, the regional authorities and elite have made various efforts to build new local identities by using memory of the wars. On the one hand, the local authorities and elite promoted the memories of the wars to invent new post-Soviet regional symbols in order to attract more tourists. On the other hand, the promotion of the war memory also helped the local authorities attract attention from the central government and, subsequently, receive financial support from the center. In this sense, forging local identities by using war memories helped the local government achieve practical goals such as promotion of local

economy and regional development. At the same time, it should be noted that the memories of wars played as a catalyst that promoted both patriotism and regional patriotism among local population in the borderland region.

¹ Joonseo Song, «Redefining a Post-Soviet Symbol of a Russian Borderland: Prince Alexander Nevsky of Pskov», *Seoyangsaron*, vol. 112 (March 2012), pp. 230-231.

² Дмитрий Райчев, «В Москве в офисе агентства «Интерфакс» состоялась пресс-конференция Сергея Антуфьева», Smolnews.ru, 20 августа 2008, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/28940>, accessed 4 March 2013.

³ Татьяна Жевак, Глава региона Сергей Антуфьев дал интервью журналу «Отдых в России». Smolnews.ru, 7 сентября 2011, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/103367>.

⁴ Татьяна Жевак, Глава региона Сергей Антуфьев дал интервью журналу «Отдых в России». Smolnews.ru, 7 сентября 2011, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/103367>.

⁵ 4 августа, в деревне Лубино отметят 200-летие Отечественной войны, 1 августа 2012, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/135585>

⁶ 4 августа, в деревне Лубино отметят 200-летие Отечественной войны, 1 августа 2012, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/135585>

⁷ 4 августа, в деревне Лубино отметят 200-летие Отечественной войны, 1 августа 2012, <http://www.smolnews.ru/news/135585>

⁸ Ирина Васильева, На поле при Лубино состоится перезахоронение останков 20 русских воинов, павших в 1812 году, 15 ноября 2012, www.smolnews.ru/news/145135.

⁹ Юлия Веселова, Памятный знак смоленскому дворянскому роду Лесли установили на фасаде дома № 12/1 по улице Исаковского. 29 декабря 2012, www.smolnews.ru/news/148483; Проект решения об увековечении памяти рода Лесли единогласно поддержали депутаты Смоленского горсовета на профильной комиссии. 23 ноября 2012, www.smolnews.ru/news/145951.

¹⁰ Юлия Веселова, Памятный знак смоленскому дворянскому роду Лесли установили на фасаде дома № 12/1 по улице Исаковского. 29 декабря 2012, www.smolnews.ru/news/148483

¹¹ День Города. 28 сентября 2006, www.smolnews.ru/news/9179; Ю.Г. Иванов, Щит России. Памятники и памятные места Смоленщины (Смоленск. Русич, 2006), С. 95.

¹² В посёлке Красный открыли монумент, посвященный войне 1812 года, на месте взорванного в 1931 году, 18 сентября 2012 г. www.smolnews.ru/news/139597

¹³ В посёлке Красный открыли воссозданный памятник героям Отечественной войны 1812-го года. 18 сентября 2012, www.smolnews.ru/news/139664.

¹⁴ В Смоленске начинаются мероприятия ко Дню города. 19 сентября 2006. www.smonews.ru/news/9079; Уважаемые смоляне! 25 сентября 2006,

www.smolnews.ru/news/9090.

¹⁵ Федеральный закон о почетном звании Российской Федерации Город воинской славы, 6 мая 2006.

¹⁶ В Смоленской области до конца 2009 года будет приостановлено действие закона о городах воинской славы. 26 марта 2009, www.smolnews.ru/news/27641.

¹⁷ Для жителей Ельни Сергей Миронов стал последней надеждой на справедливоить, 7 сентября 2007 г. www.smolnews.ru/news/16004.

¹⁸ 7 июня в центре Вязьмы на Советской площади состоялось праздничное шествие горожан, 10 июня 2009, www.smolnews.ru/news/38707

¹⁹ Вязьма получит подарок от Президента. 8 мая 2009, www.smolnews.ru/news/37898.