

The Politics of the Past in Russia*

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Abstract

Active political intervention in the politics of memory and the professional historian's sphere began no later than in 2006 in Russia. Today all the basic elements of the politics of the past are present: attempts to inculcate in school a single, centrally-defined, politicized history textbook; the creation of special, politically-committed structures, which combine the tasks of organizing historical research and controlling the activities of archives and publishers; attempts to legislatively regulate historical interpretations; and, as is typical in such cases, efforts to legitimize and ideologically justify all of these practices.

The Origin of History Politics in the Post-Communist Space

In 2004 a group of Polish historians announced that Poland needed to develop and propagate its own politics of the past or history politics. They did not hide the fact that they borrowed the term *polityka historyczna* from the German *Geschichtspolitik*. Thus, the rapid political intervention into the politics of memory and domestic historical research in the post-Communist countries received a "name." As typically occurs with new phenomena, it is not easy to grasp and concisely describe the politics of the past, particularly since its practitioners make a conscious effort to hide its mechanisms and tasks.

The phenomenon of history politics is particularly powerful in the post-Communist societies, but the prominence of this issue is only partly explained by increased public interest in the history and "blank spots" left by the legacy of Communist censorship. The gist of the matter is that we are dealing with *post*-Communist societies, that is societies freed from previously tight forms of authoritarian ideological control. Strictly speaking, one should only apply the concept of history politics to democratic societies, or at least more or less pluralistic societies that recognize democratic values, including freedom of speech. Only in these conditions is there a form of politics that functions as a competition among various political actors, parties and points of view. In the authoritarian regimes of the Soviet type, the intervention of the authorities in the study of history and the politics of memory was based on the official presumption of an ideological monopoly, censorship, and administrative control over professional historiography.

In a society claiming to be democratic, all these mechanisms evolve. In contrast to the previous Communist party-state system, the group or party which holds power at a given time is no longer the same as the state. The social sphere becomes pluralistic and the authorities no longer seek to control it, particularly through repressive means. Schools become more pluralistic and history teachers, in keeping with educational standards, are free to choose their textbooks and interpretations of the events and processes studied. The historian, in his professional activities, should benefit from independence and intellectual freedom. Access to the archives should be equal to all and regulated by law rather than administrative decisions. State financed schools and research should not give the group or party currently in power the ability to dictate the contents of instruction and research since the funds are not party money, but the budget of the country, formed from the taxes of citizens. The political group currently in power cannot claim an ideological monopoly.

In these post-Communist conditions, where efforts to establish democratic practices are more or less successful, well organized political groups seek to establish a specific interpretation of historical events as the dominant version. In other words, using the administrative and financial resources of the state, the political groups in power ideologically indoctrinate society in the sphere of historical consciousness and collective memory. In particular, they focus on those historical events and processes for which there is no consensus in society and which are a topic of discussion.

To understand the phenomenon of history politics, one must know more than simply what is to be propagated. More important is to understand how it is done and what methods are used in this propaganda work. Contemporary history politics cannot fully return to the previous, Soviet methods and impose a single correct view, even if we supposed that in some cases there

* This is an abridged version of the article "Rossiya: vlast' i istoriya" by Alexey Miller. The article was originally published in *Pro et Contra* (Vol. 13. 2009. No 34. May–August). © 2009, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Reprinted with the kind permission of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

were people who wanted to do this and were forced to invent new methods of interfering in history and the politics of memory, and also new strategies for legitimizing this intervention.

New Mechanisms

What are these new methods? Institutionally, most important is the appearance of the Institutes of National Memory in Poland and Ukraine and the founding of similar organizations that have the same functions and principles in many other countries. Another example of the institutional dimension of the politics of the past is the creation of museums under the direct patronage of specific political groups. Typically, these institutions completely ignore the positions of political opponents.

Historical politics also appears at the legislative level, when parliaments adopt laws incorporating a specific interpretation of historical events as the single true version. Sometimes the drafts of these laws and even the eventual laws themselves set out criminal punishments for those who oppose such interpretations. This practice is characteristic not only for Eastern Europe, but also for the West.

Four Postulates

The ideological justification for employing history politics is based on four key postulates. First, history and memory are presented, above all, as an arena for political battle with foreign and domestic opponents. On this basis, it is possible to argue that history is “too important to leave to the historians.” This approach assumes that historians do not consider the principles of professional ethics obligatory and suggests that they, as rank-and-file fighters on the ideological front, should be placed under the oversight of more “sophisticated” and “patriotic” people.

Second, the practitioners of the politics of the past claim that “everyone does it,” thereby justifying in the eyes of society an obvious violation of the principles of social science used in democratic conditions. They implement this effort by limiting historians’ freedom to speak out, pushing inconvenient views to the fringe of the media, and changing the principles of financial support. For example, instead of distributing grants for research through a system controlled by the scientific community, they hand out money to projects carried out by direct political orders.

Third, they assert that a foreign enemy diligently seeks to spread an interpretation of past events that is harmful to the fatherland. Therefore the duty of historians is to come together in countering the danger, usu-

ally by preparing a strong counter-argument: wherever they say yes, we say no, and vice versa. As a result, the space for dialogue in the country is destroyed since all are required to swear an oath to the official postulate.

The same happens in relation to the external world: supporters of historical politics on both sides of the border engage each other in skirmishes. Since neither side seeks to convince or understand his opponent, such “discussions” can only generate conflict.

Fourth, a further justification for history politics is the supposedly shameful low level of patriotism and history instruction in the schools. For this reason, they propose (temporarily) to sacrifice pluralism in textbooks and concepts so that “children learn at least the most basic things.”

In fact, social interests are only a cover and the true goals of the politics of the past have a political and partisan character.

How It Works in Russia

In Russia, the active political intervention in history began several years ago, a little later than in many neighboring countries and partially bore a reactive character. Apparently, the team which worked on the so-called Filippov textbook – in fact we are talking about a set of textbooks and teaching aids for the history of the 20th century – was gathered together and received its orders in 2006.

The book produced by Filippov and his coauthors teaches patriotism as loyalty not to the state, but to the authorities. The sins of the latter are explained for the most part by the difficult international situation and the need to mobilize. In essence, this discourse by today’s ruling elite is strikingly similar to the Soviet post-Stalinist narrative without the Communist rhetoric. The last chapter of Filippov’s teaching aid is entitled “Sovereign Democracy” (without quotation marks in the book). This term is not defined as an ideological concept developed by one of Russia’s political parties, as it is in reality. Rather, “sovereign democracy” is used as an objective description of the contemporary political regime in Russia, which has overseen, as the material explains, the successful development of the country during the last ten years. Danilov’s textbook does the same thing.

However, the question of whether the version of events in this textbook is convincing is not our main topic. With a wide choice of textbooks, this one would have the right to exist. While the starting point for Filippov-Danilov is rejecting the concept of totalitarianism, a number of other textbooks use this concept.

Danilov's textbook immediately after it was ready was published with a print run of 250,000 copies. For comparison, other textbooks are published today with print runs of 10,000, maximum 15,000 copies, and some only have 5,000 copies. A print run of 250,000 is a political decision; no publisher would print so many books at its own risk if it is guided only by commercial considerations. The publisher "Prosveshchenie" ("Enlightenment") clearly must have received an advance and guarantees that there would be enough demand to buy that many books. Providing such an advance and using administrative levers to successfully "introduce" the textbook as the "correct one" is historical politics in its purest form.

Russia has also seen efforts to regulate historical questions with the help of legislation, a typical practice of history politics. The first official to speak about the need to adopt a law threatening legal consequences for "incorrect" statements about the history of World War II and the USSR's role in it was Emergency Response Minister Sergei Shoigu, one of the leaders of the United Russia party, in the winter of 2009. Today the Duma is considering two bills developing these ideas.

Another example of the Russian version of historical politics is President Medvedev's decree, promulgated in May 2009, creating a presidential Commission on Countering Attempts to Falsify History in a Manner that Damages Russian Interests. The commission is an instrument of history politics although it has clear structural and functional differences from, for example, the Polish Institute of National Memory.

There are several reasons for these differences. First, in contrast to Poland, the contemporary security services in Russia are direct descendants of the security services of the Soviet era. As a result, in Russia the security services did not lose control of the archives from the Soviet regime. The membership of the Russian commission, which includes several representatives of the special services, makes clear that they want to preserve the status quo in Russia regarding access to the archives. Currently, the law on unclassifying documents after a period of thirty years simply is not implemented. According to this law, all documents of this age should be automatically declassified and researchers should have access to them. Only special decisions can preserve the secret classification on specific documents. By contrast, in Russia

there is a practice in which each document is declassified by special agency commissions. This practice will continue in the future and access to the documents will be provided only to select researchers, working on projects defined from above. It is possible that institutional archivists could make a selection of documents or even excerpts from them on appropriate topics for these privileged researchers.

Second in the Russian version of the politics of past there was clearly a decision that both research and publishing functions would be concentrated in several institutions and centers. In both cases, the institutions were not chosen for their academic reputation, but for their ability to conduct effective political campaigns.

Conclusion

Thus it is possible to find all the key elements of the politics of the past approach without difficulty in the Russian practice of recent years. First, there is a clear attempt to inculcate in school a politically and centrally-defined history textbook. Second, there are special, politically-committed structures, which combine the tasks of organizing historical research and controlling the activities of archives and publishers. Third, there are clear attempts to define historical interpretations of key events through legislation. And, finally, as is typical in such cases, there are efforts to legitimize and ideologically justify all of the practices listed above. As in the majority of neighboring countries, the sharpest features of history politics are for domestic consumption. If in Russia the historical politics of neighbors arouses, with complete justification, contempt and indignation, then the masterminds and organizers of our history politics can hardly expect the reaction to the fruits of their labor to be any different abroad! By following the path of historical politics trod by its neighbors, Russia only promotes a hardening of the "dialogue of the deaf" atmosphere which increasingly defines the discussion of questions regarding the recent past.

The destructive consequences of historical politics inside Russia possibly are more serious than in other countries. The reason is that the potential for society and the community of historians to counter the politics of the past is smaller in a society where the elements of pluralism and democracy are weaker.

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