An Unpredictable Past:
Constructing a Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia

by
Lydia Tomkiw
Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2011
A Note on Translations

Whenever possible I found texts and documents that had already been translated into English. Any reading or translation that was needed from Ukrainian to English I did on my own. I am grateful to Professor Magda Teter who provided translations of texts from Polish to English. Any reading or translation that was needed from Russian to English I would try on my own with the aid of an online translator. Any Russian texts with which I was uncertain, I turned to Professor Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock to whom I am also grateful.
Acknowledgements

There are many people without whom this thesis would not have become a reality and I would like to thank them.

My two thesis advisors were pivotal in helping me with their edits and suggestions along the way. Professor Magda Teter helped me form my ideas and think of ways to organize my thesis during the fall semester. During the spring semester, Professor Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock helped me clarify my thoughts and look at the overarching ideas my thesis presents. Professor Smolkin-Rothrock edited numerous drafts, discussed ideas with me for hours, and offered me coffee. I am extremely grateful for all three.

Over the past few years at Wesleyan I had the opportunity to take several classes with wonderful professors that first made me start thinking and then continue thinking about the Soviet Union, Russia, history, and politics. In the fall of my sophomore year I took the course “Stalin and Stalinism” with Professor Philip Pomper; in the fall of my junior year I took the course “The End of the Cold War” with Professor Ronald Schatz; and in the fall of my senior year I took the course “Russian Politics” with Professor Peter Rutland. I am thankful to all three professors for selecting interesting texts and inspiring me to learn more. I am especially grateful to Professor Rutland for discussing my thesis idea with me in the spring of 2010 and for sending me numerous emails with helpful articles, links, and videos over the past year.

As a young child my parents made me attend Ukrainian school every Saturday despite my incessant complaints about wanting to stay home and watch Saturday morning cartoons. They told me, “someday you’ll thank us for this.” That day has come and I am extremely grateful to my mother and father for insisting that I learn how to read and write in Cyrillic and learn to speak with my grandparents in their native language. I am also extremely grateful for my parent’s help years later with reading my thesis chapters, making suggestions, inserting commas where needed, and Skyping with me when I needed a break.

To all of my fellow thesis writing friends, especially my fellow classmates in the College of Letters, for their support and encouragement throughout this process. To my group of freshman year friends who became life-long friends – thank you for listening to me talk about Russia, Putin, and Medvedev for hours. And to Victor, for being the best friend I could ever ask for and for bringing me macarons, chocolates, and baguettes when I needed them.
# Table of Contents

## A Note on Translation

## Acknowledgements

### Introduction

*The Romanov Funeral: To Attend or Not to Attend?* ................................................................. 1
*The Problem with a Problematic History* ........................................................................... 4
*Historical Debates* ........................................................................................................... 8
*The Yeltsin Years: The Difficulties of Transition* ............................................................... 10
*Yeltsin and the Russian Idea* ............................................................................................ 12
*Putin and Medvedev Concentrate on Modernization* .................................................. 14
*Structure of Work* ............................................................................................................. 16

### Chapter One: Navigating Changing Times: Holidays and Heroes in the Public Sphere

*Come Celebrate National Unity Day: What Are We Celebrating?* ..................................... 20
  *National Stability* ........................................................................................................... 23
  *Multiethnic Unity* ........................................................................................................ 29

*Victory Day: World War II as a Unifying Event*
  *The War and Its Implications* ......................................................................................... 32
  *Contemporary Relevance and Commemoration* ............................................................ 33
  *The Baltic States and the Western War Narrative* ........................................................... 38
*A Search for Heroes: Nevsky, Stolypin, and Stalin* .......................................................... 41
*Conclusion* ........................................................................................................................ 48

### Chapter Two: Educating the Next Generation: Constructing and Teaching a New History

*The History of Writing History in Russia* ........................................................................... 51
*Yeltsin Searches for a Historical Foundation* ..................................................................... 54
*Putin Sets Out On a Clear Path* ........................................................................................ 60
*Textbooks Front and Center* ........................................................................................... 62
*Textbook Content and Public Opinion* ............................................................................. 66
*The Height of Controversy* ............................................................................................... 70
*An Emerging Shift?* .......................................................................................................... 77
*Conclusion* ........................................................................................................................ 78

### Chapter Three: The Government Acts to Protect Its Useable Past

*Medvedev Introduces a New Commission* ....................................................................... 82
*Defining “Falsification”* .................................................................................................... 86
*The Falsification of Katyn* ............................................................................................... 88
*Against the Commission: Historians and Memorial Respond* ........................................ 91
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Support of the Commission</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Unknowing Public</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Incident at the Academy</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposing a New Great Patriotic Law</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equating Nazism and Stalinism</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe Remembers</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion: Confronting the Past and Looking to the Future**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confronting the Past</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking to the Future</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bibliography**                                                        | 118  |
Introduction

“Sometimes—history needs a push.”

-Vladimir Lenin

The Romanov Funeral: To Attend or Not to Attend?

In July of 1998 Russian President Boris Yeltsin was faced with a political dilemma: should he attend the funeral of the last Russian Tsar Nicholas II of the Romanov dynasty, Tsarina Alexandra, their five children, and some of their servants, all of whom had been shot to death by the Bolsheviks 80 years earlier? Yeltsin, the first post-Soviet president, had to address the deep Soviet past to which he was personally tied as was the new Russian democracy. The Bolsheviks had placed Nicholas II and his family under house arrest in 1917 and on July 17, 1918, in the city of Yekaterinburg, the Romanovs were taken to a downstairs room in the building in which they were being held. The selected room had plastered wooden walls, so the bullets would not ricochet. The Romanovs and their servants were executed at point blank range. When describing the site of the murders later, Pavel Medvedev, commander of the house guard where the Romanovs were held, told how “blood flowed in streams.” The Romanovs’ bodies were buried nearby the house and their remains were not found until 1979. It was not until 1998 that the remains were officially identified, finally presenting the opportunity for the new Russian state to

---

2 During the Soviet era Yekaterinburg was known as Sverdlovsk.
give the Romanov family a proper burial. As the leader of the Russian Federation, Yeltsin wanted to find a way to reconcile the Communist past with the democratic present.

President Yeltsin, like many Russian politicians, was directly linked with the Communist past. Yeltsin had been involved with the history of the Romanov family when he was the Communist Party chairman in Yekaterinburg. He had ordered the destruction of the building in which the Romanovs had been held and executed.

Yeltsin, like Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, grew up under the Soviet system and now had to find a way to reconcile a Communist past, full of dark and light historical pages, with a democratic future.

Nicholas II is a controversial and polarizing figure in Russian history. Some view him as a weak-willed yet draconian autocrat responsible for the collapse of the imperial Russian state, while others view him and his family as martyrs because of the terrible fate they met under the new Bolshevik regime. President Yeltsin wanted a state funeral for the tsar, his family, and some of their servants to serve as a national act of repentance and reconciliation.

A grandiose funeral was planned and the Romanovs’ remains were to be buried and placed with other members of the royal family in the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul in St. Petersburg. President Yeltsin initially indicated that he would attend the funeral, viewing it as an opportunity to reconcile and repent for the crime that had been concealed by the Communist state for decades. Russia’s Communist Party officials, whose political predecessors had

---

4 Andrew Cook, *The murder of the Romanovs* (Stroud: Amberley, 2010), 495.
6 Ibid.
ordered the executions of the Romanovs, objected to the funeral. Russian Orthodox Church officials were divided over the authenticity of the remains, and the Russian Parliament (Duma) decided not to send a representative to the funeral. All of these objections, as well as public doubt about the authenticity of the remains, caused Yeltsin to change his mind in June 1998 when he decided he would not attend the funeral. Then, the day before the funeral, Yeltsin changed his mind for a third time, ultimately deciding to attend.

At the burial, Yeltsin gave an address that highlighted the new situation in Russia: dealing with a difficult past and trying to move forward.

Eighty years have passed since the slaying of the last Russian emperor and his family. We have long been silent about this monstrous crime. We must say the truth: The Yekaterinburg massacre has become one of the most shameful episodes in our history. By burying the remains of innocent victims, we want to atone for the sins of our ancestors. Those who committed this crime are as guilty as are those who approved of it for decades. We are all guilty….We must end the century, which has been an age of blood and violence in Russia, with repentance and peace, regardless of political views, ethnic or religious belonging. This is our historic chance. On the eve of the third millennium, we must do it for the sake of our generation and those to come.7

Political opinions, meanwhile, have remained torn over the burial of the Romanovs. When, for example, Putin was asked his opinion on whether burying the Romanovs was the correct choice, he only answered “I think so.” Putin’s indecision points to a fundamental reason the Romanovs would not play a large role in the history of the new Russian state: for the new regime, cultivating patriotism was more valuable than

reconciliation with the past. While Yeltsin stressed the idea of reconciliation and forgiveness of sins, Putin and Medvedev have steered Russia on a course to modernization that stresses patriotism and makes guilt and reconciliation problematic. For Putin and Medvedev, the cost of reconciliation seems to outweigh the benefits. They have left the idea of reconciliation in, borrowing Lev Trotsky’s phrase, the dustbin of history.

The Problem with a Problematic History

The funeral of the Romanovs is a microcosm of the broader problems facing the process of creating a historical narrative in a post-Soviet world. When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it brought forth 15 new states, and with them, 15 new political problems: how should these newly independent states, many of them the product of Soviet nationalities policies, understand and represent their past? In the case of the Russian Federation, this problem had another, perhaps unique, component. Faced with the broader question of who would inherit Soviet history, the most obvious answer seemed to be Russia, who would have to reconcile the legacy of the Soviet Union into its new narrative as an independent democratic nation. Naturally, the Soviet past raised further questions for the Russian present. How, for example, should the Russian government react to controversial figures and events in the Soviet and pre-Soviet past, such as the murder of the Romanovs? What historical events and figures should form the base of the new

---

Russian historical narrative? While 14 other former Soviet states were able to present themselves as victims of the Soviet regime, Russia has absorbed rather than rejected the Communist past as part of its own history. For Russia, the Soviet past had to become part of the Russian past.

This work examines the Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev eras, providing a contemporary analysis of an ongoing process—Russia’s project of searching for and creating a useable past. On a broader level, this work addresses an issue that many countries deal with after wars and political revolutions: how do we address a past that may include difficult, and at times violent, moments and how do we make sense of this past and weave it into a unifying narrative today? Russia provides a distinct example of how a country that has experienced different forms of government, each providing different versions of history, is dealing with this situation. Politically, over the past one hundred years, Russia has experienced Tsarist Empire, Communism, and today, what Russia’s textbook writers describe as, “sovereign democracy.” Russia’s dilemma is unique because, of all the former members of the Soviet Union, it is most closely tied to the history of the Soviet past. Moscow was the capital of the Soviet Union and remains Russia’s capital today and Russian was the language predominantly used during Soviet rule. Although Soviet political rhetoric stressed internationalism and the friendship of its multiethnic people, ‘Russianness’ came to dominate Soviet political culture. As Russian-born historian and anthropologist Serguei Oushakine wrote in his study of how ties to the Soviet state changed after its collapse, “Russians did not follow the path of other nationalities from the former

---

Soviet republics (and east European countries) that used various versions of presocialist national identity models as their fresh starting point. “Unlike the socialist satellite states of Eastern Europe, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, in Russia there was not solidarity among the people of breaking free from the USSR.

In the 1990s, under Yeltsin, there was a wavering in the selection of different historical events to serve as possible important components in the new Russian founding myth. The possibility of anchoring Russia’s history between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, when the country began to modernize and move towards democratic politics, was not successful because this period is not one to which citizens relate. With three diametrically opposed forms of governance over the course of a century, Russia today must deal with how to interpret and narrate its past to create a history Russians can be proud of as their country develops and modernizes.

Russia’s tumultuous political history over the past century has created a challenge of representation for the post-Soviet Russian government. In some ways this problem is akin to the transitions of leadership during the Soviet period when each change of political leader meant history was again up for debate. During the centuries of tsarist rule, the historical narrative remained static. Russia’s entanglement in World War I, however, coupled with a crisis of legitimacy within the autocracy under Nicholas II and the rise of revolutionary movements at the turn of the twentieth century, provided an opening for Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and the Bolsheviks to take control with the October Revolution. In March of 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated and after several years of civil war, Lenin and the Bolsheviks emerged as the victors.

Another political crisis followed with Lenin’s death in 1924, when the revolutionary leader departed without leaving a clear successor. Over the course of the mid-late 1920s, Joseph Stalin consolidated power and ultimately gripped the reins of the Soviet Union until his death in 1953. During Stalin’s rule the Soviet Union industrialized at a rapid rate, defeated the Nazi war machine in World War II, and bounced back from the devastations of war. Yet while Stalin is inextricably linked to these successes, he is also tied to the purges and Gulags of his time. In 1956 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech at the Twentieth Party Congress that denounced Stalin’s cult of personality, questioned Stalin’s wartime record, and ushered in an era of de-Stalinization. Following Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev became the head of the Soviet state and many Soviet citizens fondly reflect on the Brezhnev era, from the mid-1960s until 1982, as the heyday of the Soviet Union. When Brezhnev died, two older leaders, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, followed in rapid succession until the young Mikhail Gorbachev became head of the state in 1985. Gorbachev ushered in an era of reform with perestroika, meaning reconstruction, which was aimed at the economy, and glasnost, meaning openness, which was aimed at giving greater freedom to the Soviet people. Then, in 1991 everything changed when the Soviet Union collapsed. Today Stalin’s draconian rule is an issue of contention within the narrative of contemporary Russian history.

After over 65 years of a single ruling party with a monolithic ideology centered on a single ruler, generations that had grown up with no knowledge of

---

different system suddenly faced an abrupt rupture with everything familiar. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak’s 2006 book title – *Everything was forever until it was no more*—aptly described the nature of this rupture.¹³ Vladimir Putin described the surprise of the collapse saying, “You know, there’s a lot that seems impossible and incredible and then – bang! Look what happened to the Soviet Union. Who could have imagined that it would simply collapse? No one saw that coming—even in their worst nightmares.”¹⁴ In 2005, in his state of the nation address, Putin described the collapse as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”¹⁵ The collapse of the Soviet Union was a break from a system that prescribed a specific type of economy, ideology, and way of life. Making evident the astounding break with the past, by the late 1990s, the former head of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, was starring in a commercial for Pizza Hut – everything had changed.¹⁶

**Historical Debates**

Creating a historical narrative is not a new problem for Russia. Russian history and Russia’s role in the world has been a topic of debate for hundreds of years within Russia itself. In part, this is the product of Peter the Great’s radical re-orientation of Russia towards the West. In his *Philosophical Letters* written in 1829, Peter Chaadayev, a Russian writer and philosopher, wrote that history explains a people and that Russia had fallen behind the West,

¹³ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more : the last Soviet generation*, Information series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
Situated between the two great divisions of the world, between East and West, with one elbow leaning on China and the other on Germany, we should have combined in us the two great principles of intelligent nature, imagination and reason, and have united in our civilization the past of the entire world. But this is not the part which Providence has assigned to us…. Historical experience does not exist for us.\textsuperscript{17}

Chaadayev’s \textit{Letter} prompted Tsar Nicholas I to label him insane, and several years later, Chaadayev produced a second work, titled \textit{Apology of a Madman}. In \textit{Apology}, Chaadayev argues that “it is time to take a clear look at our past, not to extract from it ancient rotted relics, ancient ideas eaten up by time…but to know what to believe about our past.”\textsuperscript{18} Chaadayev’s writings gave birth to the nineteenth century debate over the idea of Russian national identity that was argued between the Slavophiles, who promoted Russian traditions, culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Westernizers, who promoted Western liberal ideas and wanted Russia to follow the path of the West.\textsuperscript{19} The debate over Russian history and identity did not abate and continued during Soviet times.

In 1917 Communist leaders had to create a new historical narrative that would legitimate the revolutionary order. Stalin, for example, consolidated power in part by editing numerous figures, such as Trotsky, out of history. Stalin’s editing and paranoia culminated in the Great Terror when many political figures were purged and removed from the record. Stalin then placed himself and Lenin in the center of Soviet history. During the Soviet era, the Party had a monopoly over history, and the

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev, \textit{Philosophical Letters \\& Apology of a Madman}, trans. Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969), 41.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 172-73.
education system was used, in part, to indoctrinate students with a correct version of history. Historically complex and complicated events that were unfavorable to the Soviet leadership, such as the Katyn massacre, were left out of the historical narrative and out of the official textbooks. The case of Katyn was blamed on the Nazis and remained largely unmentioned during Soviet times. Events that were unfavorable to the Soviet state simply remained topics that were not up for discussion. This pervasive writing and rewriting of Russia’s history led a comedian during the Soviet era to call Russia a country with an unpredictable past.\(^{20}\)

**The Yeltsin Years: The Difficulties of Transition**

President Yeltsin had difficulty deciding what to do with the Russian and Soviet past, as underscored by his indecision over attending the Romanov funeral. Yeltsin was dealt a difficult set of cards that involved transitioning a communist state to a democratic one, a command economy to a market economy, and a large multi-ethnic empire into a nation-state. Oushakine describes the difficult cultural and historic transition, “[t]he abandoning of old institutions and the erasing of the most obvious traces of Communist ideology did not automatically produce an alternative unifying cultural, political, or social framework.”\(^{21}\) While visiting Russia in the early 1990s, Oushakine noticed graffiti that said, “[w]e have no Motherland.”\(^{22}\) During the turbulent years of transition in the early 1990s, Yeltsin tried to create a semblance of

---

\(^{20}\) It remains unclear who first coined this phrase. Comedian Mikhail Nikolayevich Zadornov has used the phrase and named his 1997 show “A great country with an unpredictable past.”


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
normalcy in the new Russian state by adopting symbols that are necessary components of any new state: a crest and a flag. Yeltsin selected the imperial double-headed eagle as the state crest and the tri-color as the flag. These selections seem simple, but examining such changes, especially the changing of street names, illustrates the lack of a coherent plan or pattern that could be applied consistently across the broader historical narrative.

The new government had to replace many street and site names after the Soviet collapse. Political scientist Graeme Gill notes that street and place names are “important because they combine a geographical sense of direction and place with an intellectual, perhaps even ideological, sense of direction and place” and the names of streets and places “help to legitimate existing power structures by linking the regime’s view of itself, its past, and the world, with the seemingly mundane settings of everyday life.”

Street names were changed during Soviet times to both rid cities of tsarist symbolism and to promote Soviet leaders. Just as the naming of streets after Soviet heroes and events legitimated the new regime, the removal of names became a way to downgrade figures.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, street names again were changed, only this time to remove many of the names that had been added during Soviet times. In Moscow alone, 152 streets changed names by the end of 1993. Over 98 percent of street name changes took place within the first three years of the first post-Soviet decade.

While there was no systematic process in name changing, names of streets that featured scientists, writers, and military leaders were often not changed because

---

24 Ibid.: 493.
these individuals could now be claimed as Russian and not just Soviet heroes. “The new Russian leaders were not energized by a coherent ideology or revolutionary tradition with symbols and heroic figures which they could borrow. There was no clear ideological rationale to provide direction and meaning to the changes.”

At the same time, one interesting aspect of the name changes was that it was not a complete rejection of the Soviet era, showing that “the Soviet period was a genuine part of Russian history and that to deny this was only to replicate the actions of the early Bolsheviks.” Traces of the past remain prevalent in Russian society today. Lenin’s tomb in Red Square is a great attraction and generates symbolic power representing the greatness of Russia. Yet, the difficulty in the post-Soviet state in selecting which street names would stay and which needed to be removed, illustrates the larger problem of the 1990s: trying to create a succinct version of the past.

**Yeltsin and the Russian Idea**

Yeltsin’s government tested many viewpoints as possible bases for the new historical narrative. At first, Yeltsin’s team worked with an anti-Communist platform, but they soon realized that this would not be successful since the Communist period needed to be incorporated into the new state’s history. Yeltsin’s uncertainty about how to treat the past was underscored after his reelection in 1996 when he and his administration announced an “idea for Russia” contest. The contest hoped to find a

---

25 Ibid.: 494.
26 Ibid.: 495.
solution to the Russian identity crisis of the early post-Soviet years. The presidential administration wanted an entry that would be patriotic and nationalistic, in the sense that it would encompass the entire nation and not exclude any ethnicities.\textsuperscript{28}

For six months people from across Russia sent in entries. Finally a winner was selected. The winning essay, “Six Principles of Russianess” by Gurii Sudakov, a historian, philologist, and deputy from the Vologda region, contrasted Western values with Russian values and stated that Russians put national interest over individual wealth. Yet, this idea was not a unifying theme that “fit with the brief record of the new Russian state” at a time when oligarchs dominated and the average person worried about affording his or her next meal.\textsuperscript{29} The contest failed to find a panacea for Yeltsin and his administration. For the first time in its history, after more than 70 years of communism and over 300 years of autocratic empire, Russia became a nation-state, prompting Yeltsin to describe the early years of Russia’s transition as “a giant leap into the unknown,” which encompassed economic and political blunders.\textsuperscript{30} Ultimately former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin’s phrase describing a bungled 1993 monetary overhaul became an apt description for the Yeltsin years and the transitiological change of the 1990s, “[w]e hoped for something better and ended up with the usual.”\textsuperscript{31} Yeltsin was not able to crystallize a version of the Soviet past that would be able to serve as the basis of history for all governments that would come after his.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 163.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 171.
\end{itemize}
Putin and Medvedev Concentrate on Modernization

Yeltsin’s address calling for atonement and admission of guilt for Communist crimes, such as the murder of the Romanovs, was short lived in Russia. When Vladimir Putin came to power, the rhetoric of guilt and forgiveness and the lack of one overarching narrative, were replaced by a coherent historical narrative centered on the Soviet victory in World War II, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. Because contemporary Russia has few clear or positive historical links to its past, the USSR’s victory in WWII became, in a sense, Russia’s victory, and has been embraced as one event that the government and its citizens can take pride in and rally around.

During his nine-year tenure as president, Vladimir Putin began constructing his version of Russia’s history by emphasizing the need for modernization and strong leadership to guide Russia out of troubled times. From the first days of his presidency, Putin set out to create an image of Russia as a strong state. As academic Miguel Vázquez Liñán writes, “[t]he construction of this state ideology that substituted Soviet Communism and turned over a new page with respect to the chaos reigning in the 1990s was one of the priorities of Putin’s presidency right from the start.” Putin used a “deliberate and sustained presentation of a nationalist history in order to mobilize support for a more assertive international stand” that he hoped

---

32 Putin, in his First Person book, admits that he admires state-building leaders such as Charles de Gaulle of France and Ludwig Erhard of Germany.
would allow Russia to regain the power status it had held during the Cold War. Putin spoke early in his term about how a new historical perspective was needed to help form a national idea that would unify Russia as well as its polarized political parties. Russia’s unique position in history, as discussed over a century ago by Chaadayev, was one of Putin’s talking points and was paired with a focus on “nationalism, patriotism, imperialism, [and] respect for authority.” This focus allowed Putin to place himself within the pantheon of Russia’s great forebears such as Catherine the Great, Peter the Great, and also, somewhat controversially, Joseph Stalin. The Putin government used all of these historical figures as examples of great Russian historical figures that Russian citizens could be proud of. Putin took a personal interest in the history the next generation of Russian leaders was being taught in school, specifically concerning the textbooks they are using and he quickly spoke out about his dislike of international grants and outsiders meddling in the writing of Russian history.

President Dmitry Medvedev, a lawyer by training, has continued on the path set out by his predecessor, even going a step further by engaging the legal field to protect Russian history. In 2009, Medvedev signed a new committee, The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History, into law that is supposed to protect Russia from falsifications of its history. Protecting the Russian version of World War II prompted the creation of this committee. Laws that would specifically protect the Russian version of WWII – that Russia won the war and that it did so with successful tactics – have also been

34 Jeremy Black, The curse of history (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008), 129.
35 Liñán, "History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia," 168.
announced during Medvedev’s presidency. History has taken on a role of central importance for the current Russian government. By having a clear and concise history to which the Russian people can relate and of which they can be proud, Russia can continue to modernize as a state and be a global as well as a regional power.

Structure of the Work

The first chapter of this work examines history in the public sphere through holidays and heroes. The second chapter looks at history through the lens of the classroom by examining the history textbooks used by Russian students. The third chapter studies the legal realm and how a correct version of history is being legislated and protected through The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History. Together, these three chapters speak to the broader question of how the Russian state is constructing a historical narrative that must encompass all spheres of life.

The first chapter explores how the Russian government is trying to create popular appeal for a new historical narrative, one of a multinational state working together, through the National Unity Day holiday. The state had hoped for a positive response to National Unity Day, but this has not come to fruition and instead Victory Day, World War II, and leader Joseph Stalin occupy central and popular roles in the narrative. Stalin’s vast repressions and the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states during WWII are examples of two problems, not widely discussed, that are present in the historic narrative that has been popularized in Russia. The state has also tried to find heroes in medieval prince Alexander Nevsky and tsarist Prime Minister Pyotr
Stolypin, both of whom were strong leaders and modernizers, so that Russian citizens can be proud of figures in Russian history.

The second chapter focuses on how history textbooks are being written and what information is emphasized and what is omitted. Educating the next generation is key to the future of a strong Russian state. During the Yeltsin era, textbooks allowed for a plurality of opinions; when Putin came to power history education took on patriotic tones, reflecting Putin’s desire to create a new unified historical narrative, which created new debates and controversies over how the dark pages of Russia’s history should be addressed. A controversial teacher’s manual published in 2007 brought scholars from around the world into the foray of debate over how Russia’s history should be written.

The third chapter examines proposed laws and a new commission charged with finding historical “falsifications” in an attempt to safeguard Russia’s past and the sanctity of the meaning of WWII in particular. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which aims to provide regional security and a forum for discussions, passed a resolution which compares Stalinism and Nazism; this put the Russian government on the defensive. It is unclear how far the state will go and what kind of power will be afforded to the new commission, further underscoring the complex debate over the Russian historical narrative and the solutions being proposed by the current government. It is clear, however, that the Russian government has invested considerable resources in its effort to create a coherent narrative of the past.
Chapter One

Navigating Changing Times: Holidays and Heroes in the Public Sphere

“Anyone who does not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart, but anyone who wants it restored has no brain.”

– President Vladimir Putin

The fall of the Soviet Union necessitated a complete overhaul and restructuring of Russian history and its representations in the public sphere as the country sought to transition from communism to democracy and shed the dark pages of its past while embracing the lighter pages. New holidays were invented and old ones changed to represent a new post-Soviet political order. Historical figures from the Romanovs to Joseph Stalin were reevaluated as part of the search for a post-Soviet Russian historical narrative that has to combine diametrically opposed political and historical periods. The Russian empire under the autocratic rule of the Romanovs has to be reconciled with the rule of the Bolsheviks who killed the tsar and his family and established Communist rule over the vast territory of the imperial Russian state.

Both the transitions and transformations of the Russian political system and historical narrative have not been easy or clear cut. Events that were precisely narrated during the Soviet period, such as the October Revolution, now required different interpretations. As the example of President Boris Yeltsin at the funeral of the Romanovs illustrates, coming to a universal agreement about the historical significance of Russia’s last tsar presents former Soviet citizens with numerous difficulties. When President Vladimir Putin came into office, he played a large role in

36 Quoted in “Putin address to nation: Excerpts,” BBC Monitoring, April 25, 2005.
trying to cement a narrative that would inculcate national pride and unity. Some of his methods to achieve this goal included creating the holiday National Unity Day and influencing the direction of school education with textbooks.

History in the public sphere, through the celebration of holidays such as National Unity Day and Victory Day, illustrates how different aspects of a new historical narrative are rejected or adopted. Today, the Russian historical narrative that is being articulated glorifies the Soviet victory in WWII and stresses the importance of national unity for the development of a strong and patriotic Russia. National Unity Day and Victory Day provide a lens through which we can view the broader attempt to forge a historical narrative inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both holidays are government attempts at creating a stable historical narrative after the instability of the 1990s and illustrate the historical division between Russian empire and nation. The public’s reaction to the two holidays shows which historical elements the public is proud of and wants to celebrate and those that the public has not adopted. Ultimately, both holidays show the Russian government’s attempt at modernizing the state and moving forward with a defined history of the past.

Importantly, while National Unity Day failed to achieve the success Putin hoped for, Victory Day remains a critical holiday on the Russian calendar. The Russian victory over the Nazis in World War II has become the focal point and the culmination of national pride – history’s most important light page. Yet, even the victory in WWII presents problems for the Russian historical narrative. Stalin, who led the Soviet Union to victory, and in 1940 appeared as the man of the year on the cover of Time magazine, is venerated both at home and abroad as the leader who was
at the helm of the Soviet Red Army. Yet, alongside military achievements, his rule was marked by a vast system of political repression, and this makes him a problematic hero for the democratic state. Although he is still popular in Russia today, the Kremlin realizes the difficulty of celebrating such a complicated and controversial figure who is denounced by Western scholars, and by Russian human rights organizations such as Memorial, a group that works to identify victims of Soviet political repressions. Holidays and heroes in the public sphere illustrate the construction of a new historical narrative that has created light pages, dark pages, and ambiguous pages in Russian history. While Victory Day has been nailed into place in the Russian historical narrative, National Unity Day is still loose and ambiguous and the public’s reaction and knowledge of the two holidays and the heroes the state has held up for them shows the extent to which the new narrative is being adopted and accepted.

**Come Celebrate National Unity Day: What Are We Celebrating?**

Creating and shaping holidays for political purposes is not new to the post-Soviet era. When the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, they needed to create a new Soviet identity and historical narrative. Thus, historical and political indoctrination stretched into the public sphere. From the early days of the revolution, Soviet leaders realized the importance in the calendar cycle of holidays in public life and personal life. Holidays would allow citizens of the Soviet Union to make a connection with the state and could be used to reinforce the new Soviet historical narrative and would
become a part of personal life marked by the calendar. As historian Karen Petrone writes, the Party set out to create a calendar cycle of holidays, that both embraced pre-revolutionary socialist holidays (such as May Day and International Women’s Day) and commemorated important dates in Soviet history (such as the October Revolution and, later, the death of Lenin). Soviet leaders transformed the demonstrations of protest that had marked May Day in the pre-revolutionary period with joyous celebrations of Soviet victory.37

New holidays and festivals helped to legitimate the ruling Soviet regime but they also reflected the political mood of the times. In the 1930s, with the fear of an approaching war, Air Force Day and Navy Day, among others, were established as holidays.38 Holidays were modeled on mass meetings so that many people could learn the meaning of the celebration. More food would appear in shops before holidays creating an uplifting atmosphere and happy mood. “The state attempted to use the yearly cycle of holidays both to mold its citizens into productive workers and to reward this productivity.”39

Holidays unique to the Soviet regime, such as the Day of the October Revolution, celebrated on November 7, played a prominent role on the calendar. Preparations for the twentieth celebration of the revolution in 1937 began two years in advance, illustrating the importance of this celebration in the Soviet historical narrative.40 Another important holiday that was added to the Soviet calendar was Victory Day, celebrating the defeat of Nazi Germany on May 9, 1945. Following

38 Ibid., 15.
39 Ibid., 16.
40 Ibid., 151.
World War II, Victory Day was celebrated in the Soviet Union in 1946 and 1947 and then discontinued as a holiday. The official decision to declare Victory Day a working day instead of it remaining a holiday was never published in full but scholar Mark Edele postulates that with the end of demobilization “[t]he time of the carrot was over….It was time for the stick again.” In the 1950s with the rise of former war veteran Nikita Khrushchev to power and the creation of a Soviet Committee of War Veterans, World War II reentered the sphere of discussion and debate in the Soviet Union. This was especially important after Khrushchev’s 1956 “Secret Speech” exposing the crimes of Stalin and addressing Stalin’s war record. As historian Stephen Lovell argues, “[d]e-Stalinization was at least in part driven by the need of the Soviet elite to reclaim the memory of the war from its deceased progenitor.” In 1965, during the Brezhnev era, Victory Day was reinstated as a public holiday and has ever since remained the most important historic holiday on the Russian calendar. Although the Soviet state was incredibly powerful and “had access to massive coercive power…it could not use it when the purpose of celebration was to get citizens to identify voluntarily with the state.” The problem of trying to get citizens to identify with the state still persists today and is highlighted with the introduction of new holidays in the post-Soviet period such as National Unity Day.

43 Lovell, *The shadow of war : Russia and the USSR, 1941 to the present*.
44 Petrone, *Life has become more joyous, comrades : celebrations in the time of Stalin*, 20.
The October Revolution, celebrated on November 7, was a major holiday in the Soviet historical narrative commemorating the establishment of the Soviet government in Petrograd, which became known as Leningrad after Lenin’s death. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the holiday had to be reworked in order to remain on the calendars. On the one hand, celebrating the October Revolution had lost the political significance ascribed to it during the Soviet era; on the other hand, Russians had grown accustomed to having a day off in early November. Rather than discard it altogether, the holiday had to be remolded to fit within the new political framework of the Russian government.

The first attempt to transform the holiday took place under Yeltsin, when the holiday was renamed the Day of Accord and Reconciliation. Many Russians were confused when Yeltsin changed the name of the November 7 holiday. When asked what the new holiday represented, 46 percent of survey respondents had difficulty answering, and instead asked questions such as: “I don’t understand this kind of holiday; who am I to reconcile and reach accord with? We don’t know what we are celebrating.” Others issued sardonic replies, “[w]e are reconciled with our shitty life.” Some poll participants emphasized that November 7 was “another day-off” or “another day to drink.” A very small percentage, 2 percent, replied with open-ended answers that the day was for “reconciling the young generation with the old one, which lived in the USSR.”

45 On the Julian calendar the revolution took place on October 25. The Gregorian calendar marks the revolution on November 7, thus explaining the confusion with the name and date of the holiday.
After Putin came to power, he decided to do away with the Day of Accord and Reconciliation. Instead, in 2005, Putin established a new holiday known as National Unity Day to be celebrated on November 4 to commemorate the Russian victory, under the leadership of Kuzma Minin, “a butcher by trade,” and Prince Dmitrii Pozharskii, over Polish troops in 1612, which ended the period of instability known as the Time of Troubles. Putin acknowledged that before the establishment of National Unity Day “there were no official holidays in Russia commemorating pre-Soviet history.” In the decree that established National Unity Day, Putin canceled the non-working days of December 12 (Constitution Day) and November 7 (1917 October Revolution Day, Day of Accord and Conciliation), and in so doing, erased Yeltsin’s attempt to establish a new historical rallying point with Constitution Day. Constitution Day commemorated the 1993 Russian Constitution and could have been an important holiday to rally support for democracy, but Yeltsin never capitalized on this. Putin also struck the October Revolution and Yeltsin’s Day of Accord and Reconciliation from the calendar sending the message that Russia should not concern itself with reconciling with events from its past.

Putin’s establishment of National Unity Day demonstrated a shift away from the Yeltsin era’s concept of reconciliation and forgiveness. Instead, National Unity Day stresses the importance of a strong leader and the greatness Russia can achieve as a unified nation. In early November of 1612, Russian troops recaptured strategic

49 “The President Signed a Federal Law Establishing November 4 as a Day of Military Glory in Russia, the Day of National Unity,” President of Russia (2004).
positions, such as the Kremlin in Moscow, that were held by Polish troops. This victory helped expel foreign troops from Russian soil and was a key event in ending the Time of Troubles in Russia. The historical basis of the event underlines the importance and need for a strong ruler in Russia to ensure that another Time of Troubles does not occur. It also highlights Russia as a nation and the subsequent spread of the Russian empire. Although the victory in 1612 reestablished Russian control over its own territory, the first action taken after the victory was to “elect a tsar and thus establish a firm, legitimate government in Russia.”

Michael Romanov was elected tsar, thus beginning a dynasty that would last until 1917. The leadership established by the tsar and the reign and era of the Romanov family fits into the ambiguous pages of Russian history today as illustrated by the debates caused over the Romanov funeral in 1998. Putin’s government molded National Unity Day to focus on victory by implicitly implying that Russia needs a strong leader.

Early November in Russia is brimming with important historical events and religious moments, each eliciting multiple meanings and different personal reactions. November 4 marks several other important events in Russian history illustrating the difficulty the government faces in constructing a new holiday that is supposed to represent a historical event that took place almost 400 years ago. Besides marking National Unity Day, November 4 also marks the anniversary of Peter the Great being granted the title of “Father of the Nation and Emperor” in 1721 after defeating Sweden in the Great Northern War and ushering in the beginning of what historians

51 Ibid., 207-08.
call the imperial period.\textsuperscript{52} November 4 also marks the feast day of Our Lady of Kazan in the Russian Orthodox Church. The icon of Our Lady of Kazan, described as “wonder-working,” was brought to Moscow to bless the 1612 victory.\textsuperscript{53}

In a 2007 interview, after laying flowers at a monument honoring Minin and Pozharskii, President Putin was asked about what the “relatively new holiday” meant to him. The reporter listed the various reasons that people may be celebrating on November 4 saying “everyone assigns his own significance…people are celebrating the end of the Time of Troubles, others are celebrating the military victory of the militia over the interventionists, and for a third group it’s a day of spiritual and political unity for the Russian people.”\textsuperscript{54} Putin responded that the idea of the holiday is “extremely important” because any leader’s actions can only be successful if he unites the people, “[o]nly by uniting forces can one succeed in developing one’s country and ensure that it occupies an appropriate place, a worthy place in the world.”\textsuperscript{55} This comment underscores the importance Putin hopes to attach to the holiday: the need for a strong leader in uniting the Russian people and modernizing the Russian state.

Putin listed important moments of Russian national unity, including the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Both Putin and Medvedev have acknowledged the multiple meanings attached to November 4. In a 2009 speech President Medvedev pointed out the various reasons to celebrate on November 4,

\textsuperscript{54} Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, “Meeting with Cadets of the Nakhimov and Suvorov Military Schools and Representatives of Youth Organisations after Laying Flowers at the Monument to Minin and Pozharskii,” (President of Russia Official Web Portal, 2007).
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
This is a very special date in our history, and a very special holiday - the Day of National Unity, and also the holiday of the Icon of the Holy Virgin of Kazan, which is particularly honoured by our country and our church. I am sure that this event can unite us today too, giving us reason to feel that we are a truly united people, a people that has overcome numerous great challenges, vanquished many enemies, withstood many hardships, but never lost its strength and courage.56

All of the various reasons to celebrate on November 4 underscore the difficulty the government has had in introducing a new holiday and having people rally around it. The speeches given by Putin and Medvedev to announce the celebration of National Unity Day repeatedly stress points that the government hopes to convey with the new holiday and both speeches employ a similar rhetoric.

Survey data have indicated that a majority of Russians do not know the history that is associated with the holiday or why the holiday is being celebrated. All major speeches reiterate the history of 1612 because even though Putin described the events as ones “we all know and value very much,” it is clear that not everyone does know or value the history.57 A survey taken days after the first celebration of National Unity Day asked why National Unity Day was being celebrated and what the “main idea” of the holiday was. The highest percentage of respondents, 42 percent, said it was hard to answer this question; 27 percent replied that the day was about “Russian unity and of international friendship,” 8 percent responded “I don’t understand the meaning of this holiday or why it’s necessary,” 7 percent saw the holiday as having “connections with Nov. 7,” and only 5 percent described the

holiday as “a return to our roots, the anniversary of the victory over Poles, day in memory of Minin and Pozharskiy.”

It is clear that National Unity Day has not become a main event on the calendar and the Kremlin is trying to correct this by increasing awareness and education about the holiday. In 2007 a film, “1612: Khroniki smutnogo vremen” (“1612: The Chronicle of the Time of Troubles”) was released. Some critics attacked the film as Kremlin propaganda and compared the Time of Troubles with Yeltsin’s presidency in the 1990s and the end of the Time of Troubles as Putin’s rise. The director of the film, Vladimir Khotinenko, said that he does not want his audience to regard the film and story “as something that happened in ancient history but as a recent event.” An interesting parallel to the film “1612” is the film “Alexander Nevsky” directed by Sergei Eisenstein and released in 1938 when Stalin’s Soviet Union was wary of Hitler’s Germany. Alexander Nevsky was a thirteenth century prince who defeated the Swedes on the banks of the Neva. He later became a grand prince of Russia and the film focuses on Nevsky’s defense of Novgrod from Teutonic knights. “Rarely in the history of the feature film have the villains (thirteenth-century surrogates for the Nazis) been made to look so much like evil incarnate, the hero so imbued with strength and wisdom and the other attributes of charismatic leadership.” Thus, creating films to reinforce the government line is not a new idea in Russia.

---

60 Ibid.
Multiethnic Unity

Another theme that has emerged from the Kremlin narrative of the event is the multinational dimension and composition of the Russian state. Russia has always been a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state and now the Kremlin wants to stress these features as contributing to national strength. In 2007, the third year that National Unity Day was celebrated, Putin remarked, “[t]hanks to the unity displayed by the multinational people of Russia we managed to end the many years of troubles and internal strife. It was the way Russian society rallied together…that allowed us to defend our independence and renew Russian statehood.”62 It is unclear if Putin is trying to sketch a new enemy today or if he is simply making a vague historical reference. Putin continued using the same rhetoric in 2008 saying, “[b]ack in 1612 people of very different social classes, confessions and ethnic groups became aware of the devastating strife that divided our country and joined together and rescued Russian statehood.”63

Ethnic and national origin is an important issue in Russia today and Article 3 of the Constitution states, “[t]he bearer of sovereignty and the sole source of power in the Russian Federation shall be its multinational people.”64 The 2002 Russian census found that 20 percent of Russia’s population is not ethnically Russian and that there are over 150 ethnic groups living in Russia.65 The Constitution uses the term rossiiskii when referring to the multinational people of Russia. It is important to note the difference between the use of the words russkii and rossiiskii, which are both

63 Putin, “Speech at the National Unity Day Reception.”
translated into English as Russian.\textsuperscript{66} The term \textit{russkii} “defines Russian identity ontologically in terms of culture, language or ethnicity” while the term \textit{rossiiskii} “implies all citizens, regardless of nationality (or ethnic origin), have a civic membership in the Russian state.”\textsuperscript{67} Which term is used can imply a specific distinction. “The contemporary use of the adjective \textit{rossiiskii} in standard Russian in opposition to the adjective \textit{russkii} represents a conscious attempt to distinguish formally between national and ethnic identity.”\textsuperscript{68} Within Russia, the discussion of Russian identity is an ongoing one. “The Russian national question is of fundamental importance because Russia is far from being ethnically homogenous.”\textsuperscript{69} In certain areas and republics of Russia, such as Chechnya, ethnic Russians constitute a minority. There is also a large Muslim population in Russia. Despite this, “implicit in the assertion of the Russian Federation’s territorial integrity is the notion that Russian settlement throughout the Federation, even if only sparse in places, constitutes a basic justification for the political unity of the country.”\textsuperscript{70} President Yeltsin used the term \textit{rossiiskii} in the 1990s. Under Putin, who usually used the term \textit{russkii}, use of the term \textit{rossiiskii} declined while the term \textit{russkii} has “reacquired a multifaceted cultural and political significance.”\textsuperscript{71} Putin acknowledged Russia’s diversity in an interview in 2005, “[d]ozens of ethnicities live on the territory of our country. Together all these original languages and original cultures have a huge value, a value which exists in no

\textsuperscript{66} The term \textit{rossiyanin} is the noun form related to the adjective \textit{rossiiskii}.
\textsuperscript{67} Marlène Laruelle, \textit{In the name of the nation: nationalism and politics in contemporary Russia}, 1st ed., The Sciences Po series in international relations and political economy (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009), 9.
\textsuperscript{69} Neil Melvin, \textit{Russians beyond Russia: the politics of national identity}, Chatham House papers (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), 4.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 4-5.
\textsuperscript{71} Laruelle, \textit{In the name of the nation: nationalism and politics in contemporary Russia}. 
other country in the world. We should treasure, develop and support this which, without a doubt, is our strength.”

By promoting a strong, patriotic, multinational state, National Unity Day falls into the light pages of Russian history. The holiday also emphasizes renewing and modernizing the Russian state by pointing to a historically difficult period, when Russia was invaded by foreigners, that the Russian people were able to overcome. The holiday focuses on an exact moment in Russian history without discussing the consequences of that moment such as the establishment of the Romanov dynasty. While Putin first began stressing the ideal of patriotism and unity to create national harmony in Russia that would serve to help modernize the state, this rhetoric has continued with President Medvedev. The average Russian citizen has not been convinced by the rhetoric surrounding the new holiday and opinion on the holiday is split, 46 percent think that the holiday is needed, 36 percent think it is not, and 19 percent found the issue difficult to discuss.

Thus, National Unity Day has not become a widely adopted or celebrated holiday as the Kremlin had hoped that it would. Instead, it is Victory Day that remains a widely celebrated and popular holiday in Russia and one the Kremlin has capitalized on. Victory Day is achieving the unifying aspect that Putin was trying to achieve with National Unity Day without, however, the strong message of multiethnic unity that is part of National Unity Day. In a 2004 speech about Victory Day Putin said, “[t]oday we are celebrating the holiday that brings us closest together, and we

---

72 Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin “Conversation with Students from Moscow Universities and Cadets After Laying Flowers on the Minin and Pozharskii Monument,” (President of Russia Official Web Portal, 2005).
are proud to have such a day, this day of our national unity.” It is interesting to note that several months after this speech, Putin established National Unity Day and began stressing the importance of multinational unity – a new component in the government’s discourse.

Victory Day: World War II as a Unifying Event

The War and Its Implications

The Soviet victory in WWII has become a unifying event in the Russian historical narrative that is consistently reinforced today. Large military parades on Red Square in Moscow and throughout the nation mark the day that remembers war veterans and those who died in the victory over Nazi forces. The Soviet regime’s performance in WWII, however, presents a great paradox: they helped to win the war but did so at a tremendous cost. These darker pages in Soviet history are not addressed by the state. In a report for the Carnegie Moscow Center, a research center, journalists and scholar, S. Greene, M. Lipman, and A. Ryabov noted that,

The state has sought only to reinforce those aspects of the central World War II narrative that reinforce its own legitimacy – the abstract glory of victory, the need of a strong hand – while refusing to take a clear stand on the rest. Taking a stand, after all, would require identifying and then defending a position, while simultaneously providing opponents with the opportunity to stake out alternative positions. By refusing to take a stand, the

---

74 Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin “Speech at the Military Parade Commemorating the 59th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War,” (Moscow 2004).
state effectively occupies all of the ground at once, leaving potential opposition with no traction. \(^{75}\)

Instead the state chooses to focus on the evil enemy that had to be defeated, on Stalin as a great leader, and on the great sacrifices and the great heroism of the Russian people with much attention paid to the Siege of Leningrad and the battles of Moscow and Stalingrad.

This overarching myth hides the fact that “the fighting spirit of Soviet troops varied greatly: certain units fought heroically, while others hastened to surrender.”\(^{76}\) The Soviet Union did lose a vast number of lives, both civilian and military, during the war. Scholarly estimates range from the Soviet figure of seven million, which was presented in 1946, to more recent estimates that place the death total at 27 million. The material losses the Soviet Union sustained were great. The Soviet figures, although possibly exaggerated, cite the “total or partial destruction of 1,700 towns, 70,000 villages, 6,000,000 buildings, 84,000 schools, 43,000 libraries, 31,000 factories, and 1,300 bridges.”\(^{77}\) As historian Stephen Kotkin notes, “[n]o other industrial country has ever experienced the devastation that befell the USSR in victory.”\(^{78}\) Thus, the great cost of victory and the memory of those who helped to achieve it remains an important component in the Russian historical narrative today.

**Contemporary Relevance and Commemoration**

On May 8, 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev, stood in front of a WWII tank and delivered a video address to the Russian people which was interspersed with

---


\(^{76}\) Riasanovsky and Steinberg, A history of Russia, 514.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 518.

footage of him laying a wreath on a memorial. Medvedev said that “[t]he Great Patriotic War will never be just a historic abstraction for our people, never just a postcard date or an event celebrated only in movie battle scenes.”

This comment immediately separates Victory Day from National Unity Day – a holiday that needs to be commemorated in film for people to understand what the day signifies. Victory Day, celebrated on May 9, the day the Allies accepted Germany’s surrender, is one of the largest and most widely feted holidays on the Russian calendar.

In his video Medvedev told of his own family history, “[m]y grandfather, Afanasy Medvedev, left for the front as a volunteer in 1941….My other grandfather Veniamin Shaposhnikov, also fought in the war, while my mother and grandmother were evacuated to Tajikistan.”

Medvedev announced that the parades taking place in 2010, marking the 65th anniversary of Victory Day, would all occur at the same time in regions throughout Russia. Sixty-five years after the war, Medvedev mentioned in his video issuing an executive order that awarded the city of Volokolamsk the title of Military Glory – reinforcing the importance of remembering and revering the Soviet victory in the war.

National Unity Day shows that events far in the past do not create good rallying points for a historical narrative and the events of 1917, the October Revolution, and the events of 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union, are both too controversial to serve as the basis of a post-Soviet historical narrative. Victory Day also stresses the modernization of the Russian state. After defeating Nazi Germany,

80 On Moscow time the surrender occurred on May 9. In Western Europe May 8 is celebrated as Victory in Europe Day.
81 Medvedev, ”The Great Patriotic War will never be just an abstract historical fact for our people.”
the Soviet Union became a world power and entered the heyday of its strength and political clout. Celebrating Victory Day serves as a reminder of what came after victory and that modernizing the current Russian state is necessary for its future success.

When Russians were asked if Victory Day is an important or unimportant holiday for them, an overwhelming majority, 92 percent, replied that it was important compared with 6 percent who said it was unimportant and 2 percent who found the question hard to answer. When Russians were asked which national holiday they considered to be important, New Year was voted the most important with 80 percent followed by Victory Day with 73 percent. Victory Day and the Great Patriotic War have proved to be popular historical events that resonate with the Russian people. The rhetoric employed by President Putin and President Medvedev in speeches and video blogs reinforces the popularity of Victory Day by highlighting the courage and sacrifices that Russians endured.

The Russian government has felt the need to protect its interpretation of the Great Patriotic War from outside versions. In an address marking the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the war, President Putin highlighted the different interpretations of the war that he finds troubling,

> It is bitter to hear the Second World War described as only a war for world supremacy between two totalitarian ideologies. It is bitter to see heroes declared criminals and criminals heroes. The Great Patriotic War was not a war between the Russians and the Germans. It was a war against Nazism.

---

The Russian government feels the need to protect its narrative of the Great Patriotic War because it is a crucial part of the historical narrative and does not want the Soviet government, in relation to the war, to be described as a totalitarian government. In 2009 a new committee, “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History,” was established and laws that would protect the government narrative of the events of WWII were also proposed.85

Stalin has presented the greatest challenge to the historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Government leaders are careful not to praise Stalin although a campaign condemning the leader has never taken place. During Putin’s presidency, a controversial manual for teachers toned down Stalin’s crimes and instead focused on his leadership and successes.86 For the May 9, 2010 celebration of Victory Day, Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov approved posters, which would be on display throughout the city, with Stalin’s image.87 The posters sparked great debate, with human rights groups, such as Memorial, and cultural figures vehemently objecting to the posters while some groups of veterans, not all, and Communists supported the move.88 War veteran Olga Kosorez spoke out against the posters,

Come to your senses! Have you lost your self-esteem? Do you want to give our victory – a victory for millions of our brothers flattened on the battlefield – to this uneducated seminarian [Stalin] who didn’t see you as people or as citizens, but simply as cogs in the state machine?89

85 A discussion of the Commission and the proposed laws is examined in Chapter 3.
86 A discussion of textbooks and Stalin’s place is examined in Chapter 2.
89 Quoted in Whitmore, “Amid Protests, Stalin Posters Pulled From V-Day Celebrations in Moscow.”
Kosorez went on to mention the Stalinist purges and Treaty of Non-Aggression, commonly known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, between Germany and the Soviet government signed in August of 1939.

All the literate and educated generals who were preparing the army for war were declared enemies of the people and shot. The army was decapitated. The Father of the Peoples did not believe our intelligence officers’ warnings that war was coming. He only believed in his agreement with the fascist Hitler.\(^90\)

Kosorez underscores both the pre-war purges and the pact made between Hitler and Stalin as historical events overlooked by the Kremlin and thus, gives reasons why Stalin should not be placed on a mantle as a faultless leader.

Initially, the mayor’s office defended the decision to have posters with Stalin’s image, but soon pressure mounted. The chairman of advertising and information committee for the mayor’s office, Vladimir Makarov, said,

> If a person was commander-in-chief during the war, then that information should probably be conveyed to the people. There are portraits of Stalin in the textbooks. His tomb is on Red Square. To erase him from the history of the Great Patriotic War would be just plain wrong.\(^91\)

The public outcry over the posters, however, caused the mayor’s office to backtrack. The deputy mayor, Lyudmila Shvetsova, told the newspaper *Kommersant*, “[t]he posters will be mounted in places where veterans gather most often and most actively. And given the uncertain weather, for most of them it will be more comfortable in enclosed spaces.”\(^92\) The Kremlin remained silent on the issue, but the United Russia Party, the political party associated with both Putin and Medvedev, issued a statement

---

\(^{90}\) Quoted in Ibid.

\(^{91}\) Quoted in Ibid.

saying that the party does not support the mayor’s decision. Party secretary Vyacheslav Volodin said,

The political assessment of Stalin’s role was supplied by his comrades in the past century. Historians must give the historical one. As far as the moral evaluation goes, it is necessary to respect the feelings and opinions of the huge number of people whose families suffered as a result of Stalin’s repressions.93

It is difficult to make sense of this statement. There is no admission that Stalin committed crimes, but rather only a vague insinuation that the assessments provided by Stalin’s comrades might not be in line with the ones provided by historians today. Opinions on Stalin vary greatly in Russia from revered leader to maniac tyrant. He is, however, inextricably linked to the Soviet victory in WWII, which presents a challenge to the Kremlin about how he should be portrayed in the historical narrative.

*The Baltic States and the Western War Narrative*

Although the Great Patriotic War represents a resplendent moment in Soviet history, with the victory over a universally agreed upon evil force, constructing a post-Soviet narrative with deep roots in this event is problematic for certain groups of Russians such as the survivors of the Gulag and for many other neighboring and former Soviet nations. The problems surrounding the narrative of the Great Patriotic War include the post-war occupation of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, while Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia became Soviet satellite states, and the character of the regime under Joseph Stalin with the pre-war purges and wartime military tactical choices that have raised many questions and threaten to diminish the narrative of the War.

93 Quoted in “Pro-Kremlin party slams plans for Stalin posters in Moscow,” *RIA Novosti*, March 5, 2010.
The Victory Day is one of the most important holidays on the Russian calendar and has provided needed capital for the new Russian historical narrative, even though the events took place during Soviet times and resulted in problematic outcomes such as the establishment of Soviet power in the Baltic states. In a speech delivered by President Putin on May 9, 2004, he does acknowledge, only once, the members of the Commonwealth of Independent states and how Victory Day is a “shared” holiday. Putin said, “It was precisely this time that forged our solid bonds of brotherhood, a brotherhood that has stood the test of time and the test of life itself.” There is no mention of the imposition of Soviet rule in the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – due to the war, a dark page in the history of WWII. The other Allied powers are mentioned only once and towards the end of Putin’s speech. Instead the speech focuses on remembrance,

May 9 is the summit of our glory. The people do not forget such sacred dates. We know the significance of this victory and at what cost it was won. We remember that it was our country, our army that dealt the decisive, crippling blow to Nazism, reduced it to ashes and determined the outcome of World War Two.

Putin speaks of “our country, our army” showing how Russia has taken on the mantel of Soviet history and today the victory has become a Russian victory whereas in 1945 the army was the multinational Soviet army, not solely a Russian army and so the victory belonged to all Soviet people.

---

94 The Commonwealth of Independent States is an organization that includes countries that were previously part of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine as a participating country.
95 Putin, “Speech at the Military Parade Commemorating the 59th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.”
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
It is important to note the historical elements that are left out of discussion of the Great Patriotic War within Russia. Although Nazi Germany is portrayed as evil, the Russian government focuses on injustices committed against its own people and not others; thus, the discussion of the Holocaust is limited. A quick search of the term “Holocaust” on the presidential website, archived material is available from 1999 to 2010, resulted in only 47 hits. When duplicate results were eliminated, out of the 31 remaining results only one of the references to the Holocaust was directed to the Russian people. All of the other references when the Holocaust was invoked were made when speaking in an international context or to an international audience such as to the United Nations, to the Prime Minister of Israel, or even to American CBS anchor Mike Wallace. Discussions of the role other Allied powers played in defeating Nazi Germany is usually mentioned briefly if at all. Lend-lease, the program by which the United States provided weapons and supplies to the Soviet Union and other Allied powers, is also rarely mentioned. The fate of Eastern and Central European countries both during and after the war is not discussed. Another important missing historical component is the discussion of Stalin as anything but the leader of a victorious country.

A myth around WWII has been created glorifying war veterans and the sacrifices of millions. It seems that everyone had a grandfather who fought in the war, but no one had a grandfather who was a member of the NKVD; meaning that the dark pages surrounding Joseph Stalin and pre-war purges and the Gulag prison camps, though an important part of the discussions surrounding WWII, are usually omitted

98 President of Russia Official Web Portal, “Search: Holocaust.”
from discussion. Instead, Medvedev underscored the link of the events of the war to today saying in his video address, “When it comes down to it, we ourselves are the result of the Great Patriotic War, we, our future, our children’s future.”

**A Search for Heroes: Nevsky, Stolypin, and Stalin**

In a state-of-the-art television studio, audience members and viewers throughout Russia watched videos about historical figures in Russian history and then had the chance to vote for their favorite online, by text, or by phone. The television show “The Name of Russia,” was presented on the state-owned Rossiya channel in 2008 and was modeled on BBC’s “Great Britons” program. Winston Churchill won the British version. When a similar program was broadcast in Germany, Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders were excluded from the list of historical figures; in Russia, however, controversial historical figures made the list. Vladimir Lavrov, a history professor from the Institute of Russian History, helped select the initial list of 500 figures for the Russian program that was then narrowed down to 50 and then to 12. Different people introduced the final 12 historical figures. Soviet General Valentin Varennikov, a supporter of Stalin, introduced Stalin while Patriarch Kirill I of the Russian Orthodox Church introduced Nevsky, a saint of the church. Stalin and Lenin, who both made it to the final 12, appeared on the list while Lavrov said that certain people “couldn’t be seen as a symbol of the country, such as Lavrenty

---

99 The NKVD (Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del) was the secret police established under Joseph Stalin that handled repressions, executions, and the Gulag system.
100 Medvedev, “The Great Patriotic War will never be just an abstract historical fact for our people.”
Beria.” Beria served as chief of security and the secret police under Stalin and was known for his cruelty.

Online voting was marred with allegations of vote rigging and accusations were made that the Kremlin influenced the final selection. At one point during the competition Stalin was in first place. This lead surprised the chief producer of the show, Aleksandr Lyubimov, who said, “I wonder how many people will end up picking Stalin as the name of Russia. It sounds scary even when you think about it.” Other commentators, such as Victor Yasmann, were not surprised by Stalin’s lead, “[i]n the great cultural counterrevolution that has been going on in Russia over the last decade or more, Stalin’s name was long ago rehabilitated and has even become a fundamental element of the current system’s ideology of national revanche.” When referencing the cultural counterrevolution Yasmann seems to be referring to the switch that occurred between the Yeltsin era of reconciliation and the Putin era of rebuilding and focusing on the strength of Russia which meant whitewashing the crimes of the Stalin era so that Stalin could be viewed as the leader of the Soviet Union when it defeated Nazi Germany. Yasmann also noted that bookstores in Russia now have shelves devoted to books on Stalin many of which he describes as “paean to the dictator.”

Journalist Tomasz Sommer and Professor Marek Jan Chodakiewicz noted the same observation about bookstores and stated, “the freeze on Stalinism has been

102 Quoted in Ibid.
106 Ibid.
thawing ever since the fall of Communism two decades ago.”

Sommers and Chodakiewicz observed that Stalin apologists, individuals who are trying to rationalize and explain Stalin’s actions, wrote many of the books such as A. B. Martirosyan’s 200 Myths about Stalin, published in 2008 which Sommers and Chodakiewicz describe as arguing that “the terror of 1937 was not initiated by Stalin himself and that it is a lie to claim that he permitted the torture of prisoners during NKVD police interrogation sessions.” Martirosyan argues that documents that show that Stalin instigated the terror have been falsified. In the 2010 book 1937: The Principal Myth of the 20th Century, Dimitrii Lyskov argues that Mikhail Gorbachev created the myth of the millions of victims of the Soviet system. Sommer and Chodakiewicz pose several questions trying to understand what has led to the rise of Stalin apologists,

Does all this mean that a new generation of Russian historians, failing to find a moral compass in Russia’s past, have resolved to forge Stalin into a new Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great? Or does this reflect the continuing moral and intellectual confusion in the post-Soviet sphere? Or is it merely part of a delayed effort to rehabilitate almost anything that was challenged under Gorbachev and Yeltsin?

It is very possible that Stalin’s rehabilitation has been taking place because of a combination of the listed possibilities.

One important possibility left off the list is that the government has never had a campaign denouncing Stalin. When President Medvedev was asked in an interview, “it’s true that Stalin ruled the country that defeated fascism. But does this give us the

---

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
right to turn a tyrant who committed many crimes against his fellow citizens into a hero?"\textsuperscript{110} Medvedev responded by saying “[i]f we are talking about the official view of him…then the verdict is clear: Stalin committed a vast array of crimes against his own people. So despite the fact that he worked hard…what was done to our own people cannot be forgiven.”\textsuperscript{111} Yet, as “The Name of Russia” television show illustrates, many Russians have either forgiven Stalin or never viewed him as a criminal.

When the television program came to its conclusion, Stalin ended up in third place with 519,071 votes.\textsuperscript{112} Medieval prince Alexander Nevsky took first place with 524,575 votes followed by tsarist minister Pyotr Stolypin in second place with 523,766. The vote difference between Nevsky and Stalin was 5,504 votes. Communist party officials claimed the vote had been manipulated because the Kremlin did not want Lenin, who came in sixth place, or Stalin to win. Organizers of the program alleged that Communist sympathizers had been manipulating voting.\textsuperscript{113}

Either way, it is clear that Stalin remains a historical figure known to a vast majority of the population and that the public has not been able reach a consensus with staunch supporters of Stalin pitted against those who believe that Stalin was a draconian dictator.

Both Nevsky and Stolypin are interesting contrasts to Stalin and if the government did manipulate the results, their victories illustrate the promotion of new heroes for the Russian historical narrative. Nevsky was a strong leader who saved

---

\textsuperscript{110} Vitaly Abramov, “Interview given to Izvestia Newspaper,” Izvestia, May 7, 2010.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} “Name of Russia,” http://top50.nameofrussia.ru/
\textsuperscript{113} Tom Parfitt, “Medieval warrior overcomes Stalin in poll to name greatest Russian,” The Guardian, December 29, 2008.
Russia by defeating the Teutonic knights. His strong leadership is something that the Kremlin would like to popularize. Stolypin served as the Prime Minister of Russia from 1906-1911 under Tsar Nicholas II and Stolypin worked to establish agrarian reforms and to pacify revolutionaries, which meant a harsh crack down on their activities. Stolypin was a progressive minister who “attempted a sweeping change in the condition of the Russian people.”\footnote{Riasanovsky and Steinberg, \textit{A history of Russia}, 389.} Having Stolypin come in second place advocates a view of modernizing the state through legal and constitutional means but at the same time still using a strong hand when needed. Both Nevsky and Stolypin were strong leaders and modernizers. Although Stolypin censored newspapers and allowed court-martials that silenced many opponents, his dark pages are not as well known as those of Stalin. Nevsky allows the Russian government to make a historical connection to the deep past and base the modern Russian state leadership in a historical line of strong leadership.

In a 2006 opinion poll Russians were asked whether Stalin played a positive or negative role in Russian history and 47 percent replied that Stalin had played a positive role, 29 percent thought that Stalin had played a negative role, and 24 percent found the question hard to answer.\footnote{The Public Opinion Foundation, “Attitudes toward Joseph Stalin,” (The Public Opinion Foundation, 2006).} The survey makes clear that there is no consensus on Stalin’s role in Russian history, and it is difficult to reconcile the view of Stalin as a tyrant with the view of Stalin as a great leader. When the statistics were broken down by age, education, and residency, people 55-years-old and older held a higher positive view of Stalin at 58 percent, respondents who had only completed a primary education also held a higher positive view at 54 percent, and residents of
villages held the highest positive view of Stalin at 53 percent. The highest negative
view of Stalin was held by respondents with higher education, who make more than
3,000 rubles a month, and who live in large cities.\textsuperscript{116} The survey also asked, “[w]ould
you say that these days Stalin and his policies are respected, sharply criticized or
rated objectively?” Only nine percent believed that Stalin’s policies were respected,
38 percent thought his policies were sharply criticized, 29 percent thought his policies
were rated objectively, and 24 percent found the question hard to answer.\textsuperscript{117} The final
question in this survey asked whether respondents would like to “know more about
life in Stalin’s Russia” and 55 percent said that they would, 36 said they would not
like to know more, and 9 percent found the question hard to answer.

Many scholars have argued that Stalin’s popularity faced a resurgence under
President Putin. Historian Orlando Figes argues that no one in the Kremlin is trying to
deny Stalin’s crimes because they are far too vast.\textsuperscript{118} Instead, he argues that during
the Brezhnev era myths were built around Stalin and the Great Patriotic War in which
Soviet citizens could
give meaning to their suffering in some higher narrative. That was what these official myths...enabled people to do. The collective memory of the Great Patriotic War was the most potent in this respect. It enabled veterans to think of their pain and losses as having a larger purpose and meaning. Represented of course by the victory in 1945, in which they could take pride.\textsuperscript{119}

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was no longer seen as a world power
and was faced with a difficult economic environment. This difficult environment and

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} An estimated 25 million were repressed.
\textsuperscript{119} Orlando Figes, “Stalin’s Ghost: the Legacies of Soviet History and the Future of Russia.”
the destruction of the coherent Soviet narrative left room for a resurgence of Stalin, “the economic hardships of the 1990s coupled with Russia’s unfinished reconciliation with its past…have been fertile ground for Soviet and even Stalinist nostalgia.”  

Figes argues that Putin began constructing a post-Soviet mythology combining, “Soviet myths with above all the victory of 1945, but clearly stripped of their communist symbols, their communist packaging. Stalin is not revered as a communist but as a national leader.”  

By focusing on Stalin as a leader, the historical discussion has shifted away from the crimes that Stalin committed. Instead, the Russian people can be proud of a leader who won the Great Patriotic War and turned the Soviet Union into a world power.

Academic Boris Dubin has questioned the staying power of the Stalin myth for the next generation of Russians. Over the course of the 2000s, Dubin noticed a rise in respondents who feel indifferent towards Stalin. Dubin argues “[t]he Stalin myth, the Stalin symbol, no longer has active mobilizing power—if it ever did have such power at the mass level.”  

Other researchers do not think the Stalin myth will begin to fade anytime soon. “Nostalgia for Stalin in Russia is not simply a relic that will die out with the older generation.”  

The debate over Stalin and his place in Russian history is bound to continue for years.

---

121 Orlando Figes, “Stalin’s Ghost: the Legacies of Soviet History and the Future of Russia.”  
Conclusion

Examining holidays and heroes in the post-Soviet Russian historical narrative gives insight into what events and figures the government wants to play an integral part in Russian history and what themes they want to emphasize. The stakes are high in creating a coherent narrative. As academic Nina Khrushcheva, the great-grand daughter of Nikita Khrushchev, writes, “[f]or many Russians, the demise of the Soviet political system and the breakup of the Soviet empire resulted in a truncated historical narrative, which carried with it the loss of national identity.”124 The economic difficulties and uncertainties of the 1990s made people nostalgic for the past. While the Yeltsin era focused on peace and reconciliation, the Putin and Medvedev eras have focused on creating a strong state.

Modernizing Russia is a key theme in both National Unity Day and Victory Day. Modernization will help pull Russia out of the quagmire of transition and ensure that the Russian state does not fall behind Western states. The resurgence of the importance of World War II and Victory Day show that “patriotic pride born of wartime sacrifice went rapidly from psychological reflex to state-sponsored orthodoxy when the political and economic chaos of the 1990s was replaced by a more secure order under Vladimir Putin.”125 The dark pages of Russian history interfere with the memory of the War. Additionally, many survivors of the Gulag and Stalin’s political repressions have been dying in recent years and with them their memories of events. Protecting the memory of World War II is important to the

125 Lovell, *The shadow of war : Russia and the USSR, 1941 to the present*, 11.
Russian state because the War now serves as an important base in the post-Soviet historical narrative.

Both Putin and Medvedev acknowledge the dark pages of the Soviet past but they do so without discussing them in much detail. Today there is talk of victims of repressions but discussions about the perpetrators remains silent. The great difficulty in the post-Soviet Russian historical narrative is that “[t]he Soviet state was the chief perpetrator of the crimes of the Soviet era. Recognizing this fact must be the first step in coming to terms with the past. But this is hard for a political system that insists on the infallibility of the state.”

This challenge has become evident in the field of education.

---

Chapter Two

Educating the Next Generation: Constructing and Teaching A New History

“There are many textbooks nowadays, and they give completely different views of history that can cause the head to spin….This is bad because the result will be that schoolchildren’s heads will turn to kasha. I believe that we need to straighten out this matter.”

–President Dmitry Medvedev in an interview aired on Rossia television

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that a new version of history would have to pass through school gates. Over 70 years of textbooks and education plans that had centered around and dictated the Communist party line now had to be altered. During the Soviet period, history was used to reinforce government ideology. Views of history that were contrary to the party line were seen as falsifications. The past was rewritten to fit with the ideology of the present and history textbooks were powerful instruments in the hands of the state. In 1991, Russian politicians were faced with a dilemma: how should Tsarism and Communism be represented and what role should they play in the emerging historical narrative of the new Russian democratic state? A complex debate about the country’s historical representation in textbooks erupted among historians, politicians, and textbook writers, some of whom are historians and others, such as A.V. Filippov and Pavel Danilin, are writers without advanced degrees in history.

Russian politicians are ready to protect historical memory from interpretations by other countries and develop a version that they deem acceptable for purposes of building a strong state and inculcating patriotism starting with the education of the next

generation. Controversial periods such as the Great Purges of the 1930s and Joseph Stalin’s political terror against his own people have given rise to debates in Russia and in the West about how the past should be portrayed in Russia today, especially in the field of education. Since the Yeltsin era, debates have emerged over how the light pages and the dark pages of the Tsarist and Soviet past should be represented.

During the Yeltsin era textbooks that were often funded by grants and foundations outside of Russia produced a plurality of perspectives and often challenged the Soviet line by, for example, reporting on Stalin’s pre-WWII purges of Soviet military leaders. From the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s presidency, the plurality of opinions has diminished and history education is now aimed at instilling a sense of pride in Russian citizens. Controversies have emerged over the portrayal of Joseph Stalin in history textbooks. Debates over the writing of history have continued under President Medvedev. In response to the plurality of opinions that are still being presented in textbooks, Medvedev said in 2009 before the first meeting of the new “Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History” that schoolchildren’s heads were turning into kasha, a buckwheat porridge, a common staple in Russia and Eastern Europe. Medvedev said, “I believe that we need to straighten out this matter.”

The History of Writing History in Russia

Becoming a historian during the early years of the Soviet Union was a dangerous career choice. The first leaders of the Soviet empire, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, were not going to leave the writing of history solely to historians. They realized the

---

128 Quoted in Ibid.
power of history and how it could be used and manipulated to reinforce the Communist party line. Thus, education became a priority for the new government. During the Civil War, the Commissariat of Enlightenment began restructuring schools and in 1929, for the first time, Stalin intervened in the writing of historical texts by making his own comments on a text. After that, Stalin continued to personally comment on historical texts and history was subjected to censorship. With the publication of the Stalinist, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course*, in 1938, the Soviet Union had a monolithic historical narrative. There was no longer room for a plurality of opinions or interpretations. The Stalinist version of history became the only version of Soviet history that was acceptable. As historian Catherine Merridale writes, “there was one single history textbook for all schools. Students were required to learn it more or less verbatim. They were examined orally at the end of the year, and marks…were awarded for accurate renditions of its contents.”

A number of historians who refused to tow the government line were persecuted, some arrested, and others were murdered by the state. In 1931 alone, over 100 historians were arrested, some of whom were executed, and others emigrated. Those historians who remained “were required to conform their work to the principle of partiinost’ or ‘party-mindedness.’ They were viewed by the regime as warriors on the ideological front, soldiers in the campaign to build communism.” The Soviet version of World War II was written down in 1948 and entitled *Falsifiers of History*. This text, and apparently its

---

130 Ibid.: 28.
title, was a response to the publication of German documents “on relations between the Third Reich and the USSR. The German diplomatic correspondence released by the Western Allies seemed to demonstrate a cynical collaboration between Stalin and Hitler to enslave the nations of Eastern Europe.” The Soviet text portrayed the USSR as a peaceful state that wanted to maintain harmonious relations with all countries but the rise of Germany necessitated that the Soviets adopt a policy against Germany.

Generations of children were indoctrinated with the Soviet version of history. With the advent of glasnost and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, citizens and politicians alike were faced with making sense of the past and how history should be portrayed in the new Russian state. For many Eastern European countries this meant writing a history outside of the Soviet narrative. Many countries, such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine, saw themselves as victims during the Soviet period. The idea of victimhood can be traced back to Soviet ethnicity identification policies. Under Stalin, who was ethnically Georgian but saw himself as a Great Russian, ethnicity became an indicator of identity. Although officially nationalities were considered equal and allowed national traditions, “the Great Russians belonged to an advanced, formerly dominant nation possessed of a secure tradition of national statehood and frequently guilty of ethnic arrogance and insensitivity known as ‘great-power chauvinism.’” To describe the peculiarity of the Soviet multi-ethnic state, Yuri Slezkine used the metaphor of the communal apartment to show how at the collapse of the USSR different ethnicities became nations that turned their backs to Soviet and Russian identity, “the tenants of various rooms barricaded their doors and started using the windows, while the befuddled

---

133 Ibid.
residents of the enormous hall and kitchen stood in the center scratching the backs of their heads.\textsuperscript{135} Russia was left in the common areas, in the hall and kitchen, and thus, Russia inherited the legacy of the Soviet period.

**Yeltsin Searches for a Historical Foundation**

For the new Russian government, the 1990s illustrated the difficulties of making the transition from a total ideological system that provided an unquestioned history that reinforced government actions to a democracy. Politicians now embarked on the difficult challenge of rewriting the past to fit with a new democratic future. A new historical base was needed to serve as the historical foundation for a post-Soviet Russia. The October Revolution of 1917 could no longer remain an important historical event in the narrative of the Russian government. Politicians needed to find events and ideas that Russians could relate with. As historian Kathleen Smith writes,

> New rulers face the problem not just of ‘forming a government’ but of ‘fostering emotional attachment’ to a new system of government and, in the case of Russia, to a new state. Neither the achievement of sovereignty nor a sharp break with a political system guarantees the quick adoption of new identities or the rapid reconstruction of new historical narratives that explain how the present came to be.\textsuperscript{136}

Every aspect of the past was now up for debate and nothing remained sacrosanct.

After the Soviet collapse, the state no longer maintained a monopoly on textbooks and reforms were launched by the state in 1992 that allowed for the development of textbooks by private groups. Between 1994 and 1996 the Russian Ministry of Education, the State Committee on Higher Education, and the

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.: 452.
\textsuperscript{136} Smith, *Mythmaking in the new Russia: politics and memory in the Yeltsin era*, 4.
International Association for the Development and Integration of Education Systems collaborated and sponsored a competition for a new textbook to be used in elementary and secondary education. The hope was that the textbook would examine “national and international values of modern democracies.” American financier George Soros’s International Fund supported the collaboration.

The winner of the competition was Igor Dolutskii, who had graduated from Moscow State University earning a degree in history and then had taught history at the secondary level. Dolutskii strayed from the official Soviet interpretation of history and was even questioned by the KGB during Soviet times. Dolutskii’s textbook, National History: 20th Century, views both tsarist and Stalinist states as “criminal.” Dolutskii advises his readers not to weigh the pros and cons of the Stalinist era and instead comes to the conclusion that there are no justifications or excuses for Stalin’s political terror. Historian Thomas Sherlock criticizes Dolutskii for privileging certain responses from his text by presenting more evidence in their favor and by selecting questions that guide the reader to preferred conclusions. For example, on the question of political responsibility for the carnage of the Russian Civil War, Dolutskii’s subjective interventions are significant: “Didn’t the Bolsheviks create these extreme conditions...[didn’t they] continue the policies that led to the widening of the civil war?”

Sherlock admits that Dolutskii’s analysis of the Russian Civil War may in fact be correct, however, Dolutskii’s presentation leads readers to come to his conclusions.


138 Ibid., 210.

139 Ibid., 209.
At the same time as more liberal interpretations were being adopted in textbooks, the Communists were regaining political ground in Russia. Lustration policies were not adopted in Russia as they had been in Poland and other Eastern European countries that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union.\(^{140}\) The Communist Party in Russia was reborn in a new form and remained a staunch defender of the actions of the Communist Party during the Soviet period. It underscored the Party’s role in the USSR’s defeat of Nazi Germany and the improvement of living conditions during the Soviet period. “With the dissolution of the USSR and the loss of superpower status, many Russians felt like the vanquished rather than the victorious.”\(^{141}\) Thus, being reminded of the Soviet, and therefore Russia’s glorious past was welcomed. In the 1993 parliamentary elections, the Communists gained a substantial success. The Communists began criticizing Dolutskii’s textbook in the Duma, the Russian parliament, especially highlighting the source of foreign funding in the writing of Russian history. The Russian Ministry of Education was controlled by liberal leaning officials so Dolutskii’s textbook remained safe for the time being.

At the same time, President Boris Yeltsin realized that condemning the past was not a route that would be politically successful and thus, he decided to advocate for a policy of reconciliation. Some scholars, such as Smith, view the early 1990s as a misstep, because “the democrats both neglected to expose the misdeeds of the old regime systematically and let slip opportunities to consolidate collective memories of the struggle for democracy that might have bolstered their own legitimacy.”\(^{142}\) Lenin’s

\(^{140}\) Lustration policies limit the extent of participation of former Communists and secret police officers in new post-Soviet states.

\(^{141}\) Smith, *Mythmaking in the new Russia: politics and memory in the Yeltsin era*, 23.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 176.
Mausoleum on Red Square remained open, illustrating the symbolic power that the Communist past still held. Yeltsin focused on healing the rift with the Orthodox Church. Some Soviet era statues were removed and some Soviet era streets were renamed, but at best, Yeltsin’s effort was half-hearted and ambivalent. He was more inclined to try reconciliation instead of inflaming passions when the Russian state was still young and fragile.

During Yeltsin’s presidency, school textbooks reflected the search for a historical foundation of the past that would serve as the base on which the future of the new state could be built. Academics Zajda and Zajda conducted a content analysis of the main Russian textbooks that were approved by the Russian Ministry of Education and published between 1992 and 1996. Their analysis showed that the textbooks portrayed “a new, post-Soviet national identity that represents an ideological repositioning and a redefinition of legitimate culture in Russia.”¹⁴³ They noted the ideological repositioning from Communism to democracy and a post-Soviet emphasis on culture and heritage as well as patriotism.

Textbooks during the 1990s asked students to formulate their own opinions. The foreword of Russia in the 20th Century, a textbook for grades 10 and 11, illustrates this point by telling students:

> You will have the opportunity to encounter contradictory viewpoints concerning the same facts, events and phenomena. We hope that you yourselves will attempt to formulate your own viewpoint, either agreeing or disagreeing with the textbook’s authors and other historians.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.: 15.
The study found that the post-Soviet texts were inviting students to see history through different perspectives reflecting “the loss of the grand narrative privileged during the Soviet Union – from a single or orthodox version of history, to an historical perspective characterized by plurality and heterodoxy.” One possible explanation for the emergence of different interpretations was the financing behind textbooks in the 1990s; a field that had once been dominated by the Soviet government was now opened to the marketplace. The study also noted that much archival material is still unavailable; and that various interpretations of history have become a battleground between political factions such as the Communists and the Democrats. Yeltsin and the democrats saw the Communist past as a tragedy, while refashioned Communists held nostalgia for the glory days of the Soviet Union.

The new history textbooks led to the rediscovery of figures from Russian history who had been written out of textbooks during the Soviet period, such as the Romanov dynasty.

Nation builders rarely make new myths. Rather, they mine the past for suitable heroes and symbols. Just as Lenin resorted to borrowing religious symbols and myths from the Russian Orthodox Church and giving them a socialist interpretation to attract peasants and Stalin reopened the churches during the darkest days of World War II in order to boost morale, so too did Russia’s immediate post-communist leaders and intellectuals turn to Russia’s cultural past in an effort to redefine national identity. One of the first post-communist sources of ‘Russian-ness’ came from the rediscovery and reworking of the Romanov dynasty.

---

145 Ibid.: 16.
Yet the rediscovery of the Romanov dynasty was not accepted across the board.
President Yeltsin’s own confusion about where the Romanovs should fit into the new Russian historical narrative underscored the new multiple perspectives that textbooks were encouraging students to discover and debate.

During the 1990s the reverence surrounding the Great Patriotic War suffered in Russia. Veterans complained about Dolutskii’s textbook and other textbooks began chipping at the foundations of the myth surrounding WWII by including information on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the deportations of civilians from the Baltic states in 1940, the Soviet massacre of Poles at Katyn, the lack of Soviet military preparation for the invasion on June 22, 1941, the huge losses that the Soviet Union sustained, and the treatment of prisoners of war upon their return to the USSR. In his textbook Dolutskii blamed the Soviet Union for “the conflagration of World War II.”

Many people began questioning the narrative of the Red Army as the savior of Europe. Prior to 1994, up to 23 hours of classroom time were devoted to teaching the history of WWII in the ninth grade. In 1994 the Laboratory for History Instruction of the Russian Academy of General Education decided to reduce the amount of time to 12 hours for ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades.

However, after the Yeltsin years of economic upheaval, and the reduction of school time devoted to moments of pride in Russia’s past, many politicians wanted to instill pride and patriotism in Russian citizens. Vladimir Putin was ready to do just that and to create a clear new historical narrative for the emerging state.

---

148 Sherlock, "History and myth in the Soviet Empire and the Russian Republic," 211.
149 Ibid., 213.
Putin Sets Out On a Clear Path

Unlike his predecessor, Putin did not struggle when it came to creating a clear and succinct history of the past. Putin was ready to instill a sense of pride in the Russian people after a decade of uncertainty.

Since coming to power, and above all during his second mandate, Vladimir Putin centered on constructing a public image that was the complete opposite of the chaos of the 90s….He presented himself as…the person called to put an end to the chaos. This also involved symbolic disorder of the country’s identity, or the ‘historical chaos.’

From the beginning of his presidency, Putin began outlining a clear path that would build Russian patriotism and set out a succinct version of Russia’s past that would help lead the country forward but also instill pride in the country’s history. Early in his first term, in December 2000, Putin decided to take on state symbols. Yeltsin had adopted a new flag, the tri-color, a new emblem, the double-headed eagle, and a new wordless national anthem, the Patriotic Song by Mikhail Glinka. Putin launched a contest to find lyrics for the new anthem, but when the contest did not produce any results that Putin liked, he decided to support reviving the old Soviet anthem with new lyrics. Putin put forward a compromise to the Russian legislature: ratify Yeltsin’s choice of flag and emblem and ratify the old Soviet anthem with new lyrics and restore the red Soviet flag to the armed forces.

Communists saw Putin’s move as a victory, while liberal politicians criticized him. Russian intellectuals and cultural figures protested Putin’s decisions in the

---

150 Liñán, "History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia," 167.
151 Glinka’s anthem had never been ratified by the Duma.
152 Smith, Mythmaking in the new Russia: politics and memory in the Yeltsin era, 181.
newspaper Izvestiya. Their appeal warned of the danger of reviving ghosts and that “no new lyrics will be able to erase the words attached to it that forever glorify Lenin and Stalin.” The intellectuals were afraid that “the ghosts,” meaning the leaders of the Soviet era, would always be attached to the melody. The original lyrics from the Soviet 1944 anthem read, “[t]hrough days dark and stormy where Great Lenin led us/Our eyes saw the bright sun of freedom above/And Stalin our leader with faith in the people,/Inspired us to build up the land that we love.”

The appeal published in Izvestiya addressed the attempted reconciliation of different periods of Russian history. “For the very reason that we have memory, we are convinced that all attempts to seamlessly unite the history of Russia with the history of the USSR will fail. The seams are there and they are still bleeding.” Famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich vowed to never stand when the new version of the old Soviet anthem was played. Alexander Iakovlev, who had advised both Gorbachev and Yeltsin said, “[w]e can’t live [with the anthem] if we recall that under its sounds, awful crimes were committed and millions executed.” Putin defended his decision saying,

If we agree that that the symbols of the preceding epochs, including the Soviet epoch, must not be used at all, we will have to admit then that our mothers’ and fathers’ lives were useless and meaningless, that their lives were in vain. Neither in my head nor in my heart can I agree with this.

155 Interfax, “Russian intellectuals protest return of Soviet anthem.”  
156 Quoted in Banerji, Writing history in the Soviet Union : making the past work, 275.  
157 Smith, Mythmaking in the new Russia : politics and memory in the Yeltsin era, 182.
The dilemma Putin emphasized was a familiar one for many Russian citizens, especially veterans and those with family ties to the Great Patriotic War. Any criticism of the war in Russia is tantamount to criticizing veterans themselves. Thus, the darker pages of the war, such as the Katyn massacre and 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact are often glossed over and not discussed in the context of victory. Instead the great sacrifices of the Russian people in defeating the evil Nazi power take center stage in discussions.

Textbooks Front and Center

As a leader, Putin became especially active in the field of education and the presentation of Russian history in textbooks. Putin quickly indicated his vision of history was in line with that of war veterans and the years of Putin’s presidency showed a steady positive reassessment of the Soviet past. In 2001 Putin’s Cabinet devoted a session to discussing history textbooks and how Russian history was being taught in schools. Devoting a session to history education showed the government’s concern with writing a clear version of the past that would have the power to unify the Russian people and instill patriotism in students beginning with their early years in the classroom. After the 2001 Cabinet meeting Alexander Chubarian, head of the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, posed the following questions: “What do you say in textbooks about the crimes committed by your own people? What is more important: repenting or

---

Putin would quickly make clear that repenting, as was popular in the Yeltsin period, would not take hold. Historical events would not be entirely forgotten, but criticism of the Soviet period would remain at a minimum. History would be used to instill pride in the Russian people.

Putin’s Prime Minister, Mikhail Kasianov, had the Ministry of Education organize a textbook competition after the 2001 Cabinet meeting that had criticized available textbooks. Chubarian and Andrei Sakharov, head of the Institute of Russian History, were selected to help with the competition. A year later the winner of the competition was announced: Nikita Zagladin with his text *History of the Fatherland: The 20th Century*. Zagladin is a doctor of historical sciences and professor at the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Prior to winning the competition, Zagladin had written *History of Russia and the World in the 20th Century*. Sherlock notes that this textbook is much different in tone than *History of the Fatherland: The 20th Century*. *Fatherland* does not provide an overarching frame that criticizes the Stalin period; instead the text focuses on achievements of the Soviet period.

Later editions of Zagladin’s text *History of Russia and the World in the 20th Century* were toned down and criticized in Russia and in the West for brushing over the crimes and problems of the Stalin era. For example, the Holocaust is not mentioned once in Zagladin’s *20th Century* text. Concerning the Stalin era, Zagladin writes, “[i]t is necessary to show Russian youths that industrial development

---

159 Sherlock, "History and myth in the Soviet Empire and the Russian Republic," 242-43.
160 Ibid., 225.
during the Stalin era was successful, and that the repressions and terror did not touch upon all of the population.”\(^{163}\) Zagladin’s view of history falls in line with that of Putin. Zagladin believes that history should instill pride, “[i]f a young person finishes school and feels everything that happened in this country was bad, he’ll get ready to emigrate. A textbook should provide patriotic education.”\(^{164}\) And this was the view that Putin was prepared to ensure was the dominate one.

In 2003, a newer edition of the textbook *National History: 20th Century* by Dolutskii caused a scandal. Dolutskii’s text described crimes and terror during the Soviet period and asked students to prove or disprove remarks by journalist Iurii Burtin and Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinskii describing “Putin’s style of leadership as an ‘authoritarian dictatorship’, and regime in Russia as a ‘police state.’”\(^{165}\) Students were to decide whether Putin was a “democrat at heart” or an “authoritarian ruler.”\(^{166}\) Putin reacted negatively to the text. On November 27, 2003 meeting with scholars from the Academy of Sciences at the Russian State Library, Putin said, “[h]istory textbooks should provide historical truths and they must cultivate in young people a feeling of pride for one’s history and one’s country.”\(^{167}\)

The government’s reaction did not stop with verbal denunciations; on November 30, 2003 the Ministry of Education and Science revoked Dolutskii’s textbook’s approval. The ministry said that new standards meant that all history textbooks have to be examined by experts from the Federal Experts Council on

\(^{163}\) Quoted in Banerji, *Writing history in the Soviet Union: making the past work*, 266.

\(^{164}\) Quoted in Ibid., 279.


\(^{166}\) Banerji, *Writing history in the Soviet Union: making the past work*, 264.

\(^{167}\) Quoted in Ibid., 258.
History, the Academy of Sciences, and the Academy of Education before the texts could be given the official stamp of approval and then be placed on the government’s list of recommended texts. Dolutskii responded to the criticism of his text in a radio interview with Echo Moskvy in December 2003 saying,

Critics consider my book to be Russo-phobic, that it undercuts the collectivist values of the Russian people, that it inculcates individualist, Western values that are alien to the Russian people, that it blackens the history of a great country, that [World War II]—as I have shown it—is painted in too dark a colour. Critics were especially vexed that the second front is constantly mentioned, that the allies who fought against Hitler from 1939 are mentioned.\(^\text{168}\)

Putin also noted that complaints from WWII veterans about the portrayal of the war in history textbooks were part of the decision to have textbooks examined and approved.\(^\text{169}\)

Lyudmilla Aleksashkina, a historian and member of the Institute for School Education, a body that will aid in the review of textbooks, noted that Dolutskii’s textbook was factually accurate, “[w]e can’t dispute any of the facts that the author uses. The main thing is that the picture he draws of [Soviet] history has a sarcastic hue; the author writes with condescension and irony about some tragic things.”\(^\text{170}\)

Aleksashkina’s remark highlights the emotional focus that the Putin government has decided to endorse in the evaluation of history. Aleksashkina also noted that the ministry’s new approach of approving textbooks is troubling because history does have multiple points of view. She did, however, approve of the removal of Dolutskii’s text due mainly to his sarcastic treatment of dark and tragic periods in Soviet

\(^{168}\) Quoted in Ibid., 264-65.


history. It is interesting to note the close proximity in time with the dismissal of Dolutskii’s textbook and the adoption of Zagladin’s text with its patriotic message. Some scholars have suggested that Zagladin’s updated version of *History of Russia and the World in the 20th Century* was selected to replace Dolutskii’s text. A shift from the textbooks of Yeltsin’s period was definitely occurring. “Putin believed that the restoration of a positive narrative of the past would help reverse widespread demoralization and generate an essential store of symbolic capital for the task of rebuilding the Russian state and modernizing its economy.” By 2005, then chair of the Presidential Council and future president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev was supervising the reform and standardization of Russian education again highlighting the importance that Russia’s leadership was placing on historical education.

**Textbook Content and Public Opinion**

American academic Jim Butterfield and Russian academic Ekaterina Levintova conducted a study of 47 Russian history textbooks and published the results in 2010. They limited their study to textbooks that are officially approved and used as part of the national curriculum. Textbooks for ninth and eleventh grade were examined because these are the grade years where post-Communist history is presented in textbooks. The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation compiles an annual list, the Federal Set, of textbooks that are officially approved by the Russian government. Textbooks that are on this list must be made available to

---

172 Banerji, *Writing history in the Soviet Union: making the past work*, x.
students without any fee, usually at a school library. If a school plans to purchase textbooks then they must purchase books from the Federal Set unless they have students buy their own textbooks.

Levintova and Butterfield noted in their study that when the 1990s and the Yeltsin presidency were compared with 2000s and the Putin government that “by all measures, the latter was portrayed as substantially better.”174 Officially approved textbooks painted the same general picture: the 1990s were portrayed as a controversial period full of uneven growth and development and challenges to Russia’s territorial integrity, economic upheaval, questionable political stability, and societal tensions. Positive aspects of the era include the revival of religious and cultural practices that were not permitted during the Soviet period, and the beginning of democracy. The praises, however, do not outweigh the difficulties of the 1990s and overall a rather bleak picture of the period emerges in school textbooks, especially highlighted in the discussions of the economic transition from Communism to market capitalism, which was most often described as “painful.”175 The bleak picture was evident when the first Chechen War was described in school textbooks.176 The war was described in various textbooks as “a disgrace for Russia, its president, and its military,” “the most difficult trial,” and “the national tragedy, the biggest, since the Afghan war mistake by the country’s leadership.”177 Overall, the 1990s showed

174 Levintova and Butterfield, “History education and historical remembrance in contemporary Russia: Sources of political attitudes of pro-Kremlin youth,” 144.
175 Ibid.: 149.
176 The First Chechen War took place between 1994 and 1996.
177 Levintova and Butterfield, “History education and historical remembrance in contemporary Russia: Sources of political attitudes of pro-Kremlin youth,” 144.
Russia’s biggest fault as a lack of a “national idea or ideology that could unite the
government and people.”  

With Vladimir Putin as Russia’s president, economic conditions improved and
textbook descriptions of the period venerated Putin’s leadership:

With V.V. Putin as its president, Russia has entered the
new period of development. Russians look at the future
with optimism, feeling the positive transformations which
are taking place in the life of their state. New period of
reforms allowed for a dynamic development in all
directions, including economy, social sphere, domestic and
foreign policy.  

In textbooks that compared the Putin and Yeltsin periods, the critique of the Yeltsin
era was even more critical than in earlier textbooks. Putin, however, did not escape
from criticism scot free. Problems that were noted during the Putin presidency
included: “continued terrorist threats, displaced people coming from Chechnya, the
weak political party system and under development of civil society, state dominance
in the public sphere, economic stagnation and slower economic growth” among other
social and international relations problems.  

Levintova and Butterfield noted that
when textbooks leveled criticisms against the Putin government that the critiques
were often minor or made before other comments that would then praise Putin.

Their study also examined how Kremlin-backed youth groups, Ours (Nashi),
Young Russia (Rossia Molodaia), and Young Guard (Molodaia Gvardiia), discussed
and thought about history textbooks. Members of the three groups that were formed
in the mid-2000s were interviewed. In discussions with the members, it was clear that
the Kremlin line featured in approved history textbooks corresponded with the

---

178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.: 154.
180 Ibid.: 156.
members’ opinions on different historical periods. The majority expressed negative opinions about the 1990s. When asked about mistakes in textbooks and in the teaching of history, the most common critical response given was about bias concerning “failure to fully credit Russia’s victories in various wars and insufficient or tendentious coverage of certain periods of history including, notably, the Soviet period.”

Thus it appears that students are reading their textbooks and the views therein are shaping their own views about eras, such as the Yeltsin period, that they are too young to remember.

A poll conducted in 2007 in Russia tackled the subject of school history textbooks and education. The nation-wide poll involved home interviews in 43 regions with a sample size of 1,500 respondents. When asked whether they enjoyed history classes at school and the textbooks that they used, 71 percent said that they liked their classes and the textbooks that were used. When respondents were asked what aspects they liked about the history textbooks that they had used, of the 53 percent of responses, 20 percent said they read for certain topics of eras, 10 percent said they liked the clarity of the texts, and 6 percent enjoyed everything in the textbooks. When the respondents were asked about what they had disliked about their history textbooks, 72 percent “had difficulty answering this question.” Of the 28 percent who answered, 6 percent disliked issues dealing with the Communist Party, ideology, and congresses while 3 percent disliked the single point of view that Soviet textbooks had presented. The participants were also asked, “[s]hould the

---

181 Ibid.: 162.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
teaching of national history allow for various opinions or offer a single interpretation of historical events and characters?"\(^{185}\) Sixty percent of respondents thought that history textbooks should present different points of view while 21 percent thought that they should not. It is interesting to note that overall, 52 percent of respondents said that they would prefer the “former uniform Soviet textbook-based system to the contemporary way of teaching history.”\(^{186}\) One possible explanation for this response is that respondents had become habituated to this type of teaching and may have liked that there was one correct way of interpreting history. Fifty-six percent of respondents believed that the government should control the contents of history textbooks; 20 percent of those in favor of this view believed that history textbooks will be inaccurate and biased without the government’s control. Thirteen percent said that the government should not control history textbook contents because of the potential that authorities will “rewrite history the way they want to.”\(^{187}\) A controversy over a teacher’s manual released in 2007 illustrates that the government is still interested in producing one correct interpretation of history that includes downplaying dark pages.

**The Height of Controversy**

The discussions and debates about Russian history textbooks reached a zenith in June 2007 when a teacher’s manual overseen by A.V. Filippov, *The Contemporary History of Russia, 1945-2006*, was released. In 2008 a textbook for students based on the teacher’s manual, *History of Russia: 1945-2008: 11th Grade* was released.

\(^{185}\) Ibid.
\(^{186}\) Ibid.
\(^{187}\) Ibid.
Filippov is a former schoolteacher and the deputy director of the National Laboratory on Foreign Policy, “an ostensibly independent think tank connected with Gleb Pavlovskii’s far better-known pro-Kremlin Foundation for Effective Politics.” He does not hold an advanced degree in history. The release of the manual was accompanied by rumors that the Kremlin had supported and backed the text. Journalist Anna Kachurovskaja quoted an anonymous source saying that Putin’s administration went beyond sponsoring the text – they gave instructions on how to structure the narrative. The source told Kachurovskaja that the government line was that,

Stalin was good (he established the power hierarchy, although not private property); Khrushchev was bad (he weakened the hierarchy); Brezhnev was good for the same reasons as Stalin; Gorbachev and Yeltsin were bad (they collapsed the country, although Yeltsin did allow the development of private property); Putin is the best state manager (he strengthened the power hierarchy and private property).

The manual was controversial for its treatment of Stalin and for its last chapter, “Sovereign Democracy: The course steered by President V.V. Putin towards social consolidation” which dealt with the Putin era and many academics argued came across as a propagandistic campaign piece for Putin. This chapter is, however, similar to the arguments found in other textbooks when it addresses the Yeltsin era as a period of weakness.

The release of the teacher’s manual prior to the release of the textbook showed a government effort to make teachers the mouthpieces of the new text.

---

189 Quoted in Ibid.: 7.
190 Liñán, "History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia," 173.
Prosvesheniye, a Kremlin-supported publishing house and the publisher of the contentious teacher’s manual posted a statement on its website outlining the objectives of the manual and why there was a need for one. One of the main directives of the text is to turn students into “patriots, bearers of the values of civil society, aware of their participation in Russia’s destiny.”\(^\text{191}\) According to the statement, existing textbooks do not provide a reliable picture of the latest period in Russian history and teachers also do not have reliable information. The statement went on to say that Russia’s leadership is rebuilding the country, and young people, during their studies, need to become motivated to help participate in the rebuilding of Russia. The goal of the text is to show students Russia’s place in the world and to answer critical questions including: “[w]hy wasn’t the Soviet economy able to provide living standards comparable to other highly developed countries?”\(^\text{192}\) The fifth and final section of the statement released by Prosvesheniye addressed improving teaching qualifications through seminars that would be held across Russia and would train teachers in modern methodological strategies and also in dealing with “falsifications.”

Seminars will help to overcome falsification aimed at the distortion of Russia in world history, in post-war events, in complex issues relating to contemporary international relations, and Russia’s interaction with its neighbors in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.\(^\text{193}\)

It remains unclear exactly what falsifications the seminars will address and what historical events that Russia shares with other countries would be discussed. It is clear that the proposed seminars would set out a clear narrative of Russian history that

\(^\text{191}\) Prosvesheniye, “Concept of the textbook ‘History of Russia. 1945-2008.’”
\(^\text{192}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{193}\) Ibid.
would not allow Russia’s global position to be judged. It is interesting to note the similarity in rhetoric between government commissions and textbooks aimed at high school age students. The statement concerning the seminar is reminiscent of ones later made by President Medvedev concerning the creation the Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History.¹⁹⁴

One of the reasons for writing Russian history and inculcating a rhetoric of patriotism in students seems to be a fear of outsiders writing Russian history and distorting important parts of the country’s narrative. Filippov said that,

> Foreign ‘foundations and communities,’ either through active participation in the post-Soviet revision of textbooks and educational programs or through support for the desired activity of local educators, with grants and stipends, managed to ‘completely twist and deform the history of Russia’ by neglecting centuries of the struggle for Russia’s independence and unification.¹⁹⁵

Two days after the teachers’ conference in June 2007, Putin met with participants and made clear that he was annoyed with textbooks financed with Western grants. He was most likely referring to people such as Soros who took an avid interest in the writing of Russian history in the 1990s. Putin said that he wants Russians to be aware of the dark pages in their history but he did not want Russians to be “saddled with guilt” over the negative aspects.¹⁹⁶

The controversial section of the Filippov text about Stalin begins by acknowledging that Stalin is a “polarizing” figure and that some view him as a

---

¹⁹⁴ For discussion of the Commission see Chapter 3.
“hero” and others see him as “the embodiment of evil itself.”\textsuperscript{197} The chapter aligns Stalin with the tradition of absolutist rulers in Russia’s past such as Peter the Great. Many critics of the text took offense at a section that described Stalin as an effective manager: “[t]he drive to squeeze out maximum effectiveness from the administrative apparatus is further evidenced by the fact that the upper and middle levels of the bureaucracy were one of the groups subjected to repressions.”\textsuperscript{198} The repressions of the Stalin era are mentioned, but at the same time the text defends Stalin by saying “similar to how Chancellor Bismarck through ‘blood and iron’ consolidated the German lands into a united state in the 19th century, Stalin harshly and mercilessly reinforced the Soviet state.”\textsuperscript{199}

The section on Stalin is rather short and does not leave room for a more nuanced discussion of the pros and cons of Stalin’s leadership. Scholars have debated the intended message that the text puts forth. Brandenberger noted that the expected message of patriotism is overshadowed by a focus on state power. Writer Anatolii Bershtein criticized the text’s treatment of repressions and purges that took place during the Stalin era. “Formally, everything is there that should be, but it is really just separate bits and pieces scattered about the text, reminiscent of the parts of a dismembered corpse that someone has tried to hide.”\textsuperscript{200}

Another criticism concerning the era of repressions is that the Filippov text gives explanations for why Stalin would have used repression. “The problem

\textsuperscript{197} Quoted in A.V. Filippov, “Debates About Stalin’s Role,” in \textit{A New History of Russia 1945-2006} (2009), 1.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{200} Brandenberger, "A New Short Course? A.V. Filippov and the Russian State's Search for a 'Usable Past'," 3.
is that the text does not mention that this logic was criminal, as were the methods.

Neither Filippov’s book, nor the textbook based on it, define this clearly. They only mention mobilization, a hostile international environment, and preparation for war.”

Other scholars have not been as critical, what one finds is a text of considerable complexity and multiple meanings, in places well and engagingly written, in others dull, mostly informative but sometimes self-contradictory and opaque. Although some of the book’s meanings are quite objectionable, one has to give its authors their due: the book is not uniformly bad.

Solonari went on to say that for him, the most controversial statement in the whole text was that the “population, eager to see social reforms carried through, generally supported the advent of Communists to power in Central and Eastern Europe.” He argues that archival evidence shows this statement to be false.

The actual textbook intended for students was released two years after the controversial teacher’s manual and the textbook was also criticized, but it should be noted, that some of the passages and phrases that were the most controversial have been edited and watered down, such as the phrase describing Stalin as an “effective manager.”

The Filippov text is one among a dozen or so approved texts. However, the textbook “became the basis for writing the history section of the Unified State Examination, which all school graduates are required to take as of 2009.” The decision to make the history section based on the Filippov text shows the government’s power to push forward one text ahead of others. This also illustrates the

---

203 Ibid.: 7.
204 Liñán, "History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia," 174.
overall historical message that the government wants to inculcate in Russia’s youth: a narrative that instills pride in Russian citizens and does not make them feel guilty about the dark pages in Russia’s past.

The authors of the text responded to the criticisms aimed at their work defending what they had written with sharp attacks at those who had criticized them. Filippov is the main author of the text, however, the chapter on “Sovereign Democracy” was written by Pavel Danilin who said that the goal of the text was not to make Russian history appear as a “depressing sequence of misfortunes and mistakes but as something to instill pride in one’s country.”

Danilin, like Filippov, does not hold any advanced degrees in history. On his blog, where Danilin writes under the name Leteha, he directed harsh words towards teachers who may not share his view of instilling pride through the teaching of history.

You may ooze bile but you will teach the children by those books that you will be given and in the way that is needed by Russia....It is impossible to let some Russophobe shit-stinker, or just any amoral type, teach Russian history. It is necessary to clear the filth, and if it does not work, then clear it by force.

Danilin’s quote echoes Putin’s comments at the Moscow Library in 2003 where Putin spoke of the importance of instilling patriotism. Danilin goes a step further explicitly demanding that teachers teach the material that he has written. His vulgar language describing those who do not teach history as he sees fit illustrates the tenacity of his own belief in his version of history.

---

207 Ibid.
An Emerging Shift?

Much criticism was aimed at the Russian government and the Filippov text for allowing a rehabilitation of Stalin and avoiding a discussion of the dark pages of Russian history. In a recent move, with approval from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Natalia Solzhenitsyn, the widow of the famous Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, introduced a new abridged version of the book *The Gulag Archipelago*. The book about the prison camp system and crimes and misdeeds of the Soviet regime had been banned during the Soviet period. Now, Putin promises that the book will be required reading for Russian high school students and Prosveshcheniye is publishing 10,000 copies to be sent to schools across Russia. Putin said, “[t]his book is necessary. Without knowing what’s in these pages, it’s impossible to have a complete understanding of our country and difficult to reflect on where it’s headed.”

The issuance of *The Gulag Archipelago* brings up an interesting and potentially confusing dilemma for teachers: how should they teach about Stalin’s repressions while at the same teaching from a history textbook that justifies these repressions? Some schools may be using history textbooks that do not outline or stress the repressions, show trials, and plight of the kulaks, wealthy peasants, and others who were sent to gulags during Stalin’s rule. Solzhenitsyn’s novel underlines the dark pages of Soviet history and this may prove to be a difficult situation to reconcile in an academic setting.

---

Conclusion

Dolutskii’s text can be seen as representative of the Yeltsin era, whereas the Zagladin and Filippov texts have come to represent the Putin era that has continued in the Medvedev era. While textbooks in the 1990s under Yeltsin allowed for a plurality of opinions, textbooks under Putin and Medvedev have consolidated around a central government narrative of patriotism that glosses over the dark pages in Russia’s past. When speaking about his text, Dolutskii said, “[y]ou shouldn’t confuse patriotism and concealing the truth. I want my country to be well, so I point out its ills. Putin wants to glorify and falsify history.”

The Filippov textbook once again sparked debate about the direction of Russian history especially because it skips over the ills that Dolutskii mentions. There is a fear that a patriotic version of history will freeze the past and not allow for alternative interpretations to be taught in schools. “A pro-state version of history is a rather dangerous thing, because it can easily slide from being the most important way of interpreting the past into being the only one. Once this happens, history becomes ideology.” Putin’s treatment of the Stalin era indicates “an important shift in official discourse that further reconstructs and simplifies through deliberate if selective forgetfulness.” Medvedev’s quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates that the government is concerned about different versions of history and the confusion this may cause for children. In an interview with TV anchor Yevgeny Revenko, Medvedev was asked, “[a]s everyone knows, official views on history in

---

209 Quoted in Banerji, Writing history in the Soviet Union: making the past work, 293.
Russia change frequently. What is currently happening in our nation with regard to history?” Medvedev replied that there are problems with texts written in the 1990s and that there are many history textbooks written from different perspectives today by people with different levels of ability. He further contended that some textbooks take “spiteful” approaches, using emotional language showing just how politically charged the issue of history textbooks has become. Medvedev went on to say that textbooks are currently undergoing assessment by experts such as those at Academy of Sciences and that only after a positive assessment will a text be recommended for classrooms.

I think that we need to bring some order to this process and a decision to do so has pretty much been passed….The real issue is to ensure that certain clear moments in history are presented in the same way in all of these textbooks. We cannot define key events in completely opposing ways. We cannot label a country as an aggressor if it was merely defending itself or protecting its interests.\(^\text{212}\)

When Medvedev addressed the fact that a variety of textbooks can be used in schools, he noted that teachers then take on the responsibility of selecting the text that will be best for their students. The question remains who will provide all encompassing definitions of historical events and how these events will be written into the historical narrative. It is possible that these decisions will be made in the legal realm with government commissions.

\(^{212}\) Yevgeny Revenko, “Interview to Anchor of TV Channel Rossiya’s ‘News of the Week’ Programme Yevgeny Revenko,” (2009).
Chapter Three

The Government Acts to Protect Its Useable Past

The Cold War is becoming a thing of the past, but we still need to get rid of a few lingering prejudices.

– Tweeted by President Dmitry Medvedev on July 12, 2010

The control of history through legal mechanisms for political and nationalistic state-building reasons has been a prerogative of the Soviet and later Russian governments since 1917. Whether it was to instill Marxist-Leninist ideology during the Soviet period or to assert a new identity and state authority after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the historical narrative remains significant in the government’s efforts to tell a coherent story of the state while moving forward and modernizing. The chaos of economic transition in the 1990s, however, directed the Russian government’s focus away from writing a new history narrative for much of the decade. During his second presidential term Boris Yeltsin tried, unsuccessfully to find a new idea for Russia through a national contest. When Vladimir Putin came to power, the government again began focusing great attention on the Russian historical narrative both through holidays and textbooks. Currently, President Dmitry Medvedev, a lawyer by training, has continued where his predecessor left off by focusing on safeguarding Russia’s past by working through legal channels. In 2009 Medvedev established “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History.” The purpose of the Commission is to counteract historical falsifications that could be damaging to Russia’s interests.

213 Dmitry Medvedev, Twitter, http://twitter.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/18358008641.
This enterprise is not unprecedented. Russian historian Pavel Polian has argued that Russian history has undergone multiple revisions.

Falsification—that is, the rewriting of history—is a tradition in Russia. Ivan the Terrible, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev: none was averse to such tomfoolery as correcting an ‘error’ in a manuscript or tearing out and burning a dangerous or simply poorly written paper. Vladimir Lenin, too feared what the archives might reveal about the disreputable matters in his past.²¹⁴

The term “falsification” is ambiguous in the context of the Commission. It is unclear how falsifications will be defined and whether or not the Soviet tradition of rewriting history, perhaps to correct past mistakes or perhaps to reframe an event in a way the current government wants, will proceed. The case of the Katyn massacre, when Soviet forces murdered Polish citizens in 1940, shows that when admitting and apologizing for historical falsifications is prudent in the international realm, then the Russian government acts.

The kind of power that will be afforded to the new Commission is also unclear. What is clear is that the Russian government is trying to protect a historical narrative rooted in the Soviet victory of World War II, the Great Patriotic War. In 2008-2009 equations of Nazi Germany with Stalin’s Soviet Union by the European Parliament and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe upset the Russian government and put it on the defensive. Moreover, in recent years, alternative historical narratives, especially those that cast countries as victims of the Soviet regime, have been emerging from former Soviet states such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic states, much to the chagrin of the Russian government. These events have spurred the Russian government to refocus its attention on the importance

²¹⁴ Pavel Polian, "For Whom Did the Tsar Bell Toll?,” Russian Politics and Law 48, no. 4 (2009): 64.
of history and protecting its version of events. The battle to protect the Russian historical narrative is being waged and the government is willing to enter any realm, from the public sphere, to education, to law, to protect it.

Medvedev Introduces a New Commission

President Medvedev has taken specific aim at historical memory and on May 19, 2009 he signed “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History” into law. The 28-member Commission works without remuneration and is tasked with summarizing and analyzing “information about the falsification of historical facts and events aimed at diminishing the international prestige of the Russian Federation and to report such incidents to the president of the Russian Federation.” The language of the law suggests a contradiction: unveiling falsifications aimed specifically at diminishing prestige as opposed to correcting past inaccuracies in the historical record. The Commission is also supposed to develop strategies to counteract attempts to falsify history, prepare proposals concerning these strategies for the president, examine and coordinate proposals from other government agencies, and recommend actions in response to falsification and “neutralize their possible negative consequences.” It is unclear what strategies will be used to counteract attempts to falsify history.

In order for the Commission to fulfill these assigned duties, President Medvedev has given the Commission the right to request materials from government

---

215 President of Russia, “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History,” Russian Politics and Law (M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2009).
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
and non-government entities alike and to create working groups comprised of
government and non-government members. At a minimum, the Commission meets in
session twice a year and during these sessions the Commission can invite
governmental and non-governmental representatives to participate. The final part of
the law states, “[t]he Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation
will provide organizational, technical, informational, and documentary support to the
commission.”\(^ {218}\) The very name of the Commission leaves room for distorting history
in favor of the Russian state. It remains unclear what the exact legal reach and power
of the Commission will be.

The creation of the Commission sparked controversy and debate in Russia,
especially among academics. Of the 28 members who are part of the Commission,
only three are academicians: two are directors of institutes, A.N. Sakharov, director of
the Institute of Russian History and A.O. Chubar’ian, director of the Institute of
World History and one member is the head of the Federal Archives Agency, V.P.
Kozlov. Other academicians have brought the credentials of the two directors as well
as the institution that one represents into question.\(^ {219}\) Roy Medvedev, a well-known
Russian historian told the newspaper *Kommersant* that “there are only three historians
there, and even they are not recognized among professionals.”\(^ {220}\) All three
academicians have government ties; they “are not independent researchers, but
government-appointed directors.”\(^ {221}\) There are no members on the Commission who
represent public organizations that deal with history such as the human rights

\(^{218}\) Ibid.
\(^{219}\) Polian, "For Whom Did the Tsar Bell Toll?,” 58.
\(^{220}\) Quoted in Pavel Felgenhauer, "Medvedev Forms a Commission to Protect Russian History," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 98 (2009).
\(^{221}\) Ibid.
organization Memorial that compiles lists of victims of Stalin’s repressions and raises awareness of the dark pages in Russia’s past. S.E. Naryshkin, the head of the presidential administration of the Russian Federation, heads the Commission. Other members include the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, the department head in the Federal Security Service, and the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Having committee members who are involved in the security and armed forces fields has brought the exact goals of the Commission into question. Commission member S.A. Markov, the deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee on Public Associations and Religious Organizations, said that the Commission would not jail or blacklist historians whose views they disagree with. According to Markov, historians who live outside of Russia and espouse pro-Russian views will be given grants. Markov and K.F. Zatulin, another Commission member who is the first deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee for the Commonwealth of Independent States and Compatriots, have both been banned by the Ukrainian government from entering Ukraine because they allegedly promoted transferring Crimea back to Russia.\textsuperscript{222} Markov made clear that historical distortions have made the Commission necessary. “There’s an information war going on. This is about defining who the Russians were historically.”\textsuperscript{223}

During an interview with the newspaper \textit{Izvestia}, President Medvedev was asked, “[s]ome time ago you started fighting history falsifications by establishing the Commission….What historical facts are being distorted, in your opinion?” Medvedev focused on World War II and answered that his decision was motivated by the actions

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
of certain politicians who have manipulated history to their own benefit; he did not mention any of the politicians by name. He went on to say that,

The aim was to address the question of what future we will build, what memory we will leave our children and grandchildren, what they will know and think about the war and what lessons they will learn from it….This does not mean that we should direct our efforts against the different interpretations of wartime events or various scientific theories. Let people put forward and defend their theories and interpretations, but there are facts that do not require proof because they are absolutely self-evident or are fixed in international documents such as the records of the Nuremberg trials. There can be no discussion on these particular issues because discussion here could only be in the wrong direction. If we see at some future point that this work has been completed there will obviously no longer be any need for the commission to continue its activities.  

Medvedev does not mention which “facts” are indisputable.

Although the Commission’s focus is on all history that may harm Russia, the focal point thus far has been World War II and different interpretations of the war. In his interview with Izvestia, Medvedev discussed viewpoints of the war that highlight the Western Allies defeat of Nazi Germany without mention of the Soviet Union’s contribution. Medvedev mentioned the film Saving Private Ryan as an example of “how we end up with this idea that it was they [the Western Allies] who achieved victory….we need to remember the real events that took place.” Medvedev was also questioned about the interpretations of the war that the interviewer described as “being interpreted to fit some political interests” in the Baltic states, Ukraine, and

225 Ibid.
Medvedev replied that it may be hard but “the historian’s art and the ordinary person’s common sense lies in the ability to make the separation between the Red Army and Soviet state’s mission during the World War II and the events that followed later.” This distinction, however, is one that is not being made and instead countries are taking on the historical mantle of victims of the Soviet regime.

Medvedev also addressed comparisons made between Nazi Germany and the Red Army by saying that “those who describe [the] Red Army’s mission in the same terms as that of the Nazi aggressors are committing a moral crime.”227 The comments made about WWII and the Russian government’s responses have made clear that Russia today has inherited the Soviet past. All of the various interpretations and comments about the Soviet Union during and after WWII have caused the Russian government to fight back to insure that a key event in their historical narrative is protected.

Defining “Falsification”

An ambiguity that strikes at the heart of the Commission is the definition of the term “falsification.” It remains unclear exactly how this term will be applied to Russian history. President Medvedev gave the concrete example of the Soviet cover-up of the Katyn massacre, where there was sufficient evidence to prove that the crime was committed by the Soviets, as an instance of historical falsification. Other than this example, however, Medvedev did not specifically mention other historical falsifications. Medvedev’s discussion of facts that are not open to debate concerning WWII and his view that “overall there is nothing capable of changing the way we see

---

226 Ibid.
227 Ibid.
this victory” may close the door to other interpretations, such as those presented by Viktor Suvorov. Suvorov, in his book Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?, challenged the view that the Soviet Union was surprised by Hitler’s attack and that Stalin was in fact preparing to attack Europe. The standard narrative of these events claims that Stalin was not planning to attack Europe and was surprised by Hitler’s attack. Although Suvorov’s views are controversial and not agreed upon in Russia or by Western historians, it is unclear if Medvedev is planning to target such views or allow them to continue. Many historians and commentators have suggested that the best way to avoid historical falsification would be for Medvedev to open the presidential archives. The presidential archive is confidential and contains records from Communist times that could potentially cast a negative light on the current narration of events such as World War II.

Outside of distinct historical incidents and events, such as Katyn, that are widely agreed upon by historians of different nationalities and supported by evidence, there remains the possibility of governmental and political influence in shaping what qualifies as a historical falsification and what qualifies as a point of view contrary to the governmental line or a view espousing a different historical interpretation. The possibility remains that the government could call something a falsification because it is unfavorable to its own political agenda. If such actions were ever taken, they could lead to the production of an unquestionable historical narrative that would not leave room for debate.

---

228 Ibid.
The Falsification of Katyn

One particularly important event to remember is the Katyn forest massacre. In 1940 the Soviet secret police killed upwards of 20,000 Poles, primarily military officers but also Poles from a wide range of professions from doctors to professors, who had become Soviet prisoners of war and then buried them in mass graves. In his interview with *Izvestia*, Medvedev stressed the importance of remembering the events of the war, in the case of Katyn this meant that the Russian government recognized and participated in remembrances with the Polish government. The Nazis discovered the graves at Katyn in 1943 but the Soviet government blamed the crime on the Nazis and denied any Soviet involvement in the crime for more than 40 years. It was not until 1990 that the Soviet head of state Mikhail Gorbachev acknowledged that Soviet secret police held responsibility for the crime. Gorbachev, however, did not directly blame Stalin for the killings. Katyn would remain a point of contention in relations between Poles and Russians. “Even before 1989, during Gorbachev’s perestroika, it became clear that an official Soviet recognition of the slaughter of thousands of imprisoned Polish officers and civil functionaries in 1940 must be a precondition of any real reconciliation.”

Medvedev described the killings at Katyn as,

> A black page in our history, a black page on which we had no access to the truth…people still discuss in all seriousness who actually took the decision to execute the

---

230 Historians have debated the Soviet motive for killing such a large number of Poles postulating that perhaps Stalin wanted to wipe out a large portion of Polish military leaders who could present a future threat or opposition.


Polish officers. The documents on these events had already been declassified, but I decided to make them public. But these events remain debated even so. Why, because this subject was kept hidden from the public, and because it was presented from a false point of view. This was precisely an example of how history can be falsified. After all, it is not just people beyond our borders who allow history to be falsified, people in other countries, but we ourselves too, who have allowed our own history to be falsified. The time has finally come to open up the truth on these events to our own people and to foreign citizens with an interest in these matters.\textsuperscript{233}

Despite Medvedev’s strong words concerning who decided to execute the Polish officers and civilians, it was not until half a year later that the Russian government took action. In November of 2010 the Russian Parliament (Duma) approved a statement, by 342 of 450 members, that holds Stalin and Soviet leaders responsible for ordering the killings at Katyn. Communist members of the Parliament protested this action. One member, Viktor Ilyukhin, questioned the action asking, “[h]ow can we apologize for the Katyn tragedy when it wasn’t our fault?”\textsuperscript{234} Ilyukhin poses the question of responsibility in terms of the post-Soviet state by asking how “we,” meaning the Russian people not the Soviet people, can apologize for something that was not directly “our,” meaning citizens today, fault. The vote illustrates the divergent views on the past within the Russian Duma and the complicated and controversial opinions on how the current government should deal with contentious historical events that have been divisive in foreign relations. The Duma responded to the Communist statement by saying that archival material “not only unveils the scale of this horrific tragedy but also provides evidence that the Katyn crime was

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{234} Quoted in Maria Tsevetkova, “Russia blames Stalin for Katyn tragedy,” \textit{Reuters}, November 26, 2010.
committed on direct orders from Stalin and other Soviet leaders."  

In the public sphere, the Polish film “Katyn” by director Andrzej Wajda, which shows the systematic execution of Polish officers, was shown on Russian television on the Kultura channel on April 2, 2010. Sergey Shumakov, editor-in-chief of the Kultura channel, called the event “unprecedented and at the same time a deliberate action.” On April 7, 2010, Vladimir Putin joined Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in commemorating the Katyn massacre. In so doing, Putin became the first Russian leader to commemorate the massacre. The gesture was a step towards reconciliation between the two nations. Tusk said, “I want to believe that the word of truth can bring together two great nations, which have been painfully separated by history.” Russia’s Communist Party responded to Putin’s visit by issuing a statement on their website. The statement said, “[y]ou can apologize as much as you want about the so-called Soviet guilt, but no one can hide the fact of German responsibility for the shootings of Polish soldiers.” The Communist Party responded with the same attitude a few months later when the Duma voted to hold Stalin accountable for Katyn. Importantly, Putin made a distinction between the Russian people and the Soviet authorities at the time saying “it would also be a lie and manipulation to place the blame for these crimes on the Russian people.”

Thus with certain historical events which could improve European relations,

---

238 Quoted in Ibid.
239 Quoted in Ibid.
240 Quoted in Ibid.
Moscow is taking steps towards ameliorating long-term controversies. Head of the Duma committee on foreign affairs, Konstatin Koschyov, said that issuing a statement in November of 2010 concerning Katyn was “really a question of conscience, after so many years of negation and silence, to make a declaration that would close this chapter of our history.”  

At the same time, Moscow is also working to create an acceptable edited image of its past and prevent other versions that may include falsifications, such as the role the Soviet Union played in the defeat of Nazi Germany, from becoming widely circulated.

**Against the Commission: Historians and Memorial Respond**

The creation of the Commission caused much debate and worry among historians and human rights workers. In reaction to the Commission, as well as a proposed law concerning statements about WWII discussed later in this chapter, historians, editors, journalists, engineers, sociologists, teachers, and others signed “In a Democratic Society, Freedom of History is Freedom for Everyone: Appeal to the Citizens, President, and State Duma of Russia.” The signers see the Commission as limiting freedom of speech and research in Russia and creating an unalterable fixed view of the twentieth century. They argue that the causes and events of WWII still need to be studied and that Russian historians had suffered under the Soviet monolithic boot, which had only allowed for one viewpoint. Today, historians need to continue doing research that was not allowed only 20 years ago. Additionally,

---

241 Quoted in Tsevetkova, “Russia blames Stalin for Katyn tragedy.”
243 Ibid.
these scholars called for archives to be opened to aid the study of this period: “[w]e call up historians, the Russian intelligentsia and citizens of the Russian Federation to join our protest and to protect freedom of historical research and teaching without which democratic society is impossible.”

Historians were not the only ones who issued a statement against the Commission. Memorial, a group that specializes in research and human rights, and has education centers in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities, and works on collecting documents and telling the history of the Soviet Union’s dark pages, sometimes to the chagrin of the government, issued a similar statement on May 22, 2009. The statement criticized the make-up of the Commission and the fact that the number of historians can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The statement admits that historical falsifications can damage Russia, but Memorial is against a legislative directive creating a Commission. Memorial believes that history needs to be debated in a free and open environment. Memorial also calls for easier access to archives and argues that the publication of archival materials will be the best weapon in the fight against historical falsification and falsifiers. The statement raises the concern that the Commission will not only counteract historical falsifications but also interpretations of history that run counter to the official government line regarding the correct historical memory of the Russian nation and that this could conflict with Article 13 of the Russian Constitution which states that “1. Ideological diversity shall be recognized in the Russian Federation. 2. No ideology shall be proclaimed as State

244 Ibid.
ideology or as obligatory.”247 In a separate statement, Oleg Orlov, the head of Memorial, said that the Commission would “halt any objective view of what really happened in Russia’s past.”248 The Commission has worried historians and activists alike that the government will now interfere with their research and work.

In Support of the Commission

Statements in support of the Commission have also emerged. Pavel Danilin, a young writer, deputy director of the Foundation for Effective Politics, an organization involved in Russian politics, and the editor-in-chief of Kreml.org, “a website where Russian mainstream pundits regularly place their commentaries,”249 authored a section in the “Short Course,” a Kremlin-backed history book that contained a controversial section concerning Stalin’s place in Russian history.250 Danilin does not have an advanced history degree and has never worked as a teacher. His political leaning has been described as that of a “Kremlin propagandist”251 and he actively calls for fighting the falsifiers of Russian history.252 Danilin commented, “[t]he revisionists have raised their heads and speak through the main mass media as if under Goebbels.”253 Danilin sees the Commission as a political body. In Danilin’s view, the Commission does not need to pursue academic ends such as research but, instead, should pursue political work. Danilin is quick to attack professional

249 Solonari, "Normalizing Russia, Legitimizing Putin," 838.
250 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this textbook.
252 Ibid.
It is the amateurs who have won contracts with publishers and have large print runs of their books, which review the events of the Stalin era, World War II and the end of the tsar’s epoch at a much higher level than professionals can afford. These amateurs and enthusiasts are Russia’s main heritage. They do not spare themselves in defending historical memory and in fighting against falsifications....The official historians...lean towards revisionist positions.\textsuperscript{254}

Danilin’s view is troubling because he assumes that historians are trying to slander Russia’s past and he does not take into account the opening of archives as adding or changing views of historians. He regards revisionism as a negative activity instead of a necessary one when new documents and information come to light. As an amateur historian himself, Danilin is vehemently defending himself.

\textbf{An Unknowing Public}

The Russian public does not know much about the new Commission nor does it seem to care. The Russian Public Opinion Foundation conducted a survey about the Russian public’s awareness and views of the Commission. The survey was carried out between May 30-31, 2009 and asked participants if they had heard of the Commission and what they thought of it. More than half of the respondents, 58 percent, had not heard about the Commission. When asked if they viewed the Commission as positive, negative, or with indifference, 49 percent said they thought the Commission was positive while 25 percent believed it was negative.\textsuperscript{255}

Protecting Russia’s role in WWII and the Russian historical narrative of the

\textsuperscript{254} Quoted in Ibid.
war spurred the creation of the Commission and survey information shows that Russia’s role as a victor in the War is an important event that creates a sense of pride for Russians. The Foundation conducted a survey in 2002 that asked participants an open question, “[w]hat exactly in our country’s past makes you feel proud?” The event that garnered the highest percentage of answers, at 41 percent, was the Soviet Union’s victory in WWII. The event that came in second place with 14 percent of the vote was Russia’s space achievements. This was followed by 13 percent taking pride in the USSR. One respondent wrote, “[i]n the period of the USSR, we had pride for our country.” In a tie for fourth place, with nine percent, were Russia’s sports achievements and historical personalities and events before 1917, especially the era of Peter the Great. Overall, WWII remains the event that the most people relate to and with which they have direct family connections.

**An Incident at the Academy**

In connection with the Commission, during the summer of 2009, Valery Tishkov, the deputy academic-secretary of the history and philology department of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), issued a directive asking the directors of different RAS departments to put together lists of historical and cultural falsifications including the names of the individuals or organizations who were responsible for disseminating the information and to submit it within three days. “We request…information about the work of scholars at your institute to expose

---

256 Ibid.
falsifications and historical or cultural theories that harm the interests of Russia.”

Tishkov’s statement, like those made by Medvedev, underscore the inherent contradiction and problem with assuming that falsifications will harm Russia’s interests. Tishkov’s directive was meant to remain private, however, it was leaked to media sources. Tishkov responded by saying that the directive had been written by other officials and he had only corrected and signed it. He went on to say, “I made this request so I can formulate my own position on this issue, and perhaps write an article about it for Izvestiya or Rossiiskaya gazeta.” Outrage over the leaked directive caused Tishkov to backtrack.

The request was a troubling indication that the fears expressed by historians and Memorial were not far off. The response that was leveled at Tishkov when the directive was leaked is a positive indication that public pressure and outrage could insure that a plurality of historical views and opinions remain in the Russian academic sphere. It is possible, however, that future requests could be made or made at other Russian academic institutions and be backed up with government support.

Proposing a New Great Patriotic Law

While the Commission was being formed, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, one of the leaders of Putin’s United Russia party, started the discussion about the importance of adopting a law that would threaten prosecution of

---

259 Ibid.
those who made inaccurate remarks about WWII and the role that Soviet Union played in the war, including those claiming that the Soviets did not win the war, used poor military tactics, or did not liberate Eastern Europe. Shoigu was explicitly clear about his position, “I believe the Duma should enact a law that would criminalize the denial of the Soviet victory in World War II.” 261 The law would also be applied to political officials from former Soviet states, such as Estonia, that deny liberation by the Red Army during WWII and instead view the event as the beginning of Soviet occupation. “The presidents of certain countries denying this would not be able to visit our country and remain unpunished. Mayors of certain cities would also think several times before pulling down monuments,” Shoigu said. 262

   It seems that Shoigu was referring to an event that occurred in Estonia in 2007 when a statue of a WWII Red Army soldier, which memorialized fallen Soviet soldiers, was moved from a main square in the country’s capital of Tallinn to a military cemetery. The event caused rioting by ethnic Russians in Estonia and rioting in Moscow at the Estonian embassy as well as the rerouting of deliveries from Russia to Estonia showing that the Russian government is willing to use economic threats in the battle over history. 263 This event underlined the nationalistic fervor tied to the memory of the Soviet victory in WWII. A survey conducted in 2005 concerning Russian celebrations of Victory Day, May 9, found that 64 percent of respondents had family members killed during WWII thus illustrating the widespread importance of

262 Quoted in Adam Bloomfield, “Russia to outlaw criticism of WWII tactics,” The Telegraph, March 5, 2009.
Journalists have speculated that Shoigu’s announcement concerning the possibility of a new law may have been influenced by a documentary, *The Battle of Rzhev*, which aired on NTV.²⁶⁵ The documentary followed the story of Soviet offensives against the Nazis between 1942 and 1943 and shocked viewers by revealing much higher casualty rates than commonly believed and showing the surprised reactions of the German troops when they witnessed how Soviet soldiers were treated and used as cannon fodder. The proposed law, which has been named “Against the Rehabilitation of Nazism,” would carry a hefty fine of $9,200 or three years in prison for violators.²⁶⁶ If a government official is charged, the fine and the time both increase. The majority of Russians are in favor of such a law. The Center for the Study of Public Opinion polled 1,600 Russians and found that 60 percent believe that denial of the Soviet WWII victory should be criminalized. In addition, 77 percent of respondents also believe that the Soviets liberated Eastern Europe during WWII.²⁶⁷ Such views are in direct opposition to the histories being written in post-Soviet states such as Estonia.

Russia is not the only country to consider laws concerning their interpretation of WWII. In Poland, articles in the penal code address the issue of the Polish nation’s role in WWII:

Paragraph 256 ‘incitement of conflict based on race;’ paragraph 133 ‘defamation of the nation,’ and 132a ‘slander of the Nation’ passed in October 2006, which states: ‘Anyone who publically slanders the Polish Nation

²⁶⁵ Wendle, “Russia Moves to Ban Criticism of WWII Win.”
²⁶⁶ Ibid.
²⁶⁷ Ibid.
[accusing it] of participation, organization, and responsibility for Nazi or Communist crimes will be subject to a penalty of imprisonment up to 3 years.\textsuperscript{268}

These paragraphs in the penal code have created controversy in Poland and initiated debate on whether such codes are necessary. Lawyers and historians have appealed the Polish law to the Helsinki Commission, also known as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Polish Constitutional Tribunal.\textsuperscript{269} Concerning paragraph 132a, the Helsinki Commission stated that it “has no place in the legal system of a democratic state, which should champion free public debates about important matters.”\textsuperscript{270} The countries of Eastern Europe are all concerned with protecting their history and how they are portrayed in the world historical record of WWII.

**Equating Nazism and Stalinism**

In July 2009, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) met in Lithuania and voted to adopt resolutions as part of the Vilnius Declaration. One resolution “The Resolution on Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century” supports making August 23 a Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Nazism and Stalinism. August 23 marks the day that the Treaty of Non-Aggression was signed between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union in 1939. A majority, out of the “213 members there, from 50 countries, only eight voted against it and four abstained,”

\textsuperscript{268} Quoted in “There will be no investigation in the Jan Gross case,” Wprost 2008.
\textsuperscript{269} The Helsinki Commission is composed of members from the U.S. government.
\textsuperscript{270} “There will be no investigation in the Jan Gross case.”
passed the resolution. A Lithuanian delegate, Vilija Aleknaite-Abramikiene, drafted the resolution and said the intention was to remember those killed in WWII. The Resolution on Divided Europe Reunited stated, “that in the twentieth century European countries experienced two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes and crimes against humanity.” The OSCE resolution recalled “the initiative of the European Parliament to proclaim 23 August…as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, in order to preserve the memory of the victims of mass deportations and exterminations.” The Resolution also “expressed deep concern at the glorification of the totalitarian regimes, including the holding of public demonstrations glorifying the Nazi or Stalinist past.”

The European Parliament of the European Union issued a declaration proclaiming the European-wide Day of Remembrance on September 23, 2008. The text stated that war crimes and crimes against humanity such as “mass deportations, murders and enslavements committed in the context of the acts of aggression by Stalinism and Nazism” have no statute of limitations and that the “influence and significance of the Soviet order and occupation on and for citizens of the post-Communist States are little known in Europe.” The text therefore proposed that

23 August be proclaimed European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, in order to preserve the memory of the victims of mass deportations and exterminations, and at the same time

273 Ibid.
274 Ibid., 49.
rooting democracy more firmly and reinforcing peace and stability in our continent.\textsuperscript{276}

Hundreds of members of the European Parliament signed the text. On April 2, 2009 the Parliament adopted a resolution on “European conscience and totalitarianism” which called on member states to implement the Day of Remembrance. The text stated that “misinterpretations of history can fuel exclusivist policies and thereby incite hatred and racism” and that “memories of Europe’s tragic past must be kept alive in order to honour the victims, condemn the perpetrators and lay the foundations for reconciliation based on truth and remembrance.”\textsuperscript{277} The text specifically addressed Russia by stating the need “to support and defend the activities of non-governmental organisations, such as Memorial in the Russian Federation, that are actively engaged in researching and collecting documents related to the crimes committed during the Stalinist period.”\textsuperscript{278}

Another important point made in the text was the call for Member States to open archives, “including those of the former internal security services, secret police and intelligence agencies, although steps must be taken to ensure that this process is not abused for political purposes.”\textsuperscript{279} Jerzy Buzek, a Polish politician who is the President of the European Parliament, issued a statement on the second anniversary of the Day of Remembrance: “71 years ago, on this day, the world witnessed the collusion of the two worst forms of totalitarianism in the history of humanity: Nazism and Stalinism. Peoples and nations all over the world bore the brunt of this diabolic

\textsuperscript{276} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{277} European Parliament, “European conscience and totalitarianism,” (Brussels 2009).
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid.
partnership….To forget the past is to abandon our soul.” Both the OSCE and the European Parliament have directly targeted Stalinism and the European Parliament has specifically pointed to Russia and the need to support organizations such as Memorial. Equating Nazism with Stalinism has caused great concern for the Russian government, which places the defeat of Hitler’s Nazi forces at the center of its historical narrative. The earlier decision by the European Parliament could have been another reason that Medvedev felt the need to create the Commission.

The Russian delegation boycotted the OSCE vote and was upset by the comparison of Nazism and Stalinism. Russian foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko spoke on behalf of the Russian government saying, “[w]e consider unacceptable the fact that in the OSCE’s parliamentary assembly resolution there is an attempt to distort history with political goals.” The decision has spurred a response from the Russian government centered around the view of Russia defending Europe from the Nazi threat. In a television interview, President Medvedev addressed the OSCE decision.

These events [World War II] were the greatest tragedy of the 20th century….Thus, there can be no other view of those events. Of course, there is also the issue of how these events are interpreted in different nations. And here, unfortunately, there are some clear setbacks….There is another situation: the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly just recently grouped together Germany and the Soviet Union, pronouncing them to be equally responsible for World War Two. Now this, quite frankly, is a flat-out lie. One can have different attitudes toward the Soviet Union; one can be critical of the Soviet Union’s political regime and the leaders of what was then our country, but this is the very

---

281 Quoted in Kyle James, “OSCE resolution equating Stalinism with Nazism enrages Russia,” Deutscher Welle, July 9, 2009.
issue I was just talking about – the issue of who started the war, which country killed people and which country saved people, millions of people, and which country ultimately saved Europe.\textsuperscript{282}

The Russian government does not want any equations made between Nazism and Stalinism because such an equation undermines the historical myth created around the Great Patriotic War. By choosing August 23, the date of the treaty between Stalin and Hitler to mark remembrance, Medvedev, the Russian government, and media outlets immediately interpreted this as a condemnation of the Soviet government making it just as responsible for the start of WWII as Nazi Germany. The OSCE resolution never mentions who is responsible for the start of WWII instead it notes that two totalitarian regimes existed in the twentieth century Europe: the Nazi regime and the Stalin regime. This comparison, however, is not one that the Russian government can accept because they feel that it undermines the sacrifices made by the Soviet people during WWII.

\textbf{Eastern Europe Remembers}

Russia is not the only former Soviet country where the government has taken an active interest in history. Institutes of National Remembrance have been set up in other Eastern European countries and are supported by state budgets. In recent years countries have also started announcing new days to mark Soviet occupation. Georgia declared February 25 the Day of Soviet Occupation.\textsuperscript{283} Latvia declared June 17 the

\textsuperscript{282} Quoted in Yevgeny Revenko, “Interview to Anchor of TV Channel Rossiya’s ‘News of the Week; Programme Yevgeny Revenko,” (2009).
Occupation of the Latvian Republic Day. Moldova tried to make June 28 the Day of Soviet Occupation but the Constitutional Court ruled the president’s decision unlawful.

In 1998 Poland’s parliament formed an institute for remembrance, The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN). Headquartered in Warsaw, the Institute deals with legislative issues that concern preserving history and memory important to the Polish state, such as losses suffered during WWII and the post-war period, the “patriotic traditions of fighting against occupants, Nazism and Communism,” and the efforts of the Polish people in fighting for an independent state. The Institute investigates allegations of events that occurred from September 1, 1939 to July 31, 1990 and requests information from other governments to aid in the investigations. Crimes, such as genocide, “for which there is no statute of limitations, committed against Polish nationals and Polish citizens of other nationalities,” are prosecuted and compensation is given to those who were repressed and had their human rights violated by the state.

Lithuania has a Genocide and Resistance Research Center, which was approved by the government in 1992. The Center’s objectives are similar to its Polish counterpart,

Establish historical truth and justice; to investigate the physical and spiritual genocide of Lithuanians carried out

---

286 Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against Polish Nation, “About the Institute.”
287 Ibid.
by the occupying regimes between 1939 and 1990, and the resistance to the regimes; to immortalise the memory of the freedom fighters and the genocide victims; and to initiate the juridical evaluation of the aftermath of the occupying regimes.\textsuperscript{288}

The Center also studies the role of the KGB in Lithuania and the veracity of KGB documents as well as the Holocaust and the Sovietization of Lithuanian cultural life; historians aid in the investigations.

In 2006, Ukraine also formed an Institute of National Memory.\textsuperscript{289} The Institute, like its Polish and Lithuanian counterparts, studies historical periods and events of relevance to Ukrainian history, such as different Ukrainian governments, WWII, and the Holodomor, a famine that occurred in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 and killed millions of people.\textsuperscript{290} Ukrainian historians view the famine as an intentional action by the Soviet government aimed at repressing Ukrainian nationalism, and they consider the event to be a genocide. Russian historians view the Holodmor as a tragedy that affected the Soviet Union and not just the Ukrainian people.

Such historical debates have become politically charged and have caused pointed debates between the Ukrainian and Russian governments. Although unsubstantiated, a WikiLeaks document revealed a conversation that is said to have taken place in October 2008 when British Prince Andrew asked US Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Tatiana Gfoeller about President Medvedev using threats to support Russian historical viewpoints,

[Prince Andrew] stated the following story related to him

\textsuperscript{288} Genocide and Resistance Centre of Lithuania, http://www.genocid.lt/centras/en/\#.
\textsuperscript{290} Orest Subtelny and Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies., Ukraine : a history (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1988), 413-16.
recently by Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev. Aliyev had received a letter from President Medvedev telling him that if Azerbaijan supported the designation of the Bolshevik artificial famine in Ukraine as ‘genocide’ at the United Nations, ‘then you can forget about seeing Nagorno-Karabakh ever again.’ Prince Andrew added that every single other regional President had told him of receiving similar ‘directive’ letters from Medvedev except for Bakiyev. He asked the Ambassador if Bakiyev had received something similar as well. The Ambassador answered that she was not aware of any such letter.

The difference in perspective and narrative of events, especially of the Holodmor, is evident from school textbooks written in Ukraine and Russia. Compared to both Poland and Lithuania, Ukraine’s Institute was established several years later and has now come under fire in a politically divided nation. The Institute was started during President Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency; Yushchenko was commonly described as a pro-Western politician. Now that his political opponent, Viktor Yanukovich, is the president, the Institute has come under review. Yanukovich is described as a pro-Moscow politician. Communist party members hope to see a new Communist director appointed to head the Institute. The former head of the State Security Service (SBU) archives, Volodymyr Vyatrovych, commented on the Institute’s predicament saying, “[w]e’re returning not to the [ex-President Leonid] Kuchma era, but back to the Soviet times. It’s not convenient for the current ruling coalition [that includes the Communists] to have institutions exposing the crimes of the Soviet Communist Party.” Thus in Ukraine, like in Russia, history has returned to the political arena to

---

292 Korostelina, "War of textbooks: History education in Russia and Ukraine."
be debated and shaped by politicians with historians often lingering in the background.

**Conclusion**

As President Medvedev’s July 2010 tweet, “The Cold War is becoming a thing of the past, but we still need to get rid of a few lingering prejudices,” shows, the Russian government today is still trying to fight off certain images of the Soviet past while at the same time embracing others, especially the Soviet victory in WWII. Russia today has taken on the mantle of the Soviet past and with that the problems of the Soviet past such as the Stalinist regime and its repressions and territorial takeovers.

History has become an important instrument in building a new Russian national identity in the post-Soviet world and creating an image of a once again strong energy-powerful state that is not simply a regional power but also a world power. The Great Patriotic War has become a rallying point in Russian history that the older generation still remembers and is directly connected with. In the immediate post-Soviet years, economic challenges took government precedence. Now, 20 years after Soviet independence, challenges to the Russian historical narrative of WWII have been presented by other Eastern European countries who are writing historical narratives that do not flatter the Soviet leadership. Political bodies such as the European Parliament and the OSCE are also presenting challenges to the Russian interpretation of events. Recently leaked documents such as Tishkov’s directive and the WikiLeaks cable show that history remains an important ideological and political
battleground for the Russian government.

President Medvedev’s establishment of the Commission illustrates the Russian government’s desire to protect its version of the past that highlights the sacrifices of its citizens in the defeat of Nazi Germany and does not address the issues of post-war occupations of other states. The proposal of a law that would punish those who make inaccurate remarks about the War, inaccurate by Russian standards, underscores just how important the Great Patriotic War is in the post-Soviet Russian historical narrative. President Medvedev is not afraid to comment and participate in the historical debate and create a rhetoric of Russia as an important player in European and global relations. For Medvedev, this means using legal mechanisms to protect his country’s past.
Conclusion

Confronting the Past and Looking to the Future

“Paper will put up with anything that is written on it.”

–Joseph Stalin\textsuperscript{294}

Confronting the Past

Since 1991, October 30 has marked the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression in Russia. The Day of Remembrance is observed with memorial events such as wreath laying at monuments. In a 2009 video blog entitled “Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories,” President Dmitry Medvedev described the day as dedicated to the “people who were shot without trial and without investigation, people who were sent to labour camps and exile, deprived of civil rights for having the ‘wrong’ occupation or ‘improper social origin,’” in addition to groups of people, such as the kulaks and the Cossacks, who also faced repressions and purges.\textsuperscript{295} However, in his address Medvedev made no mention of the repression of nationalities such as the Chechens.\textsuperscript{296}

Medvedev’s historical references are aimed at Stalin-era repressions. The roots of the Day of Remembrance are grounded in 1974, when Soviet political prisoners decided that October 30 should be Soviet Political Prisoners Day.

\textsuperscript{295} Dmitry Medvedev, "Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories,” in Video Blog, ed. President of Russia Official Web Portal (President of Russia, 2009).
\textsuperscript{296} When searching “the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression” on the Russian presidential website, Medvedev’s 2009 video blog is the only result for a presidential address.
Complaints from prisoners about prison conditions had appeared in samizdat, self-published, publications and in the West and guards and political leadership heard about the complaints on Western radio that was broadcast in the USSR. Noted dissident Andrei Sakharov announced solidarity with the prisoners and they marked the day with a hunger strike.\(^{297}\) By the late 1980s, groups such as Memorial began publically commemorating the day. In 1990, Memorial activists and survivors of Stalin’s repressions formed a “living chain” around the infamous Lubyanka prison in Moscow.\(^{298}\)\(^ {299}\) A more radical group, Democratic Union (Demokraticheskii Soiuz), whose goal was to destroy the Communist party-system, opted for more aggressive tactics by protesting and chanting, “[h]alf of the nation were executioners, half informers. Shame on all of us!”\(^ {300}\) This chant reflected the tactic of admitting guilt and working towards reconciliation and forgiveness that President Boris Yeltsin would employ as the first post-Soviet leader in the 1990s.

In the same 2009 video blog, Medvedev pointed to how little Russian youth know about the history of state repressions. “Two years ago, sociologists conducted a survey and nearly 90 percent of our young citizens aged 18 to 24, failed to name famous people who suffered or died during those years of repression. And this, of course, cannot but be disturbing.”\(^ {301}\) Medvedev highlighted the complicated issue of Stalin’s role as the leader of the Soviet Union during WWII but stopped short of condemning Stalin.


\(^{299}\) Lubyanka served as the headquarters of the KGB.

\(^{300}\) Quoted in Smith, *Remembering Stalin's victims: popular memory and the end of the USSR*.

\(^{301}\) Medvedev, "Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories."
We pay a great deal of attention to the fight against the revisionist falsification of our history. Yet somehow I often feel that we are merely talking about the falsification of the events of the Great Patriotic War. But it is equally important not to sanction, under the guise of restoring historical justice, any justification of those who destroyed our people. It is true that Stalin’s crimes cannot diminish the heroic deeds of the people who triumphed in the Great Patriotic War, who made our country a mighty industrial power, and who raised our industry, science and culture to top global standards. The ability to accept one’s past for what it is, is the mark of mature civic culture.\textsuperscript{302}

Medvedev speaks of accepting the past, but he does not make clear how that should be done. Medvedev’s speech is significant because he admits that government resources have been directed towards protecting Russian history against falsification and thus underscores the lack of resources that have been aimed at studying and memorializing Soviet era repressions. Both Putin and Medvedev do not go as far in their rhetoric of historical reconciliation as, for example, Yeltsin did at the funeral of the Romanovs. The last decade in Russia, under both Putin and Medvedev, has seen an acknowledgement of the crimes of the Soviet past, the dark historical pages. This acknowledgement, however, has been coupled with a strong emphasis on patriotism and modernization and the lack of monuments and memorials to victims of Soviet repressions illustrate that instilling pride has priority over reconciliation with the past.

The Day of Remembrance underscores a historical fact that is both difficult and painful to admit: over the course of Soviet history, Russians were both victims and perpetrators, and many Soviet leaders killed their own people. The Day of Remembrance is an important opportunity for Russians to discuss their complicated past and study a history that was not discussed during Soviet times. Historian Orlando

\textsuperscript{302} Ibid.
Figes teamed with Memorial to gather interviews of Soviet citizens who were affected by Soviet repression. One woman, Svetlana Sbitneva, lost her father to repression and over 16 relatives on her mother’s side to repression. Sbitneva recalled that she was not told of her family’s past and on the day Stalin died both she and her grandmother cried. Sbitneva was crying because she was sad the leader had died; her grandmother was crying for joy and finally revealed the family’s history.303 Sbitneva’s case is a microcosm of the broader example of how family history was hidden during the Soviet period and now the Day of Remembrance offers an opportunity to confront the past head on. Russian journalist Maxim Trudolyubov wrote about the Day of Remembrance emphasizing that many Russians,

still believe that the entire issue is ‘foreign,’ that it is being imposed on us by the West, that to confront the past would be divisive. Divisive not because they are committed Stalinists, but because many believe that condemning the crimes of the Soviet regime would demean them, or demean their parents and the older generations of true believers in Communism, darkening their memory and depriving them of something important.304

In his 2009 video blog, Medvedev spoke of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War as the people’s victory and not Stalin’s victory. Trudolyubov, however, highlights the difficulty of criticizing the past in Russia today and how such criticism appears to many as a condemnation of the lives of their parents and grandparents. Thus, a day that is meant for remembrance is forgotten or overlooked by many.

Although Medvedev has spoken out about the need to remember the dark pages of Russia’s past and the importance of building memorials and museums,

Russia still has no national museum that commemorates the Stalinist era; only private and regional museums exist. In 2009, Medvedev signed an initiative from Memorial that would create the first national museum. The museum is to be located outside of St. Petersburg in the Kovalevsky Forest where thousands of bodies, many still unearthed, of victims from the Bolshevik Terror lie. The Russian government has dragged its feet and work on the museum has not gone forward.

The concepts of remembering and dealing with the past have also entered the political arena with the Russian political party Yabloko issuing a resolution in 2009 entitled “Overcoming Stalinism and Bolshevism as a Condition for Modernizing Russia in the Twenty-First Century.” The resolution declared that

For our country, Stalinism is not yet distant history. In many respects, Stalinism remains the essence of the current system of state power….For too many people in the corridors of power, recognition of the criminal nature of the Stalin regime would mean that they, and the methods they use today, are also criminal and unconstitutional. Overcoming Stalinism means, above all, fundamental change in the current political regime and a start to building a state based on law.

Yabloko’s statement emphasizes the need for coherence and vitality in a historic narrative, which includes overcoming Stalinism to thus move forward and allow for modernization. Mikhail Gorbachev articulated a similar view to that of Yabloko when speaking in 2007 at a discussion about the Great Terror. Gorbachev emphasized that Stalin’s crimes cannot be whitewashed, “[w]e must remember those who suffered

305 Ibid.
307 Political Committee of the Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, "Overcoming Stalinism and Bolshevism as a Condition for Modernizing Russia in the Twenty-First Century," (2009), 84.
because it is a lesson for all of us—a lesson that many have not learned. It is impossible to live in the present or build long-term plans for the future if the disease of forgetfulness afflicts the country and society, or at least sections of it.”

From the Kremlin’s perspective, a coherent narrative of Stalin is needed to move forward and modernize, but not one that overcomes Stalinism or deals with it directly.

**Looking to the Future**

The goal of this work was to examine the complex role of history in the post-Soviet Russian state by looking at how the historical narrative has been shaped in the 20 years since Russian independence. In particular, it emphasized the developments in discussions and policies about history in the past decade, under President Putin and President Medvedev. Kathleen Smith’s *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics & Memory During the Yeltsin Era* provided an excellent examination of the Yeltsin era and the problems encountered in the first decade of independence. The objective of this work was to continue a similar examination of the next decade of historical debates. Many articles have addressed sections of this work, such as holidays and the falsification committee, but the objective of this thesis was to synthesize debates about history from the public sphere of everyday life with holidays up to the political sphere with a governmental committee concerned with historical falsifications.

Changes in the approach to the historical narrative have been evident through the administrations of Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev. The Yeltsin administration had to grapple with economic instability. Thus, for the first half of the 1990s, the

---

308 Quoted in Banerji, *Writing history in the Soviet Union: making the past work*, xx.
historical narrative was a peripheral issue. In the second half of the 1990s, President Yeltsin struggled to find a base for the new Russian historical narrative with the “idea for Russia” contest and the funeral of the Romanovs. Yeltsin portrayed reconciliation and forgiveness as conditions for moving forward. In addition, the Yeltsin era featured a plurality of opinions in textbooks and a desire to debate and discuss the past from different perspectives. When Putin ascended the presidency, all of this changed. A clear historical narrative was laid out prominently featuring the Soviet, and therefore Russian, victory in World War II. Putin moved to create a single version of history so that students across Russia would learn the same facts in school textbooks. Putin’s handpicked replacement, Dmitry Medvedev, continued down the path laid out by his predecessor by moving into the legal field to safeguard Russian history. Medvedev has continued using rhetoric that glorifies Russia’s great sacrifices with the victory in World War II.

At the same time, in the past year, the Russian government has moved to address certain dark pages of its past. In 2010, the Duma approved a statement holding Stalin and Soviet leaders responsible for the Katyn massacre, with the objective that this admission of guilt would bring Russia and Poland closer together. The Katyn case illustrates that when evidence is overwhelming and international relations can be hampered by history, the Russian government will act. Additionally, 2010 brought the announcement that an abridged version of Aleksandr Solzhenitsy’s *The Gulag Archipelago* will be issued to schools across Russia. The small printing, however, raises the question of how many students will be exposed to the seminal work. Also, the abridged version could be problematic if important sections are left
out. Both of these government actions, however, can be seen as steps forward in dealing with the difficult pages of Russia’s past.

While the Russian government moves a step forward with attempts to deal with the dark pages of the country’s history, they simultaneously, move a step back with the recent creation of “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History.” The creation of the Commission gave rise to more questions over Russia’s historical narrative. What does the falsification committee mean for the future? How, for example, will falsification be defined?

Russia has continued to move forward and is, historically, already looking back to the early 1990s. The first statue to a post-Soviet leader, Boris Yeltsin, was erected in Yeltsin’s hometown of Yekaterinburg in February of 2011. The statue is significant because Yeltsin was the face of democracy in the early 1990s. President Medvedev attended the unveiling of the giant white obelisk which features Yeltsin’s face and figure, perhaps indicating an official shift to view Yeltsin in a more positive light as the first president of a democratic Russia as a opposed to the leader who presided over economic crisis and theft.\(^3\) The next presidential election will take place in 2012 and many political scientists, journalists, and historians are speculating whether Medvedev will remain for another term or whether Prime Minister Putin will want to return to the post of president and what this will mean for democracy, development, and history in Russia.

A February 2011 meeting of the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights focused discussion on commemorating the victims of totalitarianism and on national reconciliation. The group wrote “[w]ithout development of social

\(^3\) Daniel Sandford, “Russia’s Medvedev unveils Boris Yeltsin statue,” BBC, February 1, 2011.
consciousness of the tragic experience of Russia in the 20th century, it is impossible to move Russian society towards real modernization. The group emphasized that all of Russian society, from elites to regular citizens, must be involved in this process. To do this, the group suggested sweeping changes: installing more monuments, constructing two national museums, involving Russian youth and the international community, reworking school textbooks and curriculum, declassifying archives, having the Russian president annually address the nation on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression, and reworking National Unity Day into a Day of Remembrance of civil war and reconciliation. The Council noted that Russian identity should not be tied to 1917 but must look into the deeper past of Russian history,

Russian identity must finally be based on the fact that Russia’s history did not begin in 1917, that we are a country not of Lenin and Stalin, but a country and people of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Pasternak and Tchaikovsky…Alexander II, Stolypin, who made a huge contribution to the development and glory of the country and its culture.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has expended resources and time discussing how the past should now be written and they have yet to come to a consensus. The historical narrative is a work in progress. Historical revisionism akin to that which took place during the Soviet era is unlikely. However, the expression that Russia is a country with an unpredictable past still remains true as the Russian government continues to evaluate and reevaluate the past, confronting some dark pages while overlooking others.

Bibliography


Gerber, Theodore P. and Sarah Mendelson. “Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to


Lithuania, Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of.


——. “Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories.” In Video Blog, President of Russia Official Web Portal, 2009. February 14, 2011.


Russia, President of. “The Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s


http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Again_Demonstrates_Its_Past_Is_Unpredictable/1293374.html. March 8, 2011.


