



Russia: history as myth?

by Cameron Johnston

On 31 October, the world learned that a branch of the Russian National Security Council (NSC) has been discussing how to combat the ‘falsification of history’ in the run-up to the centenary of the October Revolution in 2017. It was a striking, but not wholly surprising, demonstration of the importance of history to the Russian security services.

Russian military doctrine states that the falsification of history is one element in the wider information war between Russia and the West. Western states are supposedly distorting the past in an attempt to exert psychological influence over the Russian people and weaken their will to resist. The Kremlin responds by promoting historical narratives designed to reinforce Russian patriotism, regardless of their truthfulness, while suppressing facts or interpretations that challenge these shibboleths.

It thereby hopes to achieve two goals: to propagate a black-and-white version of the past that it can deploy in foreign policy and, more importantly, to minimise the chances of domestic unrest by inhibiting freedom of thought.

As the story goes...

Russian history, the NSC participants claimed, is under assault. It has become ‘the target of...destructive measures by foreign state structures...satisfying geopolitical interests by carrying out anti-Russian policies’. Six periods or events were being particularly maligned, they complained, including

Russia’s role in the victory over fascism. What was needed, then, was a state strategy to combat distortions – insisted the General Staff, which delivered the main report.

That the abuse of history by foreign powers should assume such importance for the Russian state is hardly a surprise. Official doctrine has classified it as a threat since 2015. Point 21 of the National Security Strategy (2015) states that other countries are increasingly using IT to manipulate public consciousness and falsify history, while the Draft Information Security Doctrine (2016, point 12) notes that they are trying to ‘undermine the historical foundations’ of the Russian people.

Thus, gaining public acceptance for a particular historical narrative is part of a wider information war between Russia and the West, as states exploit the permeable borders of the modern world to reach foreign peoples with their messages. This is not to be scoffed at. Consider the views of S. A. Bogdanov, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Military Strategic Studies within the General Staff, who claims that, in future wars, the ‘leading role will be played by information-psychological struggle’.

The subliminal implication of this type of thinking is that historians only advance arguments about the past because they are serving a particular interest in the present. Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky has said this explicitly: ‘If you like your

motherland, your people, your history, what you will be writing will always be positive'. In his view, history is not about facts or truths but about useful myths. 'The facts themselves don't mean much... in the historical mythology they do not mean anything... Everything begins not with facts but with interpretations'. What matters for Medinsky – who, incidentally, has been accused of plagiarising his doctoral dissertation – is the end, the purpose that historical narratives serve.

Freed from the constraints of scholarship, the Kremlin is therefore at liberty to make claims that bear little or no relation to the truth. President Putin, for instance, was recently pictured watching the film *Panfilov's Men* with Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev. It tells the heroic story of 28 Soviet soldiers who gave their lives to slow down the Nazis' assault on Moscow in 1941. But the story is just a myth. An official investigation conducted in 1948 found that the story had been invented by an over-imaginative journalist. This has not stopped Medinsky, however, from calling anyone who questions the myth 'scum'.

Those who do not join in the myth-making face persecution. The Perm-36 Gulag Museum, the only museum in Russia ever to have been built on the site of a real camp, was forced to close in 2015 after the local authorities reportedly cut off its electricity and water supply. Likewise, the international branch of Memorial, an NGO founded to keep alive the memory of political repression, was branded a 'foreign agent' this year. Historians who do not toe the line can be silenced. Historian Andrey Zubov was fired from Russia's most prestigious university after comparing the annexation of Crimea to the Anschluss of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938.

Ideally, the narrative line should be straight and there should only be one of them. In 2013, the government resolved to create a single series of school textbooks that would 'eliminate the possibility of internal contradictions...and mutually exclusive interpretations of historical events'. So important were the textbooks deemed to be that their drafting was overseen by the then Head of the Presidential Administration, Sergey Naryshkin. Although the series was never fully realised, it lives on in attempts to create a single thread of history that permits no deviation. Any wavering can be punished under increasingly draconian legislation on extremism and the rehabilitation of Nazism. In June 2016, for instance, a resident of Perm was fined 200,000 roubles (around six months' wages) for reposting an article online that was found to contain 'deliberately false facts' about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939.

Truth to power and the power of truth

Why this crackdown on free thinking, so reminiscent of Brezhnev's campaign against 'ideological subversion' in the 1970s? One explanation is that it serves Russia's foreign policy interests. If people at home and well-wishers abroad can be united around a Manichaean vision of good versus evil, it may be easier for the Kremlin to intervene abroad.

But a more important explanation lies closer to home. The Russian elite are acutely anxious about the possibility of a popular 'colour' revolution leading to a coup that sweeps them from power. A member of staff at the People's Friendship University of Moscow recently revealed that he had been covertly touring around Russian universities to gauge the 'protest potential' of teachers and staff before sending reports in to the government. Russia's leaders know that falling standards of living have the potential to ignite popular protest and they are therefore taking prophylactic measures. In an atmosphere in which criticism of the Soviet planned economy sounds like a jab at the Russian 'vertical of power', a single, unquestioned historical narrative is considered necessary.

They are also aware of what happened last time the Russian people were able to take a close look at their own history without fearing reprisal. Under Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness) in the late 1980s, the Katyn massacre of Polish officers by the NKVD (the forerunner of the KGB) was officially acknowledged, Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin was printed for the first time and Soviet citizens went out to buy newspapers in their millions. In the view of today's apparatchiks, *glasnost* brought about a loss of faith in the Soviet Union which hastened its collapse. The *glasnost* era has been recast as a time of treachery and its founding father, Alexander Yakovlev, has been slandered as a stooge of the West.

Since Russia's domestic problems are likely to persist, the Russian state's co-option of history looks set to continue. The Kremlin will go on fighting against what it sees as an invasion of its sovereign information space – by honest researchers pointing out inconvenient truths – and will do what it can to hold the public to an official historical narrative, that is as heroic as it is simplistic. Meanwhile, it falls to Western governments – themselves struggling with post-truth politics and the revival of mythical 'imagined communities' – to support serious independent research that fosters true advances in human understanding.

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