

Overcoming the Totalitarian Past: Foreign Experience and Russian Problems

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Abstract

Russia's leaders are looking to the country's history to find ways to justify renewed imperial ambitions. While a study of foreign experience shows that there are numerous ways for a country to deal with its totalitarian past, the problem is complicated in the post-Communist context because politicians seek to use history as a tool for their own purposes. The YABLOKO party recently adopted a resolution dealing with the uses of history to stimulate democratic transition, but it so far has had no impact on Russian society.

Seeking a New National Identity in Russia

The discussion of how to evaluate the Soviet past is taking up an increasing share of public affairs in Russia. The reasons are numerous: shock from the results of the television show "The Name of Russia" (Stalin won third place in public voting for the greatest figure in Russian history), the discussion of "Stalin as an effective manager" in connection with Aleksandr Filippov's text book material *Modern History of Russia: 1945-2006*, and the broadcast of numerous pseudo-historic films on Russian television. In addition, President Dmitry Medvedev created a presidential Commission on Countering Attempts to Falsify History in a Manner that Damages Russian Interests, whose membership and tasks aroused concerns among many historians, human rights defenders, and politicians.

According to the president, the commission will fight falsifications of historical events "directed at depreciating the international prestige" of the country and to prepare recommendations for "an adequate response" to the attempts to falsify historical facts and "neutralize possible negative consequences." The membership of the commission – with the presidential chief of staff as the chair and representatives of the siloviki and politicians with nationalist and great power points of view – makes clear how they will identify cases of "falsification" and what the "adequate responses" will look like. The main objections to the creation of such a body are clear. Why should a group of people, among whom there are practically no professional historians, take responsibility for making, in the name of the government, "correct" or "incorrect" evaluations of various historical events? This is not only absurd since no one can have a monopoly on the truth, but dangerous because it inevitably arouses the next round of alarms and warnings from our neighbors.

The reason for the active and constant appeals to the past, whether consciously or unconsciously, can be

found in the tortured search for the foundation of a new national identity, a national idea. The renewed imperial ambitions of an "energy superpower" demand a form of legitimacy that justifies claims to dominance in the post-Soviet space and helps the population overcome its feelings of inferiority after the collapse of the USSR. It does not matter that this legitimacy is nothing but a mythological construction, strengthened by the mediatization of politics, within whose framework the real war in Georgia and a soccer game in Holland fit into the same category. While skipping over the problem of providing stability and the mechanism for legitimizing autocracy using artificially-created models defining its historic role, I would like to discuss the significance and complexity of evaluating the totalitarian and authoritarian past within the conditions of a democratic transformation.

Foreign Experience in Overcoming a Totalitarian Past

In the vast majority of post-totalitarian countries, the experience of rethinking the totalitarian past was a necessary part of the process of strengthening democratic institutions and democratic cultures. Special commissions – whether focused on conciliation or truth – in Latin America, South Africa, and Morocco actively drew a clear picture of the violation of human rights and the actions of the state's repressive agencies during the period of dictatorship. Additionally, the German experience of de-Nazification and "overcoming the past" serve as an example for Europe, including the former socialist countries.

The German historian Helmut König defines "overcoming the past" as a combination of action and knowledge on the base of which new democratic states relate to their predecessors, interpret the structural, personnel, and mental legacy of the totalitarian states, and evaluate their own compromised history in the country's

political culture. In Germany, overcoming the national-socialist past began with legal measures – punishing the guilty (including during the Nuremberg process), rehabilitating the victims of Nazism, and reevaluating the race-based laws. This process took several decades. Behind it stood historical research about national-socialism and in parallel there were personnel and ideological denazification, accompanied by a critical evaluation of the norms and values of the Nazi period. The measures adopted were inspired by the state authorities to show the broad public the anti-people character of the previous values and contrast them with democratic values. The entire process of “overcoming the past” was initiated by the Western allies, who sought through a law-based method to deal with past injustice, soften the suffering of the victims, reduce to a minimum the possibility of events repeating themselves, as well as understanding the reasons for why the crimes were committed and documenting them. Not only has this procedure yet to be completed, it has become an important part of the national and cultural self-identification of contemporary Germans.

Although the process of overcoming totalitarian pasts evolved differently in different countries, they all have several common features:

- After the abolition of the previous regime, particularly an ideologically-based dictatorship, the new state made clear to society that the previous state system was based, in principle, on correct ideas that were poorly realized. This was the case in Germany after 1945 and in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe after 1989.
- In the post-totalitarian countries there usually was a demand to complete the historical discussion about historical memory, reach closure about the past, and declare a moratorium on its interpretation. In Poland, for example, this course is associated with the so-called “thick line” [gruba kreśka] that the first democratic government of Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki insisted on. In defense of such an approach, its advocates usually refer to the need to preserve civil peace and the unity of national consciousness. Likewise they stress the need to build a radiant future after overcoming the dark past.
- Most frequently demands for a serious reevaluation of the past come from groups that were in opposition before the end of the old regime and that continue to seek a consistent rejection of the old institutions and traditions after the end of the dictatorship. Among their key demands are rehabilitation of

the victims, revealing the historical truth, and naming and punishing those responsible. All of these actions should be codified in a state act.

- One of the consequences of the destruction of an ideological regime is the exit of citizens into private life. They have no desire to participate in politics, which does not help in overcoming the past. While victims and executioners are still alive, their mutual dislike and efforts to push this issue to the periphery of social consciousness exists in the social conversation.

The cultural and historical peculiarities of specific countries and regions influence the forms, intensity, and depth of overcoming the past. In Japan, for example, the deeply rooted respect for elders complicates this process and in Latin America the corporatist structure of society, which envisions a strong role for the Catholic church, state patronage, and clients on the lowest level, hinders it.

On the basis of current political experience, it is possible to identify several typical reactions, characterizing state relations to the totalitarian past:

1. Ignore and remain silent – Spain after the Franco dictatorship and Russia after 1991.
2. Carry out political purges with extensive use of force in relation to collaborators – France and Yugoslavia after World War II.
3. Overcome the past through legal methods – Germany and Austria after WWII, lustration in the Czech Republic after 1989.
4. Amnesty and forgive people responsible for the crimes of the previous regime
5. Guarantee a compromise between legal investigations and political sanctions – South Africa after apartheid.
6. Compensate the victims of repression, including those living in other countries – Germany and Austria after 1945.

From the list above it is clear that some measures can be used together or can replace each other in different historical periods. Thus, in Spain after the death of Franco, at first there was a consolidating decision among all political forces to support a “pact of oblivion,” but a quarter of a century later it became clear that this did not heal the wounds of civil war and dictatorship. Therefore, today in Spanish society the time is ripe to provide answers to the questions of the past. In Argentina and Chile, on the other hand, at the beginning of the democratic path, commissions were created to study and evaluate the scale of political force used and the violation of human rights. They chose the path of remem-

bering and disclosure. In other countries such commissions did not tie memories and punishment to each other under the important condition that those guilty of crimes openly admitted their previous activity. If the former executioners did this, then they had a chance to avoid legal consequences; however, if they hid their actions, then a legal investigation might start. In the final case, the links “memory-punishment” and “oblivion-amnesty” were replaced by the tie linking memory with forgiveness. The exposure of criminals in this case does not lead to punishment; thereby encouraging public repentance. Such a choice is based on the conviction that for society rethinking the past is much more useful than punishing criminals. South Africa used this principle most completely after the end of apartheid.

Historical Memory and Communism

The countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe that took part in the last wave of democratic transformations have still not made their final choice in relation to the past and their approaches to it are constantly changing. The matter is complicated by the fact that national history in this region is often a political instrument used by the authorities of various states for their own legitimacy or to justify unfriendly or openly inimical acts against other peoples or countries. Regardless of whether the past is viewed positively or negatively, its evaluation forms a collective identity and the accompanying political loyalty. Therefore in the post-Communist world, memory is always a field for political competition.

This situation applies in particular to the post-Soviet space which has suffered a series of wars and dictatorships over the course of the last century. The peoples, living through the trial of Communism, lost and then regained their national independence, though each time in this process they suffered new insults and indignations. Each such nation has its own historical memory, which does not coincide with, and sometimes directly contracts the historical memory of neighbors. As a result in almost all of the countries of the “socialist camp” there are evaluations of the historical past making it possible to present one’s own trials exclusively as a result of other’s evil will. Under such an approach, the Communist dictatorship and its accompanying terror are presented as political instruments for national oppression. They prefer to ignore or forget the fact that a significant part of the “local” society everywhere supported the Communist regimes. As a result, they make historical-legal evaluations in a maximally one-sided manner, as evidenced by the use of the term “genocide”

in the political lexicon of numerous post-Communist countries to describe the recent past.

Russia traveled a particularly difficult path. Victory in the Great Fatherland War cannot be separated from the events that occurred before it or took place in parallel to it, particularly the massive repressions, the Stalin-Hitler pact, and the deportation of entire peoples. In present day Russia, instead of thinking about the history of the 20th century in all its completeness and tragedy, the Soviet great power patriotic myth has revived, presenting Russia’s history as a sequence of glorious and heroic accomplishments. In this myth there is no room for guilt or responsibility; its designers and propagators do not recognize the very fact of tragedy. Many Russian citizens are not in a position to more or less objectively evaluate the degree of the Soviet Union’s historical responsibility toward our current neighbors or the scale of the catastrophe that befell Russia. Rejecting the strength of memory and replacing it with a brightly colored, but primitivistically positive picture is for Russia no less of a social danger than cultivating national resentment is for its neighbors. As a result, history is becoming an instrument for achieving momentary political goals and a weapon in the hands of people who in essence have no interest in the national memories of other peoples, the tragedies that befell their own peoples, or the past in general.

In Russia’s social discourse, there are several well defined positions regarding history which are represented by well-defined political and social forces:

- Maximum openness and free discussion, represented by Memorial and several other human rights organizations, a part of academic society and society in general. They support discussing the most difficult historical topics without state dictates, including within the framework of international dialogue.
- The relativist position, according to which the events of the past can be considered arbitrarily and history serves as a type of raw material for all sorts of falsifications. According to this approach, “wasting strength on the arguments of the 20th century, you do not answer the challenges of the 21st century,” according to L. Radzikhovsky, writing in the official newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (June 2, 2009).
- The instrumental-preservationist position, most clearly represented by Presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Naryshkin, who announced that his Commission on countering falsifications of history will become an “organizational basis for guaranteeing the defense of our history from dishonest attempts to distort it.”

The first and so far only political party that has answered the question of how people should relate to the totalitarian Soviet past in the new Russia is the Russian United Democratic Party YABLOKO. On February 28, 2009, its Political Committee adopted an important decision entitled “Overcoming Stalinism and bolshevism as a condition for modernizing Russia in the 21st century.” Many experts and human rights defenders participated in preparing the document, including the author

of this article. In thinking about and developing this resolution, the Political Committee drew considerably on the already existing experience of other countries in overcoming the totalitarian past. The document elicited active discussion in the media, drawing committed supporters and ardent opponents. However, in general there have been no changes in the way that Russia relates to the past since the document was adopted.

About the Author

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Suggested Reading

- YABLOKO, “Преодоление сталинизма и большевизма как условие модернизации России в XXI веке [Overcoming Stalinism and bolshevism as a condition for modernizing Russia in the 21st century],” March 11, 2009, http://www.yabloko.ru/resheniya_politkomiteta/2009/03/11
- Имя России [The Name of Russia], <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/>
- «В демократическом обществе свобода истории – это свобода всех» [“In a democratic society, the freedom of history is freedom for all,”], <http://www.polit.ru/institutes/2009/06/01/let.html>
- An appeal from the International Memorial Society: “On national images of the past,” http://www.memo.ru/2008/03/27/Memorial_obrazy_proshlogo_Eng.htm
- “Нарышкин: Историческая комиссия не будет переписывать источники, [Naryshkin: The history commission will not rewrite the sources]” June 17, 2009, <http://www.grani.ru/Politics/Russia/m.152475.html>