

REVIVING THE PROPAGANDA STATE

How the Kremlin hijacked
history to survive

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The Issue

Western observers sometimes blame decisions by their own governments (such as NATO's expansion or the deployment of missile defenses in Eastern Europe) for the worsening of U.S.-Russia relations in recent years. Yet a closer examination of the record shows that the Kremlin's view of the West has long been hostile. Moreover, its conviction of the need to strengthen Russia's role on the international stage has remained relatively unchanged since the early days of President Vladimir Putin's rule. Underpinning those views has been a continuity of basic historical themes, which have become more pronounced over time. These include Russian national greatness and its "glorious victory" over fascism in World War II. The Kremlin has injected these narratives into a reimagined national consciousness to support its policies both at home and abroad.¹



The myth of the predatory West

Owing to his KGB background and dismay at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, among other factors, Putin has never been particularly fond of the United States, the democracies of Europe, or multilateral Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union.² In particular, he blames the West for the downfall of the USSR and exploiting Russian weakness in the 1990s. While still working in St. Petersburg during that period, according to some accounts,

Putin sometimes used tough anti-Western rhetoric reminiscent of his later 2007 “Munich speech” in meetings with Western representatives.³ Echoes of such suspicion can be found in Putin’s earliest public interviews, where he spoke about the need to restore Russia’s geopolitical might and establish a “multipolar world”—the latter a euphemism for reducing global U.S. influence.⁴

Putin’s belief in the importance of history became apparent as early as 2001, when the entire government was convened to analyze the content of textbooks and teacher’s books

on contemporary Russian history. The government directed that the “many negative descriptions that appeared in textbooks in the 1990s” be replaced by a vision of Russian history that promotes the strengthening of “patriotism, citizenship, national self-consciousness, and historical optimism.”⁵ Several national educational programs were adopted as result in subsequent years.⁶

Moreover, Putin believed Russia needed a pro-regime version of history. That is because he was convinced the United States was behind the color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine the following year, as well as the 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, according to Gleb Pavlowsky, who served as an adviser to the Presidential Administration during this time. (Pavlowsky took an active part in elaborating the new approach). Putin was concerned those events could lead to instability inside Russia that would threaten his own rule. Kremlin alarm was further heightened by the remarks of U.S. President George W. Bush, who predicted more such revolutions in countries like Belarus and

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supported U.S. initiatives in support of more popular movements against authoritarian regimes elsewhere.⁷

The color revolutions convinced Kremlin technologists that the regime lacked a strategy for youth mobilization, indoctrination or other symbols to counter similar trends in Russia. As result, Putin's chief political strategist, Vladislav Surkov, undertook an initiative to develop the political education program of Russia's youth and the

elites which also contained anti-revolutionary elements targeted against external enemies such as the United States or a worldwide conspiracy against Russia.⁸ The new campaign emphasized the concept of Russia as a "sovereign democracy," but was also designed to foster popular anti-Western sentiment through an increase in state propaganda, the creation of a youth movement ("Nashi") and repression of NGOs and human rights activists.

The new concept also made the correct use of Russian history a matter of vital national interest. By 2005, the standardization of education had become one of the four national projects overseen by Dmitry Medvedev, a key Putin ally and later Russian president. A National Security Strategy, developed later, warned against “attempts to revise the history of Russia, her role and place in world history...” which could negatively influence the country’s national security.⁹ Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky named Russia’s national interests the main “standard of the truth and reliability of historical work.”^{10,11,12} The new concept was

aimed at instilling pride among the younger generation and fostering patriotism.^{13,14} Common themes included the role of Eastern Orthodoxy in unifying the Russian people, and the vision of Russia as a “besieged fortress” historically under attack by the West. Pavlowsky describes Putin’s historical vision as “Thermidorian”—oriented toward countering revolution and at consolidating the Russian state.

In line with the new vision, a new teacher’s manual was created in 2007 by order of the Presidential Administration.¹⁵ Among other themes, the manual stressed



Russia's historical struggle to preserve its sovereignty against the predatory West. It also urged interpreting Stalin's repressions as a necessary evil, and portrayed the USSR's collapse as a tragic mistake that hindered Russia's progress.¹⁶ The manual was followed by publication of a controversial history textbook that explained Stalin's purges by "the requirements of modernization in a situation of scarce resources."^{17,18} In 2016, another set of history textbooks was published that were even more explicit in portraying Russia as rebuffing past assaults of the aggressive West—whether from 13th century Teutonic knights defeated by Russian Prince Alexander Nevsky, from German fascists, or, more recently, from "the U.S.-led united anti-Russian front aiming to punish Russia" for "defending" Ukraine.¹⁹ Interestingly, even the 1917 October Revolution is now often portrayed as being partly the product of Western interference. A 2017 series broadcast on state TV channels to mark the 100th anniversary of the Revolution emphasized that the Russian revolutionaries were backed by German financiers.²⁰

The glorification of Russia's past

The Kremlin's emphasis on the predatory West in its subversion of history coincided with its increasing whitewashing of the Soviet past. It is often forgotten that, immediately upon taking power, Putin started restoring Soviet symbols with Stalin's portraits on them.^{21,22} This was followed by the return of the Soviet anthem in late 2000 and the five-pointed star as a symbol of the Russian Army in 2002. These moves helped capitalize on Russia's post-imperial syndrome and Soviet nostalgia, but also reflected Putin's own attachment to the idea of Russian imperial power and his affinity for the idea of "useful history" that reinforced the centrality of the state.²³

In 2005, Putin described the collapse of the USSR as the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century and the biggest drama of

the Russian people.²⁵ Further reflection on this topic can be found in Putin's repetitive references to the so-called "brotherly" or "fraternal" people united by culture and language in other post-Soviet countries. Such language was reminiscent of the vocabulary of "fraternal assistance" the USSR used during its military invasions.²⁶ These statements preceded the later emergence of the Kremlin doctrine of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*), which described ethnic Russians in neighboring countries as living in a "divided nation" after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁷ While *Russkiy Mir* was created as a tool to justify Russia's responsibility to "protect" Russian-speaking communities outside its borders, this concept was a logical development of the Kremlin's vision of Russia as the largest "divided nation."^{28,29}

For the Kremlin, the key symbol of self-assertion against the West became the glorification of Russia's victory in World War II, which became the locus of Russian (and Soviet) history—the symbol of Russia's true historical meaning. Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov

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says this victory was interpreted as the triumph over not just Germany “but also over the West,” and transformed “the memory of the Victory into a power demonstration and a source of Russia’s moral right to dictate its will to others.”³⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, for example, wrote in 2016 that “the anti-Russian aspirations of the European elites and their desire to set off Hitler’s machine against the Soviet Union led to the Second World War; the catastrophe was rectified with the key participation of Russia...”³¹

Russia’s eventual World War II victory came to justify the policies and mistakes of the Russian/Soviet leadership in conducting it. The 2016 history textbook, for example, lacks any analysis of large losses or the Red Army’s retreat early in the war, which happened due to Stalin’s miscalculation. It only mentions that “the war broke out suddenly for the Soviet military units located along the borders.”³² Similarly, the war is portrayed as exclusively defensive; any references to the Soviet Union’s own war crimes like the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the Katyn massacre and the occupation

of Eastern European countries that followed the victory are mostly taboo.³³

In light of its reading of Russia’s history as largely unblemished, the Kremlin increasingly prosecutes those threatening to blacken the distorted image of Russia’s glorious past. In 2009, following repeated suggestions by Russian politicians to criminalize the “rehabilitation of Nazism,” then-President Dmitry Medvedev established a Commission of Historical Truth to combat the falsification of history.³⁵ The commission was then replaced by a 2014 law criminalizing the rehabilitation of Nazism and any activities critical of Soviet actions from 1939 to 1945.³⁶ Russia’s courts have interpreted the rehabilitation of Nazism broadly. For example, they have prosecuted people who criticize the pact Stalin signed with Hitler to divide Eastern Europe.³⁷ Since the law’s passage, about 15 people have been convicted.³⁸

Similarly, scholars and human right defenders who study these controversial historical episodes are increasingly subject to prosecution by the state. In 2016, Sergei

Mironenko, the long-time director of the Russian State Archive, was fired after the archive published formerly classified materials that cast doubt on the Soviet legend of “Panfilov’s 28 Guardsmen” (the Red Army’s heroic soldiers said to have died resisting a Nazi attack). Earlier in 2017, Yury Dmitriev, a Russian rights activist and historian of Stalin atrocities, was falsely accused of pedophile charges.³⁹ Dmitriev heads the northern Karelia regional branch of Memorial, a human rights group that researches Soviet repression. In 2016, Russia’s Justice Ministry designated Memorial itself a “foreign agent.”⁴⁰ In November 2017, a speech given before Germany’s parliament by Russian high-school student Nikolai Desyatnichenko—in which he stated that many of the German soldiers killed or captured at Stalingrad were “innocent men” who “wanted to live peacefully” and “didn’t want to fight”—sparked a public outcry in Russia. Complaints filed with state prosecutors, federal police, local school officials, and

Russia’s main security agency accused Desyatnichenko of making controversial statements and even trying to rehabilitate the memory of Nazi criminals.^{41,42}

The way the Kremlin uses history has several policy implications. First, the above analysis casts doubt on the widespread view that Russia justifiably viewed NATO expansion after the collapse of the USSR as provocative, and that it violated assurances given to Soviet leaders as the Cold War wound down. In reality, Putin’s view that the alliance was hostile likely predated the three Baltic states’ entry into the alliance, as well as the drive by former Soviet republics Georgia and Ukraine. Second, the hijacking of Russia’s history is more likely the result of Kremlin concern that the color revolutions could trigger a reaction inside the country that threaten the regime itself. If that is the case, one probably should expect Russia to remain an aggressive “Thermidorian” power as long as Putin remains its ruler.

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