

## **From the EDITORS**

# **“SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY” AND THE END OF HISTORY**

Usually people live in harmony with their history until at some point they realize that they have changed themselves so much that they can no longer relate to conventional narratives of their past. Exactly twenty years ago Francis Fukuyama conceived of the collapse of the post-Yalta world order as the “end of history.” In his interpretation it was the end of the historical epoch marked by the division of the world into two ideological camps and the ever-present threat of a third world war and the advent of ideological dictatorship. Fukuyama’s optimistic vision of triumph over history can be contrasted with a symmetrical view of defeat by history, as documented by Marc Bloch in his famous book. Sixty years ago, in a Norman garden, ““Are we to believe that history has betrayed us?” one of us cried.”<sup>1</sup> A similar dissatisfaction with history is demonstrated by the current political leadership of the Russian Federation. However, this dissatisfaction differed from both the optimistic vision of Fukuyama and the pessimism of Bloch’s interlocutors. In the traditional spirit of Russian uniqueness, Russian rulers expect not the end of history but its resumption from the point of rupture in 1991, whereas the blame is placed not on the historical process, but on those who study and interpret history. Judging by numerous recent public statements by Russian politicians and sworn historians of various ranks, they believe that by routing out “falsified” historical versions they will overcome the “end

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bloch. *The Historian’s Craft*. New York, 1953. P. 6.

of history” of the USSR and restore the lost grandeur to the contemporary Russian state.

In this issue, with its focus on human agency in the production of knowledge in an imperial situation, the editors could not avoid discussing the evolving campaign against the “falsification of history.” Fighting a temptation to dismiss this campaign as yet another demonstration of Russia’s special path and the labile cognitive system of its rulers, the editors decided to broaden the discussion by including cases of politics of history in other post-Soviet states. Common to all these cases are problems of coming to terms with the traumatic past, the politics of historical memory, and the politics of retribution and legal adjudication of problems involving historical judgment. The cases of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland testify that politicians are tempted to manipulate the past and impose on society a normative version of historical memory and interpretation in contested situations or fragile political consensus. At the same time, this discussion also reveals the distinctiveness of the Russian case.

### ***The Historical Method of Disinformation***

As Isabelle de Kéghel reminds us in her essay published below, the origins of systematic attempts by the government to control the study and teaching of Russian history date back to at least 2001. The sixtieth-anniversary celebrations of the end of World War II in Moscow in 2005 were tarnished when the presidents of the Baltic countries declined to attend. This scandal brought to the fore the sensitive problem of the historical link between the victory over Nazi Germany and the imposition of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The constantly escalating critique of “revisionists” culminated in 2009. In February, a minister and leader of the United Russia ruling party, Sergei Shoigu, proposed that all instances of denial of the USSR’s victory in World War II would be subject to criminal prosecution. In April, the State Duma accepted for consideration the draft law “On Counteracting the Rehabilitation of Nazism, Nazi Criminals, and Their Accomplices in the Newly Independent States on the Territory of the Former USSR.” In May, President Medvedev authorized the creation of a special Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts at Falsifying History that Damage Russia’s Interests. On August 28, the commission met for the first time, dominated by directors of law enforcement agencies and senior staff of the president’s administration.

These efforts to institutionalize the suppression of “wrong” history are accompanied by the systematic public statements of Russian leaders on the

politics of history in neighboring countries. They authoritatively convey the only true interpretation of the events of 1945, 1941, and particularly of the summer and autumn of 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Soviet invasion of Poland, etc.). Such hyperactivity fits so naturally into the political culture of “special operations” that have become prevalent in Russia over the past decade, that one cannot help but ask whether we are witnessing another attempt to achieve certain political goals through a combination of provocation and disinformation, under the cover of noisy propaganda.

The most obvious motives for the “falsification” campaign can be found in the sphere of foreign policy. Over the past decade, the Russian authorities have purposefully severed all allied ties with neighboring countries. In relations with the European Union (EU), the priority is given to direct bilateral contacts with “great powers” while new EU members (the immediate neighbors of the Russian Federation) are virtually ignored. This strategy makes it inadmissible to compare Russia with the former socialist countries – now EU members, including acknowledgment of the general problem of the communist legacy, not to mention its condemnation. At the same time, a series of international scandals and fiascos has seriously undermined Russia’s own pretense to the status of “great” (or at least regional) power. Under these circumstances, ideologists of the present regime in Russia find comfort in the famous saying of emperor Alexander III: “Russia has only two allies, its Army and its Navy.” They forget to add that today this may refer only to the virtual army and navy, namely, the combat-ready armada of the Soviet army as it existed between 1945 and 1953. Such symbolic “borrowing” from the past therefore implies a compensatory identification with the Soviet period not just through glorification of the bygone days but also by desperate defense of the “good name and reputation” of the old regime (a recent illustration of that is a scandalous political assault on the restaurant Anti-Soviet for its “offensive” name). This is what distinguishes today’s Russia from examples of patriotic hysteria in other countries: in Russia, it is no longer about the “glorious *past*,” as the past has become incorporated into present-day political discourse to such an extent that it is beginning to determine the logic of behavior. Historical self-identification with Stalin’s epoch once again, as in the 1970s, made the theme of military defeats and war crimes (which by themselves cannot “deny” the fact of heroic victory in 1945) taboo. In the 1970s, these topics posed personal threats to the aging Soviet marshals who participated in those events, while today the state’s mobilization of virtual historical might requires silencing any circumstances that could call into question the righteousness of that might. Self-identification with *that* past

makes the present regime in Russia an accomplice to any acknowledged mistakes and crimes of Stalin's Soviet Union, inasmuch as allowing it to look like a proud heir to the great accomplishments of the Soviet era. There is much more at stake than history!

Another obvious political reason for the unprecedented obsession with history as demonstrated by the Duma deputies and the president's administration is the domestic situation in Russia. Despite the growing ideological pressure of the past decade, a greater social cohesion has not been achieved. It was expected that the rooting out of pluralism in public discussions would result in unanimity of the population. Instead, the liquidation of the channels of expression and articulation of alternative public opinions simply degraded "opinions" to unstructured and ambiguous "ferment." Unable to find an adequate mouthpiece for itself in the "fixed" journalism and party system, this mental ferment becomes a weak foundation for official ideology but fertile breeding ground for various holistic antisystem movements. The establishment feels nostalgia for the "Soviet people" of past decades, deprived of subjectivity of their own, passive and patriotic, overwhelmed by the grand picture of their glorious past.

***Russia today is a country that does not understand that the USSR was its greatest achievement in the previous century.*** – And this prevents her from understanding the modern world, which is largely a creation of the Soviet Union, and prevents her from building the system of education, building the armed forces.

**Nothing post-Soviet exists, and nothing post-Soviet is relevant any longer.** Since there is no longer such an internationally recognized reality as "Soviet," the announcement of oneself as "post-Soviet" provides no rights or privileges.<sup>2</sup>

These are not quotations from official statements in 2009. These ideas were expressed many years ago by Gleb Pavlovsky, the man who formulated all of the key ideological concepts of Putin's regime, from "sovereign democracy" to "Putin—the national leader." His uncomplicated project of reactionary social engineering was aimed at cloning the Soviet Union in modern Russia, restoring its main features while adding just one novelty, but a very important one: large-scale financial compensations for "political managers," proportional to the power resources at their disposal. A special "Russian sovereignty" that Pavlovsky was fond of discussing in the early

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<sup>2</sup> Gleb Pavlovsky. Vyrvanoe iz konteksta [December 31, 2002] // [http://old.russ.ru/politics/20021231\\_gp-pr.html](http://old.russ.ru/politics/20021231_gp-pr.html) (last consulted 29.09.2009).

2000s means little more than granting the state full and uncontrolled authority, initiative, and the supreme right of property, which can be partially and temporally delegated to political managers. In the Marxist language of “historical materialism,” this social model was famously described as the “Asiatic mode of production,” where the people were assigned the role of “sharecroppers” of the magnificent state-nation. In this social model, the mystical body of “eternal statehood” is the fundamental historical category. In practice, it is represented by the caste of managers, who also redistribute state revenues, while the common people are privileged to identify their interests with grand historical polity, otherwise alienated from their will and needs. This ideology of timeless state-nation makes it impossible to acknowledge any of its past wrongdoings or crimes in the present; in order to embrace the state as the embodiment of the nation, people should be presented with an unblemished image of the state. As was formulated by Count Alexander von Benckendorff (head of the secret service under Nicholas I), for whom the mystical monarchy was more important than actual residents of the empire (just as for Pavlovsky, the idea of state as a geopolitically defined apparatus of power is the supreme reality),

Russia’s past was admirable, its present is more than magnificent and as for its future – it is beyond anything that the boldest mind can imagine.

Only such a version of Russian history can persuade Russian citizens about the God-given nature of the authorities, to whom they can unhesitatingly hand over their right of historical choice and initiative. This is why a critical analysis of history is being qualified now not just as hostile “falsification,” but as an assault on the fundamentals of social order entailing legal prosecution.

Qualification of academic or even ideological disagreements as a legal offense testifies not only to the authoritarian nature of the regime but also to its readiness to secure its dominance through the neoliberal rhetoric of universal juridical regulation of all aspects of social life (from kids kissing in a kindergarten to rumors about the health condition of the first person in the state). Given the government’s tight control over the courts, it is only too convenient to refer to some unquestionable legislative provision as a decisive argument in resolving a conflict that in principle cannot be resolved without considering its context and circumstances, merely on the grounds of the abstract and “case-insensitive” letter of the law. The function of the court is then reduced to the technical identification of an alleged misdemeanor with a proper article of the corresponding law – just as in the 1930s, one’s

behavior could be identified with a section of the infamous article 58 of Stalin's Criminal Code. The alternative logic of legal procedure would imply, first, the court's decision on what aspect of that particular incident can be subject to legal investigation in principle, and what should be left for regulation by other social mechanisms. Thus, in the case of a Holocaust denier, the first approach would automatically lead to a conviction on the grounds of the very fact of denial (should it be criminalized by the legislator). The second approach, on the contrary, suggests the limited applicability of legal investigation in such a case, namely, the fact of deliberate falsification of evidence and public approval and instigation of violence. In the first case, the key instrument of control and repression is associated with legislation, which can be very general and unspecific in describing the character of the criminalized activity, thus leaving room for arbitrary interpretations by the court. In the second case, the court investigates a particular situation, with very clear and unequivocal criteria for identifying a transgression. The neo-liberal legal fundamentalism becomes hostage to the authoritarian regime if the court system is corrupted, but it also needs such a regime itself in culturally heterogeneous societies with conflicting historical legacies. The all-embracing legal norm, which is indifferent to the social context, needs an equally uniform and ideologically unambiguous political order.

### ***Karl Popper and the Struggle Against Falsifications of Russian History***

Contrary to the perception of Gleb Pavlovsky, his philosophy of history and applied social engineering are not very sophisticated.<sup>3</sup> His project of counterrevolution in Russia has succeeded so far only in the de facto legitimization of corruption (as the right of political managers to handle pieces of state property) and its conversion into a cornerstone element of the regime. The conservative utopias of official ideologists and practical interests of governing the population alone cannot explain the state of demoralization that became the answer of the community of historians to the campaign against "falsifications of history." Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect coordinated actions of protest against ideological pressure on scholarship: since there is no political opposition in the country, it would be unfair to expect the academic community to publicly express its views. The deplorable state of the Russian historical profession became evident in its response to real and fictitious attempts to "falsify" Russian history – in the sense of Karl Popper's theory of knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: "I am already frequently reproached: you are speaking too complicatedly." Ibid.

As is well known, in this approach a theory is recognized as scientific (i.e., different from religion and other forms of irrational knowledge) only if it is falsifiable. This means that it can be proved wrong under certain circumstances or by extending the range of empirical evidence. From this perspective, the claim of President Medvedev that some historical events should not be critically reassessed implies nothing but a repudiation of the scientificity of our knowledge about the past:

There are things that should be perceived as a canon, in my view, say, the events of recent times – World War II, the Great Patriotic War, who did what, who attacked whom, who won, who lost 27 million [people], and so on. And we cannot conceal such dogmas, or doctrines if you wish, because they are already universally accepted in the history of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the reaction of historians to the challenge of “falsification” of the normative historical narrative tests the scientific validity of their thinking and methods. In this respect, reaction to the archetypal “falsifying” text, *Icebreaker*, by Viktor Suvorov, is particularly telling.<sup>5</sup> Published back in 1987, for over twenty years this book has remained a major irritant to Russian official historiography, periodically attracting more or less attention. After a relatively calm period in the 1990s, in recent years we have witnessed an exacerbation of attacks on *Icebreaker*. According to Popper, falsification suggests nothing about the truthfulness of a hypothesis, only something about its scientificity. Those historians who find the very *possibility* of Suvorov’s “falsification” inconceivable thus exclude from the sphere of scientific investigation a whole range of problems, well exceeding the topic of Stalin’s hypothetical “first strike:” the problem of the strategic priorities of Soviet foreign policy; the geopolitical imagination of Stalin and his entourage; their perception of the nature and mission of the USSR (beyond the official communist rhetoric) and of the imperial legacy; the evolution of military doctrine; the structure of the economy and the priorities of economic planning. The same applies to “falsifying” interpretations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the subsequent Soviet invasion of Poland, occupation of the Baltic countries, and the Katyn massacre. Essentially, the entire early Soviet period becomes exempt from scientific analysis, including topics not related directly to World War II.

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<sup>4</sup> Prezident v Velikom Novgorode obsudil voprosy sokhraneniia kul’turnogo naslediiia Rossii (18.09.2009) // <http://www.1tv.ru/news/culture/151977> (last consulted 30.09.2009).

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Suvorov. *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* New York, 1990.

Besides the fundamentally nonscientific nature of the struggle against “falsifications,” the second main aspect of the new approach to Russian history is its principal dependency and reactivity. Polish POW officers were shot in 1940 because first the Poles had murdered thousands of Red soldiers back in 1920; the pact with Hitler was signed in 1939 because of the Munich treaty of 1938; Poland was divided between Germany and the USSR because Poles had always been aggressive themselves (since the seventeenth century). The naive attempt to find historical alibis results in the complete renunciation of any independent subjectivity of Russia, its rulers, Comrade Stalin personally, and today’s historians. This explanatory mode automatically forces historians and politicians into a colonial situation, in which every meaningful (“historical”) decision becomes motivated exclusively by supreme foreign will (usually, of the malicious West). Industrialization, international treaties, entry into the war, the beginning of the Cold War – everything is explained as a reaction to outside influences. Thus Russia is deprived not just of history as a scholarly discipline, but also of History as a manifestation of national subjectivity and will. Paradoxically, in their desire to present Russia as a great power that should ignore any foreign standards, Russian politicians and historians catering to them produce a fairly miserable image. Their efforts condemn Russia to the secondary role of constant self-justification vis-à-vis “enemies” and “falsifiers,” and to self-perception only by contrast with somebody else’s (and therefore inevitably alien) positive scenarios. A “sovereign democracy” with an untouchable history.

The main and immediate result of the ongoing campaign against falsifications of history will be something that Russian authorities have tried to prevent by all means: a principal rupture with the Soviet past. As recently as 2004, in publications within the annual journal theme dedicated to the problem of historical memory, authors have written in *Ab Imperio* about the difficulties of the radical break with the Soviet legacy. The Soviet regime existed in Russia and Ukraine not for 12 or even 40 years (as the totalitarian regimes in Germany or in Eastern Europe), but for more than 70 years, or the lifespan of three generations, thus occupying the entire immediate historical background of our contemporaries. The revolutionary component of that regime, which continued to evaporate every year, nevertheless provided a remarkable degree of emancipation and social mobility of the masses. Last but not least, the life experience of the Soviet people indeed cannot be reduced to crimes against humanity, and one cannot discard the heroism and accomplishments of millions of Soviets. All of these reservations are valid only if we are talking about the problem-ridden Soviet history as one

that has irreversibly become a matter of the past. Problems still remained to be solved, including insufficiently resolute condemnation of crimes, more complex analysis of achievements, and the search for a formula of historical reconciliation with its own past. But by proclaiming Soviet history, in its most conservative version, the actual foundation of modern political identity of the regime and its citizens, the authorities have confronted Russian society with a choice: either to identify themselves with Stalinism in its simplified and glorified version, or, equally simplifying the matter, to reject it as a profoundly fascist social order. Unfortunately, the chance for a more nuanced and productive perception of history has been missed, and this is not the historians' fault.