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**The Politicisation of History
in the Russian Federation**

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Key Points

* The leadership has become especially concerned in 2008 that foreign powers, particularly in the former Soviet Union, are using history as a political weapon as part of an ideological assault against the Russian Federation.

* The Russian leadership desires to see the teaching of a more “patriotic” version of Russian history in Russian educational establishments. This applies particularly to the recent past. The leadership has called for new textbooks to reflect this line.

* There has been a partial re-Sovietisation in the interpretation of some aspects of the history of the USSR.

* If this trend prevails, the future Russian political class may become less aware of the “blank spots” in Soviet history; this could contribute to the development of a more nationalist outlook.

The Politicisation of History in the Russian Federation

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*Whoever owns history, owns contemporary policy.*¹

During the pre-Gorbachev period, the teaching of Soviet history in Soviet educational establishments reflected the line of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the history of the Soviet Union was depicted as a dazzling success story. The excesses of the Stalin era, for example, were usually never mentioned or treated in a way that distorted reality. The aim of the teaching of Soviet history was to help develop a sense of Soviet patriotism.

The development of glasnost during the Gorbachev era resulted in a more objective approach to the study of the history of the USSR. Many of the so-called “blank spots” in Soviet history were examined and discussed after March 1985.² By the time the USSR ceased to exist in December 1991, there were no longer any ideological limitations on what could be discussed. All the “blank spots” could now be written about.

The Putin period in post-Soviet Russia has seen the consolidation of the Russian state and political system, and a reversal of the centrifugalism that took place under Yeltsin in the 1990s. This has been accompanied by a more assertive nationalist tone by the Russian leadership, particularly when commenting on foreign affairs, as seen for example in Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.

These developments have in the last few years been accompanied by a desire to use the teaching of history in Russian educational establishments to promote a sense of national identity. This can be seen in comments made by Vladimir Putin to history teachers in November 2003, just before the Duma election that year:

*It is good that we have a large diversity of literature of this kind. I think that we can be glad that we have left behind the single-party and single ideological interpretation of the history of our country. This is a major achievement, but I think you will agree that we should not go to the other extreme. Modern textbooks, especially textbooks for schools and institutions of higher education, should not become a platform for a new political and ideological struggle. These textbooks should really present historical facts; they should inspire, especially among young people, a feeling of pride for their own history and for their country.*³

Just before Putin made these comments, the Ministry of Education removed its recommendation from a history book by Igor Dulotsky, entitled *National History of the 20th Century for Year 10-11 Students*. This book quoted opposition figures who described contemporary Russia as a police state.⁴

In June 2007 the Russian president returned to the theme at a meeting with delegates from a conference of teachers of humanities and social sciences. He stated that he saw the development of these disciplines as an essential part of the process of strengthening and developing Russia. He complained that there were no adequate historical studies of the contemporary era (i.e. post-1999) of Russian history. He called for a system of grants to encourage scholars to write a range of new social-science textbooks, criticising textbooks written by those financed by foreign grants.⁵ He again emphasised that he did not favour a “standardisation of thinking” and advocated that history textbooks should reflect diverse interpretations and should not seek to impose their viewpoints.

He then went on to argue against an excessive emphasis on the black pages of Soviet history:

Regarding the problematic pages in our history, yes, we do have them, as does any state. We have fewer such pages than do some countries, and they are less terrible than in some countries. We do have bleak chapters in our history; just look at events starting from 1937. And we should not forget these moments of our past. But other countries have also known their bleak and terrible moments. In any event, we have never used nuclear weapons against civilians, and we have never dumped chemicals on thousands of kilometres of land or dropped more bombs on a tiny country than were dropped during the entire Second World War, as was the case in Vietnam. We have not had such bleak pages as was the case of Nazism, for example.

All states and peoples have had their ups and downs through history. We must not allow others to impose a feeling of guilt on us. We should each first look to ourselves. But at the same time, we must not forget our own past and we will not forget it. Through all of this, our priority is that the most important principle and the foundation of our state's and society's organisation is to respond to the needs and demands of our citizens, to foster their development and ensure their protection. Democracy is the means by which we will organise our society and state.⁶

Putin clearly does not call for ignoring the “bleak chapters” of Soviet history. In this respect his comments differ from the criticisms of the uncovering of the blank spots of Soviet history made by Communist hardliner Nina Andreeva in March 1988 and by Yegor Ligachev, one of the main anti-reformers in the Soviet leadership at the 19th CPSU Conference in July 1988.⁷ However his coded reference to the USA's use of atomic weapons against Japan in 1945 and its bombing of Vietnam is more controversial, as it gives the impression that he wishes to use history as a weapon in an ideological struggle with the USA. Just one month earlier, on the celebration of Victory Day in May 2007, he made a speech in which many consider that he obliquely compared US foreign policy to that of Nazi Germany.⁸ Some might argue that this comment indicates that Putin is engaging in Soviet-type historical distortion.

There is, however, a strong opinion developing in the Russian leadership that Soviet/Russian history is being distorted by foreign media, and that Russian historians should respond. History is thus becoming a political weapon to justify parts of Russia's Soviet past and to legitimise the contemporary Russian state and leadership. In March 2008, first deputy prime minister Sergey Ivanov stated:

Recently, in connection with preparation for Victory Day celebrations, the anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, the 200th anniversary of Russia's victory in the Battle of Borodino and the 300th anniversary of Russia's victory in the Battle of Poltava, the mass media in European states, primarily in Eastern European states and our neighbours, our CIS partners, has released an increasing number of materials that distort military history, and distort the role of Russia and the Soviet Union in the battles I have mentioned. We understand what these attempts are aimed at and why this is being done. We should refute these attempts with facts in our hands, calmly and competently.⁹

This was followed by a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

It was noted that at a time when certain foreign partners are trying to turn history into an instrument for politico-ideological confrontation and deterring Russia the task of defending historical truth and countering the politicization of historical themes in a consistent manner is turning into our foreign policy priority...It has been judged necessary to step up work carried out in this regard by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and its foreign establishments, make it more systemic and assertive and to shift the debate of difficult issues concerning common history towards joint establishment of facts by scientists.¹⁰

Both these statements are reminiscent of Soviet era statements attacking western historians for falsifying history as part of the anti-communist ideological assault against the Soviet Union.

One of the most significant developments in current Russian historiography is the treatment of the Putin era in the 2007 textbook *Noveyshaya Istoriya Rossii 1945-2006 [The Most Recent History of Russia...]*, by Aleksandr Filippov.¹¹ This book is intended as a guide for teachers of history in Russian schools. The book minimises the repression of the Stalinist period. It praises Stalin's success in establishing the USSR as a major power whilst failing to acknowledge in any significant way the human costs this achievement entailed. By contrast Mikhail Gorbachev is described as having a limitless love of power.¹² Why he should be more guilty of this shortcoming than his more authoritarian predecessors is not made clear by Filippov.

The book has been criticised for being an excessively positive assessment of the Putin era. Whereas criticisms are made of every other era of post-1945 Soviet/Russian history, the chapter on Putin is devoid of any negative assessment. Arguments put forward by other commentators that the Putin era has seen a shift towards greater authoritarianism, and that its human rights record and its policy towards Chechnya since January 2000 are questionable, are ignored. The Kremlin's line on the arrest of former Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky is accepted without question. The Putin period is simply seen as a success story.¹³ Another textbook, *Obshchestvoznaniye (Social Knowledge)*, edited by L.V. Polyakov, states that "the regime of sovereign democracy is the ideal form of action of any political system".¹⁴ The significance of this statement is that "sovereign democracy" is the concept used by the Putin leadership to justify its domination of the Russian political system.¹⁵ This statement is similar to statements made in the Soviet era about the superiority and universal validity of the Soviet system. At the meeting Putin had with teachers of history and social sciences in June 2007, Polyakov, who holds the Chair of general political science at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, stated:

*We are developing a national ideology that represents the vision of ourselves as a nation, as Russians, a vision of our own identity and of the world around us. Teachers will then be able to incorporate this national ideology, this vision, into their practical work in a normal way and use it to develop a civic and patriotic position.*¹⁶

An interesting case of how history is being rewritten is the partial revival of the old pre-Gorbachev interpretation of the Katyn forest massacre. This was the massacre of several thousand Polish officers in a forest in the western Soviet Union in 1940. In April 1943 German forces came across the mass graves in Katyn and revealed the information to the world. Moscow denied responsibility and claimed that the massacre had been carried out by German forces. This was the line taken by the Soviet leadership and promulgated by Soviet historians until 1990, when Mikhail Gorbachev admitted Soviet involvement in the affair. In 1992 the Yeltsin leadership handed over documents relating to the massacre to then Polish President Lech Walesa. In 1993 Yeltsin promised that those who were responsible for the atrocity who were still alive would be punished and that reparations would be paid. A 1994 book by a Russian historian described the Katyn massacre as a crime against humanity.¹⁷

It was therefore quite remarkable when an article was published in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (a government newspaper) in September 2007 casting doubt on the view that the NKVD was responsible for the Katyn massacre.¹⁸ This has since been repeated elsewhere in the Russian press.

Differing Russian and Ukrainian interpretations of the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s also indicate the use of history as a political weapon. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko stated in October 2007 that the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 would be commemorated in 2008. The Russian leadership has no intention of remembering this event, and in March 2008, Valery Loshchinin, the head of the Russian delegation to the UN Human Rights Council and permanent representative of Russia at the UN office and other international organizations in Geneva said that Russia is against recognizing the famine in 1932-33 in Ukraine as genocide. The Ukrainian parliament had passed a resolution in November 2006 stating that the famine (Holodomor) was an act of genocide.¹⁹ The Russian Federation refuses to accept the Holodomor was a case of genocide, this has become a topical issue, as in April 2008 foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, in a speech to the Duma argued that the use of the term genocide was being used in Ukraine as a "political matter aimed against Russian interests". In commenting about the rewriting of history in various former Soviet states, Lavrov stated: "However, in a whole number of aspects there is a conscious attempt to rewrite history, which has consequences for practical politics, including claiming new territories from Russia, including claiming certain compensation from Russia".²⁰

There is also considerable disagreement - dating back to the Soviet era - with the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) over whether the period when the three states were part of the Soviet Union should be regarded as an "occupation" or not.²¹ In May 2005 Vladimir Putin rejected the notion that the Soviet Union had occupied these states in 1940. He instead used the expression that they had "entered" (*voshli v sostav*) the USSR. He noted that these territories had been transferred by Russia to Germany in 1918 and were then returned by Berlin to Moscow in 1939, when they entered the Soviet Union. He commented that "whether this was good or bad, such was history. It was a secret deal, the small states being a currency of exchange." This statement minimises the fact that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were independent states, and also plays down the fact that their incorporation into the Soviet Union was not voluntary.²² The Russian

Federation has yet to abrogate the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which cemented this deal between Nazi Germany and the USSR, and the Russian leadership has rejected any suggestions that it should.

A major Russian concern has been that if it were to acknowledge that these states were occupied, then it could result in demands for compensation. On the Baltic side it raises the fear that Moscow does not accept the legitimacy of their post-Soviet independence, and may therefore at some point in the future attempt to undermine their independence.

CONCLUSION

In many respects it can be argued that a partial and limited re-Sovietization of history is taking place in the Russian Federation. This appears connected with a desire to legitimise some of the more negative aspects of the Soviet period. This in turn may be connected with a desire to legitimise a less pluralistic political regime, a more hegemonic foreign policy towards Russia's neighbours in the former Soviet Union, and a reversion to a more confrontational policy towards the USA and her European allies. If a partially re-Sovietized history starts to be taught in schools and other educational establishments (along with similar television programmes – a development which is already occurring), then future Russian generations may become significantly less aware of what used to be termed the “blank spots” in Soviet history.²³ This may well become a prominent feature of patriotic education in early 21st century Russia, and may help to shape a more statist, authoritarian outlook in both the future Russian political class and the populace as a whole.

Endnotes

¹ Sergey Lavrov, speech to Duma 2 April 2008.

http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/7c41daeeda986e1ec32574250026f72f?OpenDocument

² See R.W.Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989, and Alex Nove, *Glasnost' in action: cultural renaissance in Russia*, Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 37-102.

³ Vladimir Putin, Opening address at a meeting with history scholars, Moscow, Russian National Library, 27 November 2003

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http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2003/11/27/1829_type84779_56332.shtml

⁴ Mikhail Moshkin, 'Short Course of VVP,' *Vremya Novostey*, 22 June 2007. See also the interview with Dulotsky, 'History should be terrible,' *Novoe Vremya*, 21 December 2003. http://www.yabloko.ru/Publ/2003/2003_12/031217_novvr_history.html In 2003, he deputy minister of education, Viktor Bolotov, said that Dulotsky's book was prejudiced and biased in its interpretations.

⁵ Edward Lucas *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin menaces both Russia and the West*, London, Bloomsbury, 2008, p.141.

⁶ Excerpts from Transcript of Vladimir Putin's meeting with Participants in the National Russian Conference of Humanities and Social Sciences Teachers 21 June 2007.

http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2007/06/21/2137_type82917type84779_135471.shtml

⁷ See Davies, *op cit.*, pp.141-146 for discussion of Nina Andreeva, and pp.155-156 for a discussion of Ligachev's speech to the 19th CPSU Conference. The Nina Andreeva affair is further discussed in Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.172-175.

⁸ Putin stated: "We do not have the right to forget the causes of any war, which should be looked for in the mistakes and errors of peacetime. They are rooted in an ideology of confrontation and extremism. All the more so given that they are no less of a threat in our time. They are only transforming themselves, changing their form. And just as in the time of the Third Reich, these new threats contain the same contempt for human life, the same pretensions of world exclusivity and dictates."

RTR Rossiya, Moscow, 9 May 2007. From BBCM.

⁹ Zvezda TV, Moscow, 25 March 2008. From BBCM.

¹⁰ RIA Novosti news agency, 26 March 2008. From BBCM.

¹¹ A.V.Filippov, *Noveyshaya Istoriya Rossii 1945-2006*, Moscow, Prosveshchenie, 2007.

¹² Filippov, *op cit.*, p.358. Filippov refers to comments made about Gorbachev in the memoirs of Jack Matlock, who was US ambassador to the USSR during 1987-1991, and the memoirs of George Schultz, who was US Secretary of State 1982-1989. Filippov gives the impression that he accepts this assessment by them of Gorbachev. He writes: "Both diplomats noted the vulnerable point (*mesto*) of the new leader – a limitless love of power (*bezmernoie vlastoyubie*)."

¹³ Filippov argues that democratic reforms were systematized and completed during Putin's presidency, *ibid.*, pp.426-427.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Aleksandr Abramov 'Sovereign democracy in schools,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 31 October 2007.

¹⁵ Mark A. Smith, 'Sovereign Democracy: the ideology of Yedinaya Rossiya,' Conflict Studies Research Centre UK Defence Academy, Russian Series, 6/37. August 2006.

<http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/csdc/document-listings/russian/>

¹⁶ Excerpts from Transcript of Vladimir Putin's meeting with Participants in the National Russian Conference of Humanities and Social Sciences Teachers 21 June 2007.

http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2007/06/21/2137_type82917type84779_135471.shtml

¹⁷ N. Lebedeva, *Katyn: prestuplenie protiv chelovechestva /Katyn: A Crime Against Humanity/* (Moscow: Izdatel'skaia gruppa Progress: Kul'tura, 1994), cited by Benjamin B. Fisher, 'The Katyn Controversy: Stalin's Killing Field,' *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1999-2000. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art6.html>

¹⁸ The NKVD was the forerunner of the KGB. Aleksandr Sabov 'Land for Katyn - commentary' *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 18 September 2007.

http://community.livejournal.com/ru_katyn/12893.html . See also Edward Lucas, *op cit.*, p.145.

¹⁹ Viktor Yushchenko, 'Holodomor,' *Wall Street Journal*, 27 November 2007

<http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/8296.html>

²⁰ Speech by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov to the State Duma 2 April 2008.

http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/7c41daeeda986e1ec32574250026f72f?OpenDocument

²¹ Igor Dulotsky states that he used the term 'occupation' when discussing the incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR, and that this term was removed by the Ministry of Education. See his interview in *Novoe Vremya*, 21 December 2003.

http://www.yabloko.ru/Publ/2003/2003_12/031217_novvr_history.html

²² Vladimir Socor 'Kremlin assails Baltic states,' *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 2, Issue 93, 12 May 2005.

http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=407&issue_id=3331&article_id=2369743 See also Edward Lucas, *op cit.*, p.150.

²³ See James Sherr, *Russia and the West: A Reassessment*, Shrivensham Papers, no. 6, January 2008, p.17, fn.33.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

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Pavel Felgenhauer, 'Kremlin rejects "foreign" approach to Russian history,' Eurasia Daily Monitor Vol. 4, No.125, 27 June 2007

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