The Use of History in Putin's Russia

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For the reader going through a rough patch

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List of Abbreviations

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States
COE – Council of Europe
EU – European Union
EEU – Eurasian Economic Union
FOM – Public Monetary Fund (English translation)
GBR – British Pounds
KPRF – Communist Party of the Russian Federation
LDPR – Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OSCE – Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PARNAS – Party of People's Freedom
RUR – Russian Roubles
UK – United Kingdom
UR – United Russia Party
US – United States
USD – US Dollars
USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VTsIOM – Russian Public Opinion Research Center (English translation)
YeGE – Unified State Exam (English translation)

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Abstract

History is not just a study of past events, but a product and idea for modernisation and consolidating the nation. This book examines how the past is perceived in contemporary Russia and analyses the ways in which the Russian state, under President Vladimir Putin, uses history to create a broad coalition of consensus and forge a new national identity. Central to issues of governance and national identity, the Russian state uses its history for the purpose of state consolidation, modernisation and reviving Russia's national consciousness in the twenty-first century, In assessing how history mediates the complex relationship between state and population, this book analyses the selection process of constructing and recycling a preferred historical narrative to create loyal, patriotic citizens to aid its modernisation. History in different spheres of Russian life, such as culture, politics, education and anniversaries are analysed in depth. This research is based on media and document analysis, as well as original interviews conducted in the Russian Federation with history teachers, as well as the first including trainee. This research shows many paradoxes with the new history. While the majority of the population favour a patriotic past, the narrative is often passively rejected. While the past is used to promote national unity, many episodes expose deep divisions in society. It must be equally rigid, attractive and malleable to the needs of a growing civil society to stand the test of time.

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Keywords: Consensus, Continuity, Education, History, Identity, Narrative, Patriotism, State.

Introduction

At his State of the Federation address 2012, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, proclaimed:

> In order to revive national consciousness we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.[1]

For the Russian nation to modernise in its own unique fashion, reacquainting with its past is essential. From the opening of the Soviet archives during *Perestroika*, through the failed democratisation process, Russian history has been as uncertain as its future at the best of times. To build a modern state and national identity surrounding it, a narrative depicting successes and glory is sought after. A narrative that is in line with state and societal traditions, supported by certain figures, events and myths that underpin success act as a model of how to construct a new Russia out of the old. Complimentary to this, the past can also serve as an example of what to avoid. The 'newness' of Boris Yeltsin's national idea and symbols of Russia in the 1990s were shallow and meaningless. More importantly, these did not create a sense of historical development in line with traditions that could explain the current situation.[2] Yeltsin's 'new Russia' was polarising because it rejected the experience of the USSR as the country dove into political and economic chaos. This 'decade without patriotism' was symbolic of the deep pessimism and lack of hope. Russia had not defined its past, therefore, it could not map out a successful future. In other words, the past must be compatible with the current situation to define what Russia is and 'should' be.

Originally the author's doctoral dissertation, this book is an examination of the past and its contemporary relevance to state policy and construction of a national identity in Russia today. This will henceforth be referred to as the 'Putin Agenda', which Russia's president sets out to achieve national unity and stability. It will be referred to as the Putin Agenda because, as the prior paragraph sets out, the state under his leadership now has a clear idea of what

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[1] President Putin, V.V. State of the Federation Address, 2012.

[2] Edwin Bacon, *Contemporary Russia*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p.179.

Russia is and should be. This idea is rooted in the past but only borrows from it where appropriate. This agenda stresses the perceived need for emphasising the continuity of the Russian state, traditions, culture and the Russia's great power status. This requires a greater role and presence in geopolitics, enhanced security and a new national idea. All of this must be based on success stories highlighted in the Putin Agenda. In addition, symbols are a commitment to this unity, assume many forms (textbooks, youth groups or monuments) and are the ultimate reinforcer of a contemporary Russian identity. The past can supply answers to the present when confusion and disillusionment occurs, often acting as a justification for state policy (see Chapter Two). The Putin Agenda, therefore, seeks historical reconciliation with the problematic and unusable past by, in this author's understanding of the term, re-framing the damaged relationship between state and society.[3] Whilst there is still a great need to help people come to terms with the problematic past, much controversy surrounds its motives and policies concerning a problematic period that divides the population and ruling elites alike. There are concerns that ignoring the traumatic episodes of the past will be detrimental to Russia's development and bring great instability to the present. The period under investigation in this book (1881-1945) was chosen for analysis because it represents two separate Russias (the Imperial and Soviet past) that are filled with grandiose events and continue to effect the country today. Not only this, but it receives great attention from academics, the media and civil society alike. The period is a less straightforward one to grapple with, directly plays on the identity of the new Russians and has usable elements for explaining the country's situation. This makes Russian history and its historic identity something of a mosaic on an awkwardly shaped canvas, and the concept of history in Russia harder to comprehend. On the one hand, there is a new government funded textbook series, busts of Stalin in several locations, newly commissioned historical monuments on the recently incorporated Crimean peninsula and films on the Great Patriotic War, which are fictional yet presented as fact.[4] On the other, there is a memorial to the victims of the great terror in central Moscow, a monument of reconciliation

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[3] James Miles, 'Teaching History for Truth and Reconciliation: the challenges and opportunities of narrativity, temporality and identity', *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol 53, No.2, Spring 2018, p.295.

[4] *Business Insider,* 2017. 'Stalin's Bust Unveiled in Moscow as Part of 'Rulers' Alley' September 2017, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-stalins-bust-unveiled-in-moscow-as-part-of-rulers-alley-2017-9>, accessed 15/12/2018; examples of these films are *White Tiger* and *Panfilov's 28 Men*, which are discussed in Chapters Three and Six.

for the Civil War and continuous reconstructions of churches. At face value, history appears to be some sort of game with inconsistent rules. Beneath the surface, it is an important quest to win the battle of ideas about the past to answer the most important questions of the day.

This book will address four issues. Firstly, to ascertain what the 'glory days' of Russian history were and discuss why these have been selected whilst others were left out, or even ignored. Secondly, to assess how far and to what extent history impacts the identity of Russians today. Third, to investigate the nature of history in secondary education and public celebrations. Finally, this research will analyse history within the context of the Putin administration's agenda considering issues such as order, continuity and patriotism. The current book is not an assessment of Putin as a president or politician. By 'Putin's Russia', the author refers to the idea of Russia under his presidencies, and how the national image and identity is being reconstructed through a recycled historical narrative.

Education and public celebrations are two spaces where governments can largely control the narrative. They are places where the government has its say and makes both ideal mediums through which to channel the preferred images of the past. The desired narrative is more evident in textbooks funded by the government, speeches made at celebrations and the images selected to represent it are symbolic of the legacy and mirage of continuity. However, the narrative is inseparable from Russian traditions. The link between history, culture and power is stronger in Russia than its neighbours, and is designed to set it apart. Therefore, it is also necessary to unpack the 'Russian Idea' and components making up Russia's historic identity. Alongside this, history has been a high-profile topic since the beginning of the Russian Federation. Once the USSR had collapsed, Russia had to be redefined. Political parties fight over the past's legacy and seek to define the trajectory on certain episodes, the Soviet period especially. The past has a big impact on many policies and political positions, and Russia's relationship with the outside world. The former Soviet space has often been defined by the past and justified by auspicious episodes – the notable example identified is the Great Patriotic War (1941-45).

While a broad scope, the book sets boundaries by focusing on the period 1881-1945. Referring back to President Putin's statement, Russia has a thousand-year history from which examples could be analysed, and are used by the Russian state. The period 1881-1945 contains important events and movements including conservatism and reaction, the 1905 revolution, the First World War, fall of the monarchy, 1917 revolutions, the Stalin era and Great Patriotic War. These continue to impact the state's legacy and Russian identity today, with the latter remaining the main force of historical unity and patriotism in the modern day. One *Levada* poll also found public interest in

the period as a whole to be modestly high compared to others (World War II 38%, the 'Silver Age' 18%, 1917 revolution 13% and Stalin era 12%).[5] This allows for a more comprehensive look at Imperial and Soviet Russia and the main issues surrounding their retelling in contemporary Russia. Another boundary is restricting the field research to Moscow, Moskovskaya Oblast, St. Petersburg and Vladimirskaya Oblast. These regions are, generally speaking, more developed and have higher populations. Schools tend to be better funded equipped. This includes textbooks and better-trained teachers who are more representative of the demographics. Not only this, but education reforms in Russia are often slow to materialise and take effect. The two capitals and their surrounding regions tend to become the 'testing grounds' in this regard, more able to enact the reforms (see Chapters Three, Four and Five). This is also why this research analysed a selection of the 2015 'state sponsored' textbook series, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, used by the interviewed teachers and schools visited. There are almost 100 school history textbooks in Russia today, yet, in the regions included in this study, most use the same textbooks. Furthermore, most public celebrations and commemorations are centered in the largest cities, especially the two capitals. This not only provides easier access for the population, but also makes them more symbolic and tied to the country's traditions.

History's Position in Russia today

The Russian state is often at the centre of the national history. In many ways, the narrative aims to provide an explanation of state development and the political implications for society. Putin and the government have sought to present itself as the natural historical heirs to Kievan Rus', pre-revolutionary Russia and the USSR. This requires a careful selection of auspicious episodes to reflect the goals of the modern state. When justifying the modern day situation, the new history must also explain the Russian experience of democracy following the USSR's collapse and global integration; both of which have roots stemming from 1881-1945.[6] History is not just a study of past events, but a product and idea for modernisation and consolidating the nation. With this in mind, three main problems with history in Russia today are particularly bothersome for the state in its attempts to establish consensus around a usable past. These three problems are as follows: Russia

[5] Russian History, *Levada Tsentr*, 03/04/2017, http://www.levada.ru/en/2017/04/03/russian-history accessed 03/04/2017.

[6] Olga Malinova, 'Sotsialnoi proektsii proshlogo', PostNauka, uploaded to *YouTube* 31/10/2014, www.youtube.com.watch?v=KpCikWiKuBA&t=35s accessed 16/12/2017.

does not have a non-imperialist history; the position of Russian society, President Putin and the outside world are all at loggerheads concerning Russian history; the 'official' narrative, whilst striving for a linear concrete version, remains a puzzle.

The period under focus is a striking reflection of these three problems and show a high level of crossover between them. The Russians are still going through a post-imperial readjustment. This is something that took Britain and France decades and recent events (namely Brexit) show that this still not wholly complete. Both had to adapt to a rather less significant place in the world, and grappling with the basic question of whether they are a mono or multicultural state.[7] While Russia has its own historical peculiarities, it is not principally different in this regard, although important things distinguish it. There is a clear distinction between the state and people often overlooked in the West. After centuries of incorporating other nations and peoples, the label of chauvinist imperialists is often applied in the West to the Russian. Meanwhile, most of the Russian population are the descendants of serfs and peasants; they do not view themselves as brutal colonisers or oppressors.[8] Russia must also now tell its story in a new language, and one that is free of any ideology or exclusive. While the new narrative embraces the Tsarist period, it also relies on achievements from the Soviet era – a clear distinction between Putin and Yeltsin. In this respect, the product and idea of history is becoming a collection of carefully selected events, periods and figures depicting the idea of a strong nation united behind a patriotic message on a march to greatness. While all nations do this, history is a fundamental part of the modernisation and governing process in contemporary Russia. The population is living through a highly politicised period where fragments of the past are used to explain the construction of skyscrapers over social reforms. The past also stresses the messianic mission that has been commonplace in Russia's state traditions. The message is adapted and shifts to reflect the mood of the government, and close attention is paid to the controversial segments of the past and how these influence the message. At best, these are downplayed and at worst ignored so they do not become an unwanted distraction. In creating a success story (and one of unity), certain things do not fit. Examples from this period would be the revolutions, Aleksandr Kerensky's leadership and the Stalinist terror. These represent weak states, leaders and chaos while the latter is a humanitarian stain on the state's record.

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[7] Email conversation with Mark Galeotti.

[8] Michele Berdy, 'What Makes The Russians So Russian', in The Moscow Times, *Russia For Beginners*, (Moscow: United Press, 2009), p.157.

As history is in part a quest for legitimacy and identity, not only can undermining the overarching message not be tolerated (to a certain extent), this requires incredible flexibility and a great deal of effort to package them for consumption. 'Russia' has been an imperial nation, the centre of the Soviet experiment, and is now an independent, notionally-democratic state with an infant living memory. Selecting one thing over another to represent contemporary Russia and the Russian state says much about the identity it wants, and will have far-reaching consequences in the future. This is also where memory becomes important and proves to be quite an obstacle for the state in establishing a consensual narrative that brings society together. Russian society is not yet ready to reach a unanimous verdict on the USSR, yet it was equally disappointed with the reality of post-Soviet Russia and democracy.[9] Externally, the Eastern and Western version of European history do not concur with the of Russian/Soviet (homogenous) one. This has led to geopolitical frictions, which in turn has sparked Russian lawmakers to invoke the past to justify their own actions and positions.

The 'feel-good' factor, which is central to the use of history for this goal, is not helped by nuance either. It should be acknowledged that Russian history is, in many ways, a very traumatic one with many discontinuities. This period is no exception. A traumatic history can be delegitimising for the state's legacy if it is not handled properly, as it can undermine continuity and the positive notions surrounding it. Abusive regimes that were often uncaring, murderous, incompetent (or all three) mark many segments of Russian history. Yet, there are examples where these and the actions of its leaders are justified in the name of progress, modernisation, self-defense or to achieve some other greater good. In a brief comparison of surveys surrounding Joseph Stalin, one found that more than half of Russians (62%) agree that boards, busts and other attributes telling his successes are needed in public places, including 77% of young people.[10] Another showed that more than 40% had in one way or another, justified the purges.[11] And in 2019, another released showed respect for Stalin amongst Russian society to be at 70% – the highest since the collapse of the USSR. The historical record means that the 'glories' are questionable – an uncomfortable reality. For instance, how far was

[9] Justyna Prus, 'Russia's Use of History as a Political Weapon', *PISM*, No.12, 114, May 2015, p.1.

[10] *RBK,* 2017. 'Ustanovku pamyatykh znakov v cest' Stalina podderzhalo pochti 80% molodyozhi', July 20, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/597057059a79472210e669c9> accessed 08/01/2017.

[11] *RBK,* 2017. 'Bolee 40% rossiyan otpravdali Stalinskie repressii', July 5, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/05/07/2017/595cbe919a794737273b109e> accessed 08/01/2017.

industrialisation on the back of Gulag slave labour? How many innocent veterans of the Great Patriotic War were sent to the Gulag during 'high Stalinism' when they returned home? Every country has cruel and unhappy sides to its history, but Russia's is largely painted in dark and bloody tones. Uncomfortable questions surrounding the glories are naturally quite unwelcome in seeking to establish a narrative. Most importantly, though, the handling of this demonstrates a core trait of the narrative, which asserts that the hardship endured in this shared experience, was not in vain. Thus, the key to modernisation is reconciliation with the problematic past, by refocusing attention on the states' achievements and national culture. As is discussed throughout, this is a taboo in modern Russia and 'criticism' of the official narrative is deemed socially unacceptable that can even result in criminal charges. Conversely, Russians might question the West's sincerity throughout history, as well, which reflects the defensive tone. Did the Entente provide the Russian Empire with enough assistance on the Eastern Front? Had the Soviet state fallen during the Second World War, would this have genuinely troubled Great Britain or the USA? Why is so little made of foreign involvement in the Russian Civil War? These are legitimate questions that in turn influence the historical narrative and besieged mentality.

To develop this further, history has become unavoidable in the limited political debates, but this mix has seen questionable results. Objectivity in history is extremely difficult (if not impossible) whereas politics is purely subjective. If a historical fact is replaced with a politically convenient pseudo-history, it risks morphing into propaganda. While many, such as Miguel Vazquez Linan, have stated that history has been utilised as a propaganda tool, this is not in fact the case. Vasquez Linan writes that in the media and state-funded textbook, the 'well defined priorities' of 'sovereign democracy' (*samostoyaltel'nost'*) have become the only pedagogical objective and pushes the narrative that 'Putin will solve all the problems as he picked Russia up off its knees before'.[12]However, this book argues that the past is not used as propaganda in modern Russia; rather, it is a bargaining chip. Firstly, the state does not have a monopoly on the historical narrative for it to be readily mobilised as propaganda. Propaganda is more readily available than the current usable past, as well. It should also not be taken for granted that Russia remains an open society, albeit one where certain discussions are managed in the public space. The lack of consensus over the usable past means pushing an unpopular narrative could expose and widen existing fractures in society.

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[12] Miguel Vasquez Linan, 'History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin's Russia', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43 2010, p.173.

Secondly, the Russian state is continuously seeking a new basis for legitimacy, particularly because one party and president has ruled for most of the twenty-first century. It is not uncommon in democracies for parties and leaders to seek new forms of legitimacy. Russia's democratic system is young and dysfunctional, the politicians have been in power for a long time and all grew up under authoritarian communism. The past has proven a reliable legitimisation instrument in Russia before, meaning it will likely be used again. However, there is an underlying fear among Russian lawmakers of chaos and instability due to Russia's historical experience. While Putin's first presidency was based on order and stability, his third term was defined by a standoff with the West (see Chapter One). Meanwhile, his most recent term (2018-) is characterised by economic redistribution, as Western sanctions in 2014 caused a retraction of Russia's economy and people's personal incomes (see Chapter Three). Applying references to a glorious past, or even the recent past, appeals to the population's patriotic sentiments by offering a 'Russian solution' to its own problems.

The ongoing attempt to finally put the past to bed seeks an all-inclusive way of being 'Russian' in the twenty-first century. The aim of this is to create patriotic citizens proud of the motherland and its achievements in order to clear the way for modernisation, led by a strong state. Both Putin and Dmitry Medvedev outline this in articles they wrote in 2008 ('Go Russia') and 2012 ('Russia Muscles Up') before the start of their premierships, analysed later in this volume. Yet, here also lies what is arguably the biggest obstacle for any Russian government and president. This takes a substantial amount of effort to create and enforce. As the research in this book will show, there is no guarantee or enough evidence to suggest that the population is buying into it. While Putin's popularity remained incredibly high, only declining in his fourth term, and patriotic sentiments hold stronger, the research carried out for this book has shown the population is equally prone to rejecting the narrative as they are to buy into it. At the same time, many more remain ambivalent and uninterested altogether. A better-known example would be A.V. Filippov's teacher handbook funded by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2007, which attracted enormous criticism for its portrayal of the Stalin era. Most teachers interviewed, meanwhile, had never even heard of it (see Chapter Five). Then again, as this book will demonstrate, it reflects that the narrative is more symbolic rather than a deep search for the truth and soul of the country. History is a source of mobilisation, but only if it is creative enough to convince

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