

Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia

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Contents

Notes on Contributors VII

Introduction: Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia 1
Niklas Bernsand and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa

PART 1

Cultural Policy and Ideological Movements

- 1 Russia: Culture, Cultural Policy, and the Swinging Pendulum of Politics 13
Lena Jonson
- 2 'Middle Continent' or 'Island Russia': Eurasianist Legacy and Vadim Tsymburskii's Revisionist Geopolitics 37
Igor Torbakov
- 3 Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and the Nazi Legacy: Titular Nations vs Ethnic Minorities 63
Andrei Rogatchevski

PART 2

Memory Politics

- 4 Constructing the "Usable Past": the Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia 85
Olga Malinova
- 5 Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia? Making "Patriotic" Sense of the Gulag in Present-Day Russia 105
Tomas Sniegon
- 6 Memory Watchdogs. Online and Offline Mobilizations around Controversial Historical Issues in Russia 141
Elena Perrier (Morenkova)

PART 3***Popular Culture and Its Embeddedness in Politics***

- 7 “Your Stork Might Disappear Forever!”: Russian Public Awareness Advertising and Incentivizing Motherhood 177
Elena Rakhimova-Sommers
- 8 Fashionable Irony and *Stiob*: the Use of Soviet Heritage in Russian Fashion Design and Soviet Subcultures 192
Ekaterina Kalinina
- 9 Humour as a Mode of Hegemonic Control: Comic Representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian Leaders in Official Russian Media 211
Alena Minchenia, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk
- 10 The Cosmic Subject in Post-Soviet Russia: Noocosmology, Space-Oriented Spiritualism, and the Problem of the Securitization of the Soul 232
Natalija Majsova
- Index 259

Constructing the “Usable Past”: the Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia¹

Olga Malinova

Conventional conceptions of the past are major pillars of the collective identities of modern political communities. Public history, as distinct from professional history, i.e. the former as a set of representations and interpretations of the past that are addressed to the broad audience of non-specialists, is an indispensable element of any identity politics aimed at shaping particular ideas of “us” and mobilizing group solidarity. Of course, the temporal dimension is particularly essential for the nations; it is no coincidence that modern historiography is mainly focused on writing the history of peoples/nations/states. Practices surrounding the political uses of the past are also closely connected with the construction and representation of national identities.

After the collapse of the USSR, all the new independent states in the region faced the problem of constructing their national identities within the new geographical and symbolic borders. In the case of Russia, this task was hampered from the very beginning by many obstacles, among which the problem of adapting established visions of the collective past to the new context was one of the most complicated. Three key obstacles of this kind should be highlighted here.

First, as the successor to the historical centre of the former tsarist empire, the Soviet Russian Federal Republic lacked both the incentive and the resources for developing a specific “national” identity within the framework of the USSR. Russian identity had historically tended to be associated with the core of empire, and dominant historical narratives confirmed this vision. This situation was further compounded after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, when the Russian Federation had to create a substantially new identity. Of course, there was a large stock of symbolic resources that could potentially be used as building material, but this legacy carried heavy ideological baggage and was hence highly contested. There was no “ready-made” historical grand narrative

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available to be taken up and revived wholesale. All of the candidates for such a narrative, whether the pre-revolutionary or Soviet versions of the imperial narrative, or the dissident counter-cultural Soviet variants developed in *tamizdat* and *samizdat*, were too controversial and divisive to serve as a solid basis for a new national identity. Any attempt to reinterpret the collective past immediately sparked fierce political conflicts and debates, and this fact had to be taken into account by policy-makers.

Second, the legal succession to the USSR made the demarcation between “the Russian” and “the Soviet” a difficult challenge for political elites (Morozov 2009; Kaspe 2012). Ultimately, after a series of unsuccessful attempts of creating a new Russian identity² defined in contrast to the Soviet “totalitarian” past, the ruling political elite finally placed its stake on a selective adoption of the Soviet symbolic legacy, which made the discussed demarcation rather vague.

Third, for Russia, unlike for the other post-communist countries, it was difficult to find a Significant Other who could be blamed for its troubles and difficulties (at least beyond the frame of conspiracy theory). This made development of a positive collective self-concept more problematic.

Because of these and other factors, the building of the new macro-political identity in post-Soviet Russia took rather contradictory and uncertain forms.

This chapter contributes to better understanding this process by exploring the main stages of evolution in the official memory policy over twenty five years. As its scope does not allow all relevant aspects to be covered, I shall focus on the evolution of the *official historical narrative*, i.e. a semantic scheme that describes the genealogy of the macro political community constituting the Russian state³, which “explains” how its past “determines” its present and future. According to my interpretation, such a scheme should be considered official if it is articulated in texts and practices that are performed on behalf of the state. The construction of the new official narrative suggests a reinterpretation of the historical events that were the key moments of the former, Soviet narrative, but also the “nomination” of some new events and figures for political usage, and a development of the new connections between the major episodes of Russian history. It takes place in official speeches, but also brings into play other instruments of memory politics, such as state symbols, national holidays, official and unofficial rituals, memory laws (i.e. legislation that

² For more about it, see the chapter by Torbakov in this volume.

³ It is still a matter of unfinished public discussion whether this community could be described as a nation and how it should be named – *rossiiskii* (i.e. including all citizens of the state) or *russkii* (i.e. having a connotation with ethnic Russians).

restricts particular ways of public representation of some historical events or processes), and so on.

From the late 1980s on, the national past was a matter of fierce debate, and the elaboration of the official narrative was unavoidably a matter of choice between competing interpretations presented in public discourse. This makes the process a part of the field of *symbolic politics*. My understanding of the term follows Pierre Bourdieu's conception, which considers the production of meanings as well as the struggle for consolidation of the legitimate vision of the social world as an integral part of the political subfield (Bourdieu 1992). In this sense, symbolic politics is understood as the set of public activities aimed at the production and promotion/intrusion of certain modes of interpretation of social reality and the struggle for their domination. It should not be considered a counterpart of "real" politics but rather a specific aspect of it.

The state is not the only actor in the field of symbolic politics, but it holds an exclusive position in this field because it can support its interpretations of social reality through the powerful allocation of resources (with the education system, for example), legal categorization (as in matters of citizenship), attaching a special status to particular symbols (public holidays, official symbols, government awards, etc.), through speaking on behalf of the political community in the international arena, etc. As a consequence, the public rhetoric and symbolic gestures of the official actors who speak "in the name of the state" gain a special significance and become an important frame of reference for the other participants of public discourse. It should be mentioned that the official symbolic policy may be inconsistent and is quite often context-driven: those who speak "in the name of the state" do not always rely on systematic interpretations of social reality and inevitably react to current conflicts. In spite of the exclusive resources that are at the disposal of the state, the domination of the interpretations of social reality it supports is not predetermined: even in totalitarian and authoritarian societies where certain normative principles are imposed by force, some opportunities for escape still remain in the form of "roguish adaptation" (Levada 2000) and "double thinking".

Various aspects of practices of using the past in the context of symbolic politics aimed at the construction of national identities are studied under different labels: history politics, politics of memory, regimes of memory, cultures of memory, politics of the past, and so on. There are different approaches to the conceptualization of practices of political usage of the past (e.g. Halbwachs 1980; Evans 2003; Müller [ed.] 2004; Art 2006; Heisler 2008; Parvikko 2008; Pakier, Stråth [eds.] 2010), but there is no consistent theory based on shared methodological assumptions. Studies of history politics form a broad interdisciplinary field, united by a common object rather than a consistent research

programme. The Russian case has also been described and analysed in this context (e.g. Smith 2002; Merridale 2003; Sherlock 2007; Wertsch 2008; Miller 2009; Kopusov 2011; Etkind 2013; Torbakov 2014; Malinova 2015; Kopusov 2018).

This chapter takes a special turn by focusing on the ruling political elites as actors who not only promote a particular interpretation of a collective past representing certain political interests, but who also depend on the available repertoire of the “usable past” in achieving various political aims – the legitimization of power, the justification of political decisions, the search of electoral support, the mobilization of solidarity, etc. Because of their access to exclusive political resources, the ruling elites are important actors of symbolic politics aimed at the construction of national identity. At the same time, the results of their activity in this field depend on how their symbolic politics fit into an already existing repertoire of notions, narratives, images, and symbols, and how these politics compare to interpretations articulated by other actors.

It is particularly important for the Russian case to note that the struggle of different interpretations of national history is not only a matter of ideological controversy, but also a consequence of the co-existence of two different models of memory politics that are at odds with one another (for more see Malinova 2016).

On the one hand, there is an ongoing process of reconsideration of the traumatic past focused on the political repressions of the Soviet regime, the Civil War, ethnic deportations, and the negative aspects of the Soviet regime in general. It started in the late 1980s with “an opening of the blind spots” of Russian history that previously had been concealed for ideological reasons, and evidently contributed to the delegitimization and collapse of the Soviet regime. This kind of memory politics fits into the model of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* – the critical reconsideration of history focused on ideas of recognizing moral guilt and commemorating victims.

On the other hand, the new Russian state faces the problem of identity construction that falls into a pattern typical of nation-building. This kind of memory politics is subjected to the development of a historical narrative that shapes the images of the national “self” and its “others”.

These patterns of memory politics have different logics that were described well by Aleida Assman (2014 [2006]). The memory politics of critical “working-off” seeks to compensate for the “asymmetry” between the memory of victims and perpetrators, to denunciate the latter and to recognize collective moral guilt for past disasters. It might be successful and result in merging competing stories of the different “sides” of a historical process into a “reconciling” meta-narrative of a higher level. However, it might fail and split society rather than unite it. The memory politics of nation-building seeks to mobilize solidarity

around a positive image of “us”, and it typically focuses on historical events and figures that could be interpreted in terms of glory, heroism, and recognized cultural accomplishments. These patterns of memory politics rely on different symbolic resources (though quite often narrate the same historical events) and suggest different political strategies. In Russia they co-exist and are supported by different coalitions of actors. This makes the construction of the official historical narrative a particularly complicated political task.

In what follows, I try to describe how the Russian ruling elite dealt with this task for twenty five years (1991-2016). On the basis of the official rhetoric and broader political discourse, I outline the evolution of the official historical narrative and assess its consequences for national identity construction. The next sections describe the principal shifts in political uses of national history in the 1990s, in the 2000s and after 2012. The concluding section summarizes the detected trends and analyses the problems and perspectives of symbolic policy while taking into account the current shifts in Russian politics.

The “Critical Narrative” of the 1990s: The Concept of the “New” Russia

The first Russian president, Boric Yeltsin, legitimized his political course through a historical narrative that sought to merge the two models described above. He and his team relied on the discourse about “the crimes of the Soviet regime” to establish the historical narrative that emphasized the contrast between the “new” and “old” Russia. The post-Soviet Russia was represented as a European country building democracy and a market economy, in contrast to the “totalitarian” USSR or “autocratic” Romanov empire. The representation of the national past in the discourse of the ruling elite was clearly subjected to the task of legitimizing a radical transformation of the Soviet “totalitarian” order. The aims of reforms that started in early 1992 were formulated in clearly “Westernist” terms. It seemed that the triumph of “the Democratic” forces in August of 1991 opened an opportunity to make Russia a prosperous democratic country with a market economy. In the words of Andrey Kozyrev, the minister for foreign affairs in 1990-1996:

our ‘super-task’ is literally to pull ourselves up by the hair... to the club of the most developed democratic countries. Only in this way can Russia obtain the national self-consciousness and self-respect that it needs so much [...] (Kozyrev 1994, 22).

The post-Soviet transition was perceived as a radical change in the country's historical trajectory⁴. Based on grand-narratives inherited from both Marxism and Cold War discourse, the ruling elite represented the transition away from the Soviet regime in terms of rough historicist schemes that urged for the total rejection of Soviet principles.

The perception of a pre-revolutionary historical legacy was less straightforward. On the one hand, the post-Soviet transition was often represented as the restoration of continuity in national history that had been interrupted by Soviet rule. As president Boris Yeltsin declared in his first address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the totalitarian ideology expressed by the CPSU that has dominated for decades has collapsed. Instead of it comes an awareness of natural historical and cultural continuity (Yeltsin 1994). Cf.: "The decade that was marked by Russia's coming back to the main track of world development comes to the end" (Yeltsin 1999). So, it was the contemporary, "new" Russia that restored the broken links with the national past.

Following in this line, post-Soviet officials paid special attention to the commemoration of previously "restricted" moments of the past – people, events, and symbols that were silenced or had not received enough justice in Soviet narratives. A good example is the deliberate celebration of marshal Georgy Zhukov, one of the military leaders of the Great Patriotic War, who fell into disgrace in 1946 and later, in 1957, was blamed at the October Central Committee of the CPSU Plenum for "misconduct" in terms of Lenin's principles of management of the army and "exorbitant glorification" of his role in the war. In 1994, president Yeltsin issued decrees prescribing the construction of a memorial to Zhukov in the centre of Moscow and the establishment of an order and medal in his honour. Taking into consideration the importance of collective memory about the Great Patriotic War, these symbolic acts might be interpreted as attempts to make shifts in the repertoire of meanings connected with this event, so as to be able to distance it from the ominous figure of Joseph Stalin. The fact that Zhukov, in spite of his great popularity, was officially disgraced made him a good alternative (though as a member of the Soviet ruling body he could not escape involvement in the morally dubious practices of the regime).

4 It is not accidental that later the Prime Minister, Egor Gaidar, described the mission of his "government of reforms" in terms of a "final decision" between two ways of modernization, the first of which supposes a development of the Western type of institutions while the second one is aimed at extensive growth under the pressure of the state. According to his interpretation, for a long time Russia was unable to choose between these two different paths, but now the time had come – Russia should put its future on the road to "civilized", "liberal capitalism" (Gaidar 1995, 47-75; 143-144).

However, the roots of many contemporary problems were to be seen in pre-Soviet history. In 1996, Yeltsin stated that tsarist Russia, being overwhelmed by the burden of its own historical problems, could not get onto the road to democracy. This fact determined “the radicalism of the Russian revolutionary process, its impetuous derangement from February to October”, and finally resulted in the break of historical tradition. According to Yeltsin:

this destructive radicalism – ‘to the very grounds,⁵ and then’ – explains the loss of many of Russia’s former achievements in the spheres of culture, economics, law, and public development in the course of the break of the old order (Yeltsin 1996⁶, my translation).

The bourgeois revolution of February 1917 was considered to be the highest point of Russia’s development along “the normal”, i.e. “European” way.⁷ The tendency for critical interpretation of the October Revolution and pre-revolutionary history became especially salient in 1996 in the context of the presidential elections. Representing the choice between the acting president, Yeltsin, and the communist candidate, Gennady Ziuganov, as a matter of life and death for the new Russia, proponents of the former appealed to the horrors of the revolution. As Nikolai Yegorov, head of the President’s Administration, put it during the campaign:

[...] the forthcoming election will be not be a matter of choice between the good and the best programmes of the candidates. We shall have to choose again between a continuation of the democratic reforms and a turn back. But there is no way back, there is a precipice behind us. Russia will not get through one more destructive revolution (Yegorov 1996).

This statement can be compared with the arguments of the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, who said: “After all the sufferings Russia has had during

5 Here Yeltsin refers to “The International”, the anthem of the Communist Party of the USSR.

6 All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

7 Articulations of this discourse can be found in many texts from this period. Here is an example taken from the official *Rossiiskaia gazeta*: “The results of the February revolution that brought the country into the worldwide channel of historically progressive changes were cancelled by the emotional rejection of the power of ‘capitalist ministers’ in favour of the false promises of the Bolsheviks...”. Remarkably, this reference to history was used as an argument in support of the acting government that, in spite of all its mistakes, aimed at the “creation of a social and economic basis for a principally new... state” that should “provide us the quality of life that citizens [of the countries] with a more developed market economy and democratic system enjoy” (Kiva 1997).

the terminating century, it definitely will not endure one more dictator, one more revolution, that could become the most bloody in its history” (Sobchak 1996).

Even after Yeltsin had won the elections, the most persistent opponents of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) continued to present the situation in terms of “the hundred-year-long civil war”, blaming contemporary “Bolsheviks” for the escalation of aggression. On the eve of the 59th anniversary of October Revolution, Alexander Yakovlev, a prominent Soviet leader of the perestroika period, published an article in which he argued that “Russia’s movement to the triumph of freedom can be interrupted any day if we do not proclaim the misanthropic Bolshevik ideology illegal [...]” (Yakovlev 1996).

But the official symbolic politics switched in a different direction. Soon after re-election, Boris Yeltsin declared the need for a “national consensus”. Even if this declaration was never fulfilled, it brought some changes in the official memory policy. On 7 November, 1996, a year before the 80th anniversary of the October Revolution, president Yeltsin issued a decree that officially reinterpreted the meaning of this day: 7 October was declared to be “the Day of conciliation and consent”. The renaming of the holiday was not followed by an elaboration of the new rituals of commemoration, and in 1997, on the 80th anniversary of the October Revolution, there was no official programme of celebration. In 2004, as a result of Vladimir Putin’s reform of the holiday calendar, 7 November ceased to be a public holiday and lost the name of “the Day of conciliation and consent”.

The transformation of the other core cornerstone of the Soviet historical narrative – victory in the Great Patriotic War – was much more successful. Being widely perceived as the most important moment of national solidarity, the Great Patriotic War had great symbolical potential for political use. So, since the first half of the 1990s, the new Russian ruling elite sought to reframe the memory of the war according to the new vision of Russia. The victory over Nazism was represented as a heroic achievement carried out by the people (*narod*) in contrast to the official Soviet narrative, which had emphasized the role of the state and the Communist Party. The recognition of the inhumane character of the Soviet regime gave a new inflection to the theme of heroism: the feat of the Soviet people was even greater in light of the fact that victory was achieved not *due* to the Communist leadership, but *in spite* of the Stalinist repressions. Such a narrative allowed the combination of two models of memory policy, as it emphasized the glory of the Soviet/Russian people and, at the same time, recognized the crimes of Stalin’s regime. It was flexible enough to even allow a partial “rehabilitation” of Soviet symbols, which was a kind of compromise for the sake of “national consensus”: since 1995 the Red Banner of

Victory (definitely a Soviet symbol) became an important part of the official ceremony of celebration for Victory Day. Actually, it was Yeltsin who established the contemporary canon of commemoration for Victory Day,⁸ with the military parade at Red Square and the Red Banner of Victory.

In spite of the declarations about “national consensus”, the official historical narrative of the 1990s remained critical towards the Soviet and even imperial periods. The efforts for “conciliation” could not be very consistent so long as the ruling elites of the 1990s had to legitimize the unpopular decisions that had been made earlier under the label of “the fight with totalitarianism”, which provoked interpretation of the past in terms of “interruption”. The model of national identity constructed by “the Democrats” (*demokraty*) was strictly opposed by “the Popular-Patriotic Opposition” (*narodno-patrioticheskaya oppositsiia*). The former expected that the communists should confess to the crimes of the Soviet regime. The idea of “a confession” (*pokaianie*) was addressed to the whole nation, but as far as it was insistently opposed by the left and “patriotic” forces, they became the main target of this discourse. Meanwhile, the Popular-Patriotic Opposition, who was indignant with the policy of Yeltsin’s “antinational” (*antinarodnyi*) and “criminal” regime, saw the attempts to reconsider the Soviet narrative of national history as a “humiliation of the Russian people”. So, it was actually impossible to reach a consensus on the basis of the “critical” official narrative.

The “Eclectic Narrative” of the 2000s: the Concept of the “Thousand-Year-Old Russian State”

For various reasons, the political transformations of the 1990s did not result in the creation of institutions that could become effective channels of public dialogue. In the 2000s, the ruling elite had staked on the establishment of “consent from above” by putting the most popular media under state control – first and foremost the central TV channels – which were used for pushing forward more “comprehensive” models of collective identity (see Malinova 2009). Being free of Yeltsin’s burden of taking a certain side in the conflicts of the 1990s, Putin was able to give way to some ideas from the repertoire of “the Popular-Patriotic Opposition” that were taboo for “the Democrats”. He could in this way mobilize “consent” by appealing to values and symbols of the Soviet past.

8 In the USSR, Victory Day became a public holiday only after Stalin’s death, in 1965. Military parades in Red Square were held only in jubilee years.

The first and the most remarkable step in this direction was the adoption of the law about official state symbols in 2000. It established the three-color state flag that appealed to the legacy of the Romanov empire and was used by “the democratic forces” as a symbol of their victory during the failed “putsch” in August of 1991, the national anthem based on the “old” melody of the Soviet anthem, and the red flag for the Russian army. Explaining this compromise, Putin proposed to abandon the logic focused on “the dark sides of the history of our country”:

[...] if we follow this logic only, we should also forget about the achievements of our people throughout the centuries. Then where do we place the achievements of Russian culture? Where do we place Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Tolstoy, Tchaikovskiii? Where do we place the achievements of Russian science – Mendeleev, Lobachevskii, and many, many others? As far as their names, the achievements were also connected with these symbols. Do we really have nothing to remember from the Soviet period except Stalin’s camps and repressions? Then where do we place Dunaevskii, Sholokhov, Shostakovich, Korolev and the achievements in the cosmos? Where do we place Yury Gagarin’s flight? And what about the brilliant victories of the Russian army since the time of Rumiantsev, Suvorov, and Kutuzov? What about the victory of 1945? I think that if we take all of this into consideration, we will confirm that we not only can, but even should use all the principle symbols of our state (Putin 2000a).

It is remarkable that “the achievements” that should not be forgotten clearly fall to two categories: the heritage of the native culture and science, connected with the names of outstanding countrymen who were recognized all over the world, and the victories of the Russian military. In this list there are no recognizable institutions or practices that could be contrasted to “Stalin’s camps and repressions”. It points to the fact that in 2000, the repertoire of negative moments in national history that could be used as “lessons and warnings” was much more limited than that of the positive symbols, which could work as “pillars” of collective identity. However, very soon the list was completed by the idea of “great-powerness”, which was projected on the whole “thousand-year-long history” of Russia. The new official discourse represented the Russian state (regardless of evaluations of its actual policy in different periods) as the central element of national identity. The idea of “the strong state” as the basis of the past and future greatness of Russia was expressed most saliently in the President’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2003, where Putin argued that:

maintaining the state (*podderzhanie gosudarstva*) as an extensive geographical space, keeping a unique community of peoples united, and, at the same time, the powerful position of the country in the world were the great historical deeds [of the Russian people] (Putin 2003).

It should be mentioned that in public discourse, particularly in the 1990s, Russia's extensive territory was often interpreted not only as a sign of greatness, but also as a source of problems, in particular, as a factor that determined the "mobilization" type of development that involves many negative aspects. Identifying Russia with the space that it "maintains", and with "Russia's thousand-year-long historical path [...] [which is how] it reproduces a strong state" (Putin 2003), Putin took a clear side in this controversy, thus legitimizing his course of "strengthening the state" by following a historical, national tradition.

This led to the reassessment of the Soviet legacy and of the collapse of the USSR (which was simultaneously the "foundational act" of the new Russian state). Actually, Putin first expressed his opinion concerning the problem of reassessment of the Soviet past in 1999, on the eve of his first presidential campaign. In the programmatic article "Russia at the Turn of Millenniums", he argued that "it would be a mistake not to see and, moreover, to reject the undoubted achievements of that time". But at the same time, he supported the main thesis of "the Democratic" narrative: "For almost seventy years, we moved along the dead-end route that lay aside the main road of civilization" (Putin 1999).

The decisive turn in re-interpreting the Soviet period took place in 2005 when, in his presidential address, Putin made the sensational statement that the collapse of the USSR "was the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Putin 2005). This sharply contrasted with Yeltsin's insistent desire to represent the collapse of the USSR as consistent with historical laws,⁹ hence as "progressive" even if difficult. As soon as the ideas of "the great power" and "the thousand-year-long Russian state" were put at the centre of the official narrative, this interpretation would give way to the conception of the contingent "catastrophe" caused by the actions of "bad" politicians.

However, the Soviet legacy was "rehabilitated" in the official symbolic policy in a converted form: the most dubious moments were obscured. It is remarkable that in 2004 the most controversial public holiday – the anniversary of the October Revolution on 7 November – was abolished by federal law (it remained in the list of festive days as the Day of the October Revolution, but ceased to be a day off). In Putin's speeches, there were many critical statements about

9 Cf.: "The Soviet Union had fallen under the weight of total economic crisis, being torn by economic, political and social contradictions" (Yeltsin 1996).

Soviet practices; the “rehabilitation” of the Soviet symbols in no way meant a total apology to the Communist regime. The main aspect of the cherished legacy was the idea of the “great” and powerful state that was able to overcome many difficulties, to succeed in modernizing (even if imperfectly), and to become a leading player in world politics. Totalitarian features, such as state violence and political repressions, were bracketed out of this picture. As a result, the official narrative became totally focused on the glorification of the Russian nation, and the themes of the “dark pages” of history and collective trauma turned out to be virtually neglected. The unwillingness of the ruling elite to take a side in the public discussions about the most “problematic” aspects of the national past made the official narrative rather fragmented and eclectic.

It is hardly a surprise that in the context of this shift from “self-criticism” to “self-glorification”, the most “usable” element of the “thousand-year-long history” of the Russian state is the Great Patriotic War. Comparable in its significance to certain other meta-events of Russian history (such as the victory over Napoleon), the war is still present in the “live” memory of older generations. Besides, it is well established in the “commemorative infrastructure” (i.e. holidays, monuments, museums, novels, films, etc.) inherited from the USSR. Politicians addressing it can still count on a strong emotional resonance in society. And, unlike many other Soviet symbols and narratives, the war memory has not been an object of zero-sum political games until recently. Despite competing interpretations of this event, virtually all political actors – nationalists, liberals and “statists” (*gosudarstvenniki*) alike – agree on the significance of the victory in WWII in Russian and world history. According to my calculation, speeches on the occasion of various war anniversaries and memorial dates make up for around 30 per cent of all commemorative addresses by Russian presidents between 2000 and 2014 (Malinova 2015, 168-169).

The victory in WWII and the post-war success of the USSR as a world superpower became the central elements of the new official historical narrative. The theme of the Great Patriotic War was reframed in terms of triumphalism and cleansed of any negative aspects associated with the totalitarian regime (Stalinist repressions, the failures and incompetence of the Soviet military leadership, and its indifference to the human cost of military success). Instead of double victimhood at the hands of the Nazi and Soviet regimes alike, the theme of mass heroism and suffering as the “enormous price” that was paid for victory took up a central position in the official canon of commemoration. The topic of mass repression was virtually eliminated from the official discourse about WWII: presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev touched on it rather rarely and unwillingly. This made the figure of Stalin particularly ambiguous. On the one hand, he led the country to the “Great Victory”, which

eventually made the USSR one of the world super powers. On the other hand, as the “criminal” historical figure, he could not be explicitly supported by the Russian presidents.

In today’s Russia, the myth of the Great Patriotic War is loaded with multiple meanings, some of them originating from the Soviet era, others reflecting Russia’s new status and the geopolitical situation. Drawing on my analysis of themes used by Putin and Medvedev in the official speeches they delivered in 2000-2014 on the occasion of Victory Day, I argue that attempts to tailor the discourse about the war to the purposes of constructing a new Russian identity, boosting intergenerational solidarity, and promoting national unity over political, ideological and ethnic cleavages were especially prominent in this period (Malinova 2015, 112-113). Some scholars have argued that the Great Patriotic War has become a foundational myth for post-Soviet Russia (Koposov 2011, 163). This was at least in part a consequence of the failure of attempts to create alternative foundational myths based on the birth of the new Russian state on the ruins of the USSR (Smith 2002; Malinova 2015).

The historical narrative developed by Putin’s successor, President Dmitrii Medvedev, in 2007-2012 generally followed the same line of deliberate eclecticism, though with some additional nuances. Like his forerunner, Medvedev appealed to the “thousand-year-long history” to legitimize his most difficult and important decisions. It was during his presidency that the official memory policy became significantly influenced by the international environment, though “the wars of memory” started earlier, in mid-2000s. Reacting to the OSCE Assembly Resolution named “Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21st Century”, which considered Stalinism on the same grounds as Nazism, Medvedev launched the “Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests”.¹⁰ This decision was widely perceived as a symbolic sign of the state’s intention to control the public discourse about history. However, actually the commission did nothing significant and was cancelled without much stir in February 2012, before Vladimir Putin’s re-election.

10 For ambiguous memory politics in regard to Stalin, see the chapter by Morenkova in this book.

The 2010s: Memory Policy as a Remedy Against “the Apparent Deficit of Spiritual Values”

As a result of the eclectic approach to constructing the official historical narrative in the 2000s, the repertoire of “usable” events, figures, and symbols from the past turned out to be rather scant. The main object of reference (and contestation) was the history of the 20th century, with particular emphasis on the October Revolution, the Great Patriotic War, Gagarin’s flight to the cosmos, perestroika, and the “hard” 1990s. These events/symbols are the most obvious focal points for the legitimization of current decision-making. The establishment of a new holiday in 2004 – the Day of People’s Unity (*Den’ narodnogo edinstva*) on 4 November – “instead of” the Day of the October Revolution on 7 November, was the only major “symbolic investment” to the “commemorative infrastructure” of the concept of “the thousand-year-old Russian state”. However, it was hardly successful, as from the very beginning it was appropriated by the Russian nationalists: 4 October became a day of “the Russian rally” (*Russkii marsh*), the political demonstrations under nationalists slogans. At the same time, for the majority of society the meaning of the new holiday appeared rather vague.

Even more importantly, general references to “the thousand-year-long history” of Russia could not compensate for a lack of more detailed narrative(s) connecting the diverse and sometimes contradictory episodes into a consistent picture. Development of a more detailed narrative was impeded by the unwillingness of the ruling elite to take more definite positions in the public discussions about the “difficult historical issues”.

The situation has begun to change after Vladimir Putin’s re-election in 2012. His election campaign took place in the context of the protest movement in major Russian cities against fraud during the December 2011 elections to the State Duma. The inarticulate yet clearly visible street opposition undermined the hegemony of government discourse. So, at the beginning of his third term in office, Putin found it necessary to design a more consistent “ideology” to mobilize the loyal “majority” against the protesting “minority”. The issues of ideology became a priority for the new Kremlin administration. As Putin stated in his 2012 Annual Address to the Federal Government, “today, Russian society suffers from an apparent deficit of spiritual values, such as charity, empathy, compassion, support, and mutual assistance” (Putin 2016). The development of a more detailed and consistent official narrative was evidently considered a major “remedy” to this problem.

In his talk at the meeting of the Council for Interethnic Relations in February 2013, Putin suggested that “we should think about introducing common

history textbooks for Russian secondary schools, designed for different ages, but built into a single concept and following a single logic of continuous Russian history, the relations between all its stages and respect towards all the episodes of our past” (Putin 2013). It should be noted that this was not the first attempt by the state to impose a particular vision of Russian history via the school textbook. In 2006-2007, the Kremlin administration was suspected of sponsoring the infamous textbook *A History of Russia 1945-2006* edited by Alexander Filippov, which disclaimed the concept of totalitarianism as a product of the Cold War and rehabilitated Stalinism by describing it as a kind of “accelerated modernization” that took place in the context of a hostile environment. It caused a scandal (see Miller 2009; Zaida 2015), but was still sent to hundreds of schools. However, the elaboration of “a single logic of continuous Russian history” was a much more complex task that supposed a further consolidation of the official narrative of “the thousand-year-old Russian state” through a search for “proper interpretations” of many historical events, which caused much public discussion.

This task was assigned to a special working group that combined state officials, historians, several teachers, and other specialists. Its activity was widely covered by the media and passionately discussed in society. It brought about not the single “common history textbook” but the concept of how to teach history at secondary schools that later became a template for several new textbooks. In spite of the fear that the project of “the common history textbook” will lead to a narrow unification of the teaching process on a basis of some ideologically driven narrative, the activity of the working group actually contributed to public discussion of the concept of the historical narrative. It revealed the list of “difficult issues” of Russian history that should be considered in school lessons from different points of view. However, the suspicions concerning the threat of unification were not quite unsubstantiated when taking into account the inescapable influence of the general focus on the consolidation of the official narrative on the actual teaching process.

Another result of the new policy of struggle for “spiritual values” was a further diversification of the repertoire of the “usable past”. One of its indicators was a rise in the share of the president’s commemorative speeches devoted to pre-Revolution history, from 28 per cent in 2008-2011 to 36 per cent in 2012-2014. Another example is the construction of memorials to Tsar Ivan the Terrible in the city of Oriol and to Prince Vladimir, the Baptizer of Rus in Moscow. Both monuments raised heavy debates, which demonstrated that “the thousand-year-long history” is no less a matter of controversy than the Soviet period.

These recent developments have brought rather ambivalent results. On the one hand, the ruling elite evidently wants to keep control over the field of

memory politics. It invests resources into the consolidation and promotion of the state-centred historical narrative focused on the theme of national glory. What is even more troublesome, in the context of the international crisis caused by annexation of the Crimea, the war in Ukraine, and mutual economic sanctions, is that the concept of Russian identity supported by the state becomes securitized. First of all, this refers to the case of the Great Patriotic War as a main pillar of contemporary Russian identity. In April 2014, the State Duma adopted a law to counter attempts of infringing on historical memory in relation to events of World War II. There are several cases of persecution of scholars and journalists who expressed ideas that were at odds with the official interpretation of the national past (see Miller 2014).

On the other hand, there is certain (even if small) progress in the promotion of the “coping with the dark past” agenda. In August 2015, the Russian Government adopted the concept of State Policy on Commemorating the Memory of Victims of Political Repression (basically drafted by Russia’s Human Rights Council and “Memorial”). Even if the governmental directive has passed with some restrictions added, it opens certain opportunities for the local actors of memory politics who aim at commemorating the victims of political repression. In October 2015, Vladimir Putin ordered a memorial to the victims of political repressions. In the same month the Museum of the Gulag was opened in the centre of Moscow. These changes demonstrate that the state’s more active policy in the field of the political use of the past opened certain “windows of opportunities” for the actors who strove to “cope with a difficult and traumatic past”. On the 30th of October 2017, Putin took part in the opening ceremony of Wall of Sorrow memorial to victims of political repression on a Moscow street named after the famous dissident Andrey Sakharov. In his speech, he particularly emphasized that “this terrifying past cannot be deleted from national memory” but avoided any mentions about those who were guilty in this tragedy (Putin, 2018). However, it did not significantly changed the situation. A couple of weeks later Director of the Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov in his interview on the occasion of centenary of All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (*Cheka*) raised his voice for the executors by arguing that “the extraordinary situation called for extraordinary actions” and that “archive materials give evidence that in the large part of criminal cases there was objective reasons for criminal prosecution” (Bortnikov 2017). It well illustrates the lack of unity among the ruling elite about “coping with the traumatic past”.

Conclusion

The evolution of the official memory policy followed the trajectory of the Russian political regime. It is clearly divided into two large periods that are characterized by different conceptions of the official historical narrative – that of “the new Russia” and of “the thousand-year-long Russia”. These periods roughly coincide with the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin/Dmitrii Medvedev. In spite of the fact that the vectors of symbolic politics changed, the ruling elites in both periods subordinated their practices of political use of the national past to the task of legitimizing their own political course. At the same time, they could not but take into consideration the public debates over the national past that resulted from the uneasy co-presence in the agenda of two distinct tasks – that of nation-building and that of coping with the “difficult” and traumatic past.

In the 1990s, the official narrative had integrated the discourse on “trauma and crime” as a part of the legitimization of the post-Soviet transformation, but it could not manage to consolidate the nation. In the 2000s the choice was made for the apologetic principle of working with the collective past, which resulted in an eclectic construction that marginalizes the topic of “trauma and crime”. In the 2010s, we can see some attempts of making the official narrative more consistent, with ambivalent results. On the one hand, in the context of the current international conflict, the apologetic conception of the national past is securitized as a “weapon” against the alleged foreign and domestic enemies. On the other hand, a new round of discussions about national history evidently opened some windows of opportunities for actors struggling to “cope with the difficult past” agenda, even if for a short time.

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