

A PAST THAT DIVIDES: RUSSIA'S NEW OFFICIAL HISTORY

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In recent years, the Russian government has formulated a policy on the country's history (a historical policy) that aims to consolidate the nation around a single official version of the past. This state-led approach tends to glorify Russia's imperial legacy and encourage citizens to conform to an oversimplified historical account. However, because this single version of official collective memory is not acceptable to all citizens, this policy is causing divisions in Russian society.

AN INSTRUMENT OF CONTROL

When a government seeks to control history, it aims to control the people. Sometimes a state's official view of the past can serve as the basis for an unwritten social contract between a government and its citizens. This is what is happening in Russia today. President Vladimir Putin has introduced the idea of what he terms a "thousand-year history" that Russians must take pride in, a history that incorporates many victorious pages from the country's past, including Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014.¹ This glorious history is offered to citizens in exchange for their political loyalty, and it is presented as being more important than economic progress.

Putin's personal role has been critical to the formation of the state's perceptions of history.² He has determined, for example, how Russians should view past events like former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the Winter War with Finland. Putin decides why certain historical figures, such as the Russian monarchist phi-

losopher Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954) and the early-twentieth-century prime minister of the Russian Empire, Pyotr Stolypin, are deemed to be important. For instance, Putin ensured that Ilyin's remains were reinterred in Russia in 2005, and a statue of Stolypin was erected outside the Russian White House in 2012.

Russian state leaders and the country's military and bureaucratic classes have become the main drivers of the country's national discourse and policy about its past. Central to Putin's vision of history is the Soviet Union's 1945 victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War. The current regime, which calls itself the sole heir of this victory, uses this achievement to make itself immune to criticism on other issues while justifying its current militarization efforts and excessive state interference in all aspects of life. Russian official history is limited to the biographies of state and military leaders and to a series of victories and demonstrations of the state's enduring military might, with no room left for doubts or defeats. This means that free men and women, as citizens (not subjects), cannot be seen as participants

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Table 1. How Russia Views Its History

	Definitely proud	More proud than ashamed	Neither proud nor ashamed	More ashamed than proud	Definitely ashamed	Difficult to answer
The takeover of Crimea in 2014	54	25	14	2	1	5
The conquests of Siberia, the Far East, Kazakhstan and Central Asia, the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, Ukraine and Belarus, and Poland and Finland between the 15th and 19th centuries	45	31	13	2	1	8
Its Soviet history	45	33	14	2	1	4
Its participation in the war in Syria	13	23	34	10	5	16
The Soviet-Afghan War	8	12	34	22	11	14
The Chechen wars	7	10	36	23	10	13

Source: Levada Center

Survey Question: Do you think that Russia should be proud or ashamed of . . . ?

Table 2. How Russia Views the Era of Stalinist Repression

	August 2007	October 2012	March 2016
These acts of repression were politically necessary and historically justified	9	22	26
These acts of repression were political crimes and cannot be justified	72	51	45
I don't know anything about these acts of repression	N/A	6	8
Difficult to answer, refuse to answer	19	20	22

Source: Levada Center

Survey Question: Which of the following opinions about Stalinist repression do you most agree with?

Note: The August 2007 version of the survey did not include the answer option "I don't know anything about these acts of repression."

in history; rather, they can only serve as what might be termed electoral fodder for the grandeur of the state. This historical narrative is a means of fueling the legitimacy of Russia's current governing regime.

Against this backdrop, opinion polls reveal that history is a major criterion of self-identification for ordinary Russian citizens. Surveys conducted by the independent Levada Center show that, in recent years, the number of respondents who

list history among the key factors that instill a sense of pride in Russia has been consistently high. In 2015, "history" surpassed "Russia's natural resources" at the top of the list of reasons for Russian national pride and has remained consistently high (around 40 percent) since.³

The Russian leadership's dominant historical discourse is imperialistic, based on the concepts of conquest, militarism, and conservatism (after all, conquered territories must be kept

within the empire). As table 1 shows, in March 2016, 76 percent of survey respondents said that Russians should be proud of their country's imperial territorial acquisitions since the fifteenth century, even the country's nineteenth-century conquest of Poland and Finland.⁴ Just 3 percent believe that this imperial past is a cause for shame, and the same number are embarrassed by their country's Soviet history and the 2014 capture of Crimea. Some of the few aspects of Russian history that substantial numbers of respondents (roughly 33 percent) feel some level of shame about are the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Fewer (about 15 percent) display signs of embarrassment about the ongoing war in Syria.

This and other similar data seem to indicate that many Russians prefer what might be termed strong (that is, harsh or cruel) leaders and favor historical periods governed by such leaders. For example, according to the results of a December 2016 Levada Center survey, a plurality of Russian respondents (49 percent) believe that the medieval monarch Ivan the Terrible, who epitomized harsh rule, brought Russia more "good" than "bad," while only 13 percent felt the opposite was true.⁵ Predictably, then, a majority of respondents (53 percent) supported a proposal to construct a monument memorializing the czar, which was unveiled in the city of Orel in October 2016.⁶

This shows that Putin's vision of Russian history as a series of achievements to celebrate seems to resonate with a majority of citizens. And yet, there is a significant minority of citizens who are not prepared to accept this state-led account of the past and the social contract it represents.

STALIN'S SHADOW

In modern Russian history, the epitome of the strong man is Joseph Stalin. Today, the state tolerates admiration of Stalin, which is no longer an informal taboo as it was in the late-Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods. But the subject of Stalin divides the Russian nation like few others.

Perceptions of whether the Stalinist period did more good or more bad for Russia have changed significantly over the past two decades. During the twenty-two years that the Levada Center has been asking respondents about their opinions on this era, the number of people who express favorable views has risen from 18 percent in 1994 to 40 percent in 2016.⁷ The leap from

27 percent in 2012 to 40 percent in 2016 was especially striking. It is telling that this shift occurred during a period in which the screws of Russian domestic and foreign policy were being tightened, including through the takeover of Crimea, the resurgence of a sense of great-power status in Russia, and the Kremlin's legitimization of power by referencing glorious pages from the country's imperial history.

For many citizens, Stalin became an exemplary hero of Russian history, as only 38 percent of respondents had a negative view of his era in 2016.⁸ A greater number of Russians—54 percent in March 2016—regard Stalin as a figure who played at least a somewhat positive role in history. Roughly a quarter of respondents say Stalin's cruelty was "historically justified" and his persecutions were a "political necessity"—a number that has soared, rising by a striking 17 percentage points between 2007 and 2016; meanwhile, the number of those who condemn Stalin's actions has fallen from 72 percent to 45 percent (see table 2).⁹ The segment of the Russian public that accepts Stalin's actions remained stable during an April 2017 follow-up survey.¹⁰

Given this divide in public opinion, Russia's current governing regime sends out ambiguous signals about Stalin. A few years ago, it gave permission for a monument to be constructed in central Moscow to commemorate the victims of Stalin's repression.¹¹ This gesture was a concession to civil society, and this demonstrates that there is a certain permitted level of semi-official grief about this period. On the other hand, the current regime also signals a greater tolerance of the Stalin era in subtle ways that encourage grassroots Stalinist initiatives. For example, no one actually issues official orders to erect statues and busts of Stalin, but somehow volunteers in various cities choose to raise memorials to the despot. Meanwhile, for the current iteration of the Communist Party, Stalinization of the party discourse has become perhaps the sole means of self-identifying and of distinguishing their brand of patriotism from that of Putin and his official United Russia party.

Meanwhile, those who advocate more vigorous forms of de-Stalinization are being put under pressure. Memorial, a Moscow-based international human rights organization that has spent three decades perpetuating the memory of victims of political repression, has been branded as a "foreign agent" by the Russian government. This is a clear signal from the authorities that

those who try to preserve memories of state oppression are conducting anti-governmental activities. In some respects, this arguably makes today's leaders heirs of the Stalin regime. In April 2017, Russian Ministry of Education officials tried to prevent high school students who had won an annual historical essay contest that Memorial has conducted for many years from traveling to Moscow for the award ceremony on the grounds that Memorial is "banned" in Russia.¹² This was not only false; it also showed that a government ministry was willing to fight fiercely against anything that did not correspond to the state's official interpretation of history, and thus to the regime's unwritten ideology.

ANOTHER DIVIDING LINE

At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the period of liberalization in the 1990s, like the Stalinist period, has provoked divisions in Russia. Just as opinion polls show a measure of public approval for authoritarian rule, Levada Center polls indicate that many Russians also have a categorically negative view of the leaders who brought democratization and liberalization to Russia: Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.¹³

The societal divisions inspired by the immediate post-Soviet period of the 1990s reemerged in a recent conflict between Nikita Mikhalkov, a self-described patriotic film director, and the Yekaterinburg-based Yeltsin Center, a museum and educational center that commemorates the first president of independent Russia. Mikhalkov, who is known for his conservative views, has repeatedly criticized this institute for "distorting history" and "glorifying the period of the destruction of the Fatherland."¹⁴ Yet the Yeltsin Center is Russia's only museum that fully demonstrates the complex, contradictory nature of the historical role played by Russia's first president and covers the history of the 1990s in detail and in depth. The Yeltsin Center depicts the 1990s not as years of the collapse of an empire and its values, but as an era of the construction of a new state whose institutions and values are rooted in democracy and a liberalized economy.

This is where the main dividing line lies. To some Russians, the 1990s was an era of disintegration (the phrase "the tumultuous 1990s" has become a common term). To others, this period was an early stage in the establishment of a new state after an empire had exhausted its apparent potential. The public atti-

tude toward this period divides the nation no less than feelings about the Stalin era.

The issue of the 1990s is especially sensitive for the current regime. On the one hand, the government bases its image on a contrast between the supposedly dangerous, impoverished, and crime-ridden 1990s and the stable, prosperous Putin era. On the other hand, all the country's political and financial elites, including Putin himself, came out of the 1990s. After all, Putin's career took off under the wing of one of the iconic figures associated with perestroika in the early 1990s, then mayor of Saint Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak. Moreover, Putin was summoned to Moscow by the so-called Saint Petersburg liberals, who had long worked in government structures and had built the economic and administrative institutions of the new country through painful reforms. Ultimately, Putin was selected to serve as prime minister and later as president by the Yeltsin political family, and it was Yeltsin himself who personally handed over the scepter and the kingdom to Putin with the request that he take care of Russia.

These awkward facts explain the current regime's conflicted feelings about the 1990s. However, the Kremlin does not oppose the tendency to depict that period as an era of complete collapse, because without this historical window dressing the image of Putin as the savior of a nation pales. There can be no phoenix if there are no ashes.

TWO COMPETING TYPES OF MEMORY

Such divisions often stem from and feed into conflicts between official historical accounts and the unofficial recollections, or counter-memories, of private individuals. A report prepared by the Free Historical Society at the request of a civil society organization called the Committee of Civil Initiatives classifies these two approaches to conceptualizing history as "first memory" and "second memory."¹⁵ Official forms of collective memory keep history within the framework of the state's understanding. These forms are used to control society and define national historical rituals and other ways the state memorializes the past. School textbooks, for example, play a decisive role in official views of history. By contrast, personal and unofficial (including academic) conceptions of history may present versions of the past that could be described as democratic or liberal, as opposed to a conservative portrayal.

When it comes to major events like Russia's Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, the state cannot ignore—even if it might wish to—the multitude of families' and individuals' personal histories, so these accounts must be incorporated into official commemorative rituals. An example of such a state-led appropriation of private memories occurred with a 2011 grassroots initiative started by three journalists from the Russian city of Tomsk, which became known as the Immortal Regiment. This initially consisted of a march by relatives holding up portraits of family members who participated in World War II, an event that was not officially organized or sponsored by the state. The initiative has essentially remained of the people to a degree, but the regime has heavily exploited it. Putin started to participate in the marches, and pseudo-civic and Kremlin-controlled organizations like the Civic Chamber and the All-Russia People's Front have basically tried to appropriate the Immortal Regiment for their own purposes.¹⁶

In its official conception, Russia's commemoration of Victory Day in 1945 is only formally an occasion for collectively mourning for Russia's war dead. It has turned instead into an instrument for providing support to the most militarized, bellicose kind of Russian leader. According to this vision of history, war is not a calamity but a cause for celebration. These excessive propaganda efforts in which the government effectively nationalizes the Great Patriotic War often have the opposite effect to what is intended. Russian citizens tend to view May 9 as a major annual event, but many of them increasingly are skeptical of how it is celebrated as a state holiday rather than a people's holiday.¹⁷ Under the influence of the state, official conceptions of history are seeping into personal memories. The nuances of a particular family's history are no longer held to be so important. Many ordinary Russians seem to be coming to accept the conventional, official version of the war's history at face value and mold their personal memories around it. This sense of memory conformity has the same drivers as political conformity in an authoritarian regime: it is much easier and more expedient to stay in the mainstream.

The standoff between these two types of memories does not mean that personal memory precludes pride for one's country—quite the contrary. However, adherents of the state's official collective memory and adherents of individual citizens' unofficial counter-memory often have very different under-

standings about their country and about what constitutes patriotism.

Moscow's official collective memory also can collide with the national memories—and historical records—of other countries, sometimes complicating Russia's relations with them. One example of this relates to Russia's relations with Poland and the case of the Katyn Massacre of 1940, when Stalin's secret police murdered approximately 22,000 Polish officers and soldiers in a forest in western Russia.¹⁸ Moscow officially acknowledged the crime when Yeltsin was president, and in 2010 former president Dmitry Medvedev had archival documents confirming the guilt of the Soviet Union published on a government website.¹⁹

Yet a large segment of the Russian public still doubts the historical facts of the Katyn Massacre, which was blamed on the Nazis during the Soviet era. A 2011 Levada Center survey showed that 24 percent of respondents still believed that Hitler's forces executed Polish officers in Katyn Forest, and 42 percent said they did not know or did not have an opinion on this matter.²⁰ Hardliners have installed so-called information stands on the territory of the Katyn Memorial giving purported facts about the deaths of Red Army officers in Polish captivity in 1920, with inflated casualty numbers. The Katyn Massacre and the 1920 captivity have nothing to do with each other, but there is a political logic to linking them on the principle of an eye for an eye. The intended implication is that although Moscow (though this was Stalin, not the modern Russian regime) did execute the Polish officers, the Polish also allegedly killed many Red Army officers.

This historical obfuscation comes against a background of unprecedentedly poor attitudes of Russians toward Poland. In 2016, Poland rose to fourth place among the countries perceived to be Russia's adversaries, behind only the United States, Ukraine, and Turkey.²¹ As a result, many aspects of the history of Russian-Polish relations have become controversial, necessitating the setting up of a Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters.

SIMPLIFYING THE PAST

Amid these divisions, the current Russian regime does not welcome complex interpretations of history. Difficult questions

and reflections are left to those who are not willing to think in the vocabulary of official propaganda.

This tendency harkens back to the simplifications of Soviet days. On December 5, 1966, the Soviet poet, writer, and editor of the liberal *Novy Mir* literary magazine, Alexander Tvardovsky, recorded in his diary his thoughts about the Soviet method of memorializing past events, which involved simplifying and condensing them as much as possible. Tvardovsky recalled Stalin's brutal repression on the eve of the war with Germany. He wrote:

*"No other army in the world had ever, in any war, suffered such losses in its commanding ranks as our army did on the eve of the war and in part after the war. What does one do with this memory? . . . There is no doubt that those who perished on the eve of the war and during the war—but not at the frontlines, rather in the mad regime's prisons, camps, and torture chambers—also deserve to be remembered in the same way."*²²

Half a century has passed since this diary entry, and the Russian understanding of historical collective memory has come full circle back to the Brezhnev era, which began in 1964. The memoirs of Alexander Bovin, Brezhnev's favorite speechwriter in his early years as Soviet leader, contain a telling episode. Liberal-minded advisers of the Communist Party general secretary wanted to help Konstantin Simonov, a poet and most celebrated Soviet writer of the war era, get his 1941 diaries published. However, the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy, which defended the era's official version of history with full resolve, was adamantly opposed.

The writer was invited to meet Brezhnev. Yet despite a warm personal encounter between the two men, Brezhnev did not support the publication of the diaries. He explained that while he had seen even worse things during the war, the feelings of the victors must be protected. Brezhnev said something that conveys, in part, the attitude of today's elites toward interpreting the history of war: "We may have seen what we have seen, but the main truth is that we won. All other truths fade before it . . . The time will eventually come for your diaries."²³

The time for truth did come with the end of the Soviet Union, and it came faster than almost anyone anticipated. Yet, as

Brezhnev said, other truths continue to fade, and today's history of the war boils down to propagandist clichés that are insulting to those who fought in the war. The ruling elite have again nationalized historical memory, and the government's ideologists view any criticism of the regime as morally deplorable. The key idea—a fairly primitive device but an effective one—is that those who doubt the Russian political system undermine the country's shared victory.

AN IRRELEVANT REVOLUTION

Nearly one hundred years ago, the Soviet regime was born in the fires of the October 1917 Revolution. As a result, throughout the Soviet era, all revolutionary, freedom-loving phenomena related to the country's national liberation—including the period's romantic fervor in the arts—had positive connotations. This is one feature of the Soviet period that the Putin era cannot share, because the latter is, in essence, counterrevolutionary. In fact, many characteristics of the current Russian model of authoritarianism, such as its repressive nature and its crusade against anything that can be broadly interpreted as extremism, stem from the government's fear of color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the Ukrainian Maidan movement of 2013–2014.

The paradox is that, historically, Russia's current political regime was born out of a peaceful bourgeois revolution, the liberal political and economic reforms of the early 1990s. This dissonance shapes the regime's ambiguous relationship to the past. Although the current leadership ultimately hails from a revolution in the population's mindset, in the country's economic system, and in its political structures, the Kremlin is obsessed with its own self-preservation, and it cannot stand anything revolutionary.

This mentality determines, for example, the negative attitudes of Russian elites, including Putin himself, both toward Vladimir Lenin as a symbol of the 1917 revolution that in some ways points toward a very different period, the democratic revolutionary unrest and so-called chaos of the 1990s. In early 2016, Putin said of Lenin, "Letting your rule be guided by thoughts is right, but only when that idea leads to the right results, not like it did with Vladimir Ilyich . . . In the end that idea led to the fall of the Soviet Union." He went on to say, "There were many such ideas as providing regions with autonomy and others . . .

They planted an atomic bomb under the building that is called Russia which later exploded. We did not need a global revolution.”²⁴ Public attitudes toward Lenin are relatively positive. In a March 2017 survey, 56 percent of respondents agreed that Lenin played a positive role in history.

What is a major challenge for the Russian authorities in 2017 is that it is impossible for them to ignore the centenary of the October Revolution, but it is unclear how they should commemorate it. The only idea that the government and the Russian Orthodox Church have come up with is to frame ongoing societal divisions as a chance for reconciliation between revolutionary Reds and the opposing Whites—even though these categories from Russian history have no relevance in the present. The limitations of this approach are underscored by the state’s controversial announcement in January 2017 that it would seek to transfer the ownership of Saint Isaac’s Cathedral in Saint Petersburg to the Russian Orthodox Church, which some residents opposed. (The cathedral had been put under state control during the Soviet era and was transformed into a museum.) Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia tried to portray this development as an opportunity to achieve a measure of civic unity, saying, “the symbol of the reconciliation of our people . . . Consensus about returned churches should serve as the embodiment of consensus and mutual forgiveness between the Reds and the Whites, between the believers and the non-believers.”²⁵ Contrary to this sentiment, however, the situation involving Saint Isaac’s Cathedral actually caused a serious conflict that did not unite but polarized not only residents of Saint Petersburg but nearly the entire nation into camps of supporters and opponents of the decision. As a result, if the cathedral became a symbol of anything, it embodied a societal split rather than an instance of reconciliation.

As the cathedral controversy indicates, the Russian public’s views on the long-ago events of the October Revolution remain rather confused. On the one hand, the government that won World War II is a direct successor of 1917. On the other hand, the mindset of the average Russian today certainly is not Red. Generations of citizens that still have romanticized notions about the revolution are departing, and the number of respondents who believe that the first years after 1917 brought “more bad than good” consistently rises, growing by 10 percentage points between 1994 (38 percent) and 2016 (48 percent).²⁶

This ongoing and growing division explains the regime’s reluctance to take a strong position on the centenary of the October Revolution. From the state’s perspective, it is better to ignore than to commemorate it. Even the budget that pro-Kremlin organizations have garnered for celebrating the anniversary is fairly small, at only 50 million rubles (about \$860,000).²⁷

A POLISHED PAST AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

State historical narratives usually tend to select the official memories and memorials a given regime needs to affirm itself. The government polishes them up and exhibits them as objects for mass pride, exultation, vengeance, anger, and mourning. The official version of memory can be glamorized with marketing know-how and modern technologies, like the Bosco-themed ice rink in Red Square, and used to promote the supposedly correct vision of history. This process is like an old black-and-white film that is colorized and aired again on national television.

Some citizens of modern Russia can nourish in their hearts the myth of Stalin’s effective iron grip and get nostalgic about the period of lethargic calm under Brezhnev, but the period they value most is the present. Perhaps that is why Russians rate the era of Putin, who is seen to be the inheritor of all that is best in Russian history, as the most favorable era of all.²⁸

Yet the way collective memory is constructed in today’s Russia leaves no possibility for the country’s future development. Mass consciousness is reduced to a primitive state, whereby Russians are united only around archaic values. The official simplification of the past refuses to recognize the role of individuals as independent players in history, reserving this role for the state and its bureaucratic system, financial elites, and the military machine.

National identity is based, above all, on the experience of a common history but, in today’s Russia, the current model of national historical experience splits people up instead of bringing them together. As a result, in some sense, the Russian nation is no closer to developing its own modern identity. Moreover, Russia seems to be much further away from properly understanding its place in history than it was as a newly independent country in the 1990s.

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