

# Protecting “Our” History

## Politics, Memory, and the Russian State

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On May 14, 2009, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev signed Decree No. 549, “On the Commission under the President of the Russian Federation for Countering Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests.” Though disturbing, the emergence of this document was hardly surprising and reflected a growing trend in Russian politics. In this memo, I explore the logic and political significance of this “struggle for historical truth.” I demonstrate that it is impossible to argue against the conservative nationalist position by offering “more accurate” interpretations of the past. What is instead required is a thorough reflection on the role played by history in current political life and on the role of politics in establishing a consensual reading of the past.

### **The Regime of Truth**

Calls for more vigorous state interference in the public debate about Russia’s authoritarian past, and about the significance of World War II in particular, are nothing new to observers of Russian politics. The pompous 60th anniversary celebration of Victory Day in 2005, deliberately designed to replicate Soviet-era festivities, was a critical moment. Around this time, textbooks telling the story of crimes committed in the name of communism were quietly removed from high school libraries. An infamous schoolbook presenting Joseph Stalin as “an effective manager” appeared soon after; despite public outcry, it has now reached tens of thousands of students. Prime minister and former president Vladimir Putin has, on a number of occasions, spoken out against “comparing Stalin to Hitler,” while Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov has argued that the Stalinist purges were no more than an “excess.”

As early as May 2007, the Federal Security Service (FSB) declared that the struggle

against “falsifications of history of the Motherland and its security services” would be a top priority. In February 2008, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a roundtable on the topic but preempted discussion by proclaiming it “a task of national importance” to oppose distortions of history. In a video blog posted two days before Victory Day celebrations in 2009, Medvedev himself complained about the proliferation of “controversial” interpretations of World War II history and the need to “again and again defend facts that a very short time ago seemed absolutely self-evident.”

The May 2009 decree appeared against the background of a new legislative initiative, proposed by the ruling United Russia party a month prior. Titled “On Countering the Rehabilitation of Nazism, Nazi Criminals, and Their Accomplices in the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union,” the legislation, if adopted, will criminalize any activity “aimed at the restoration of rights, glorification, or restoration of the reputation of Nazi criminals, accomplices of Nazism, and their organizations.” Notably, the wording of the bill suggests extraterritoriality; “rehabilitation of Nazism” is to be punishable under the Russian Administrative and Criminal Code regardless of where it has allegedly been committed. The draft specifically mentions academic organizations and mass media, making it clear that both social scientists and journalists must watch their step.

Signed less than a month after the publication of the draft bill, Medvedev’s decree indicates political support for the ruling party’s initiative. Taken together, the two documents suggest the intent to endow one version of national history with official status while punishing anyone who dares to offer an alternative view. Concern mounts when one looks at the composition of the Presidential Commission. The academic community’s representation is limited to the directors of the two most prominent institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, while the security services have a much more prominent presence. It is easy to see why Russian historians and political scientists, as well as many colleagues around the world, feel uneasy about these developments.

## **The Need for a Common Debate**

Before sounding the alarm, however, it would be wise to add a few more pieces to the puzzle. First of all, it is important to understand the meaning of these recent events within the context of Russian identity politics. References to the victory over Nazism reaffirm Russia’s image of itself not simply as a great power, but as a great *European* power. The verdicts of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg constitute the reference point for Russia’s legal endeavor against the “rehabilitation of Nazism” and are treated by Russia as a cornerstone of the contemporary European political order. Nuremberg is sometimes supplemented by the invocation of the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences and of the Helsinki Final Act, which, in the eyes of the Russian public, secured a key role for the Soviet Union in shaping the European legal and political order. Russia may often stand alone in its interpretation of these historical events and their contemporary relevance, but it strives to avoid accusations of unilateralism. From Moscow’s point of view, Russia is not acting against Europe but, instead, advocating an alternative interpretation of what Europe means.

The effort to define the meaning of Europe is a major battleground in contemporary global politics. In a July 2009 open letter to President Barack Obama, a group of Central and Eastern European intellectuals and former political leaders called on the United States to “reaffirm its vocation as a European power” in the face of Russian “revisionism.” Diverging definitions of European values can be, and have been, a source of violent conflict. However, there is still a qualitative difference between the communist revolutionary utopia of the USSR, which saw itself as incompatible with the existing capitalist world order, and Russia’s “sovereign democracy,” which claims to offer just another interpretation of the liberal democratic values supposedly shared by all. Russia’s attachment to Europe can be a bridge for establishing a working relationship with the West at a time when a genuine partnership seems beyond reach.

For this to happen, however, we must thoroughly differentiate between two modes of speaking about the past. As professionals and/or citizens, we regularly engage in an open-ended debate about certain historical facts. This first genre, with all its diverse forms, is modeled on ideal-type academic debate. At the same time, we must deal with socially and politically established regimes of truth (sometimes referred to as “collective memory”). These two modes influence each other, and we have to operate within both, but we are well-served by acknowledging their dissimilarities.

In academic debate, the result is not known in advance; even when established, it is always temporary and subject to critical revision. Skepticism and dissent are encouraged, and there is no uniformity of subject matter or method. Insofar as such an approach is unified globally, it is via a scientific unity of communication based on an assumption of universal rationality and a set of rules recognized by all. Academic ethics is about making a convincing case for one’s method and result, while respecting the work of others.

By comparison, the social and political approach to history is about substance more than form. It is based on the image of a good society. We engage in politics to bring this image closer to reality. Every one of us has our own ideas about good and bad, but our collective existence is made possible by the fact that large groups of people (sometimes whole nations, or even all humanity) share certain norms and beliefs. Furthermore, to see where we are going, we need to know from whence we came. We need to know who our heroes, villains, and traitors are, which means we need a common platform for telling stories about our past. A regime of historical truth is a necessary condition for the existence of a political community.

Different nations often share histories. More often than not, however, their regimes of historical truth are at odds. They have different heroes and villains, and the heroes of one people are often the traitors of another. Such disagreements can create significant tensions within interstate relations, as evidenced by the heated debates around such issues as the Ukrainian famine of 1932–33, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the killing of Polish officers in Katyn in 1940, or the role of Joseph Stalin in the victory over Nazism. It is quite telling that the Central and East European authors of the open letter to Obama first cite “claims to our own historical experiences” on their list of concerns relating to Russia, ahead of security, economics, and energy. Since 1945, Europeans have made great progress in their search for a shared ground for historical judgment. In the real

world, however, we will never be able to completely eliminate disagreements in this area (if this were even desirable).

Apart from the tensions that arise between countries due to different regimes of historical truth, a tension inevitably exists between the two modes of reasoning about history. In open-ended debate among experts and citizens, with a characteristic commitment to critical academic scrutiny, the fixity of political decisions is often undermined. A scholarly statement that is fully legitimate under the rules of academic communication may be perceived as subversive and unethical from the point of view of the prevailing political consensus. What is worse, it might be read as playing into the hands of the nation’s enemy, or even as directly sponsored by hostile external forces. Liberal democracies, with their deep commitment to the freedom of expression, are less likely to produce such a defensive reaction. Even they have their limits on what can be said about the past, however. In many other societies, with a thinner layer of democratic experience, a belligerent rejection almost instinctively results.

Recent attempts by Russia’s ruling class to interfere with the historical debate are a desperate effort to fix a regime of historical truth convenient for both rulers and ruled, but which patently goes against the pan-European trend. There are two ways we, as experts, citizens, or decisionmakers, can disagree with Medvedev’s decree and the bill sponsored by United Russia. One way is to say that the regime of truth they are trying to establish has very little to do with the truth as such, as it deliberately ignores many crimes committed in the name of the Soviet people. This, in effect, is what the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly did in a July 2009 resolution that associated Stalinism with Nazism.

In order to persuasively reject a political regime of “truth,” however, we first need to defend the general right to engage in unrestricted debate about the past. While aware of the inevitable tension between the two modes of historical communication and of the need for *some* fixed history upon which to base our communal existence, we must nevertheless raise our voices in defense of the right to be skeptical and independent in judgment.

An honest debate about the past must precede, rather than be preempted by, political decisions about the good and bad moments in our history. The uncritical insistence of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly on the equivalence between Stalinism and Nazism is likely to be accepted only by those who already agree with it. In Russia and some other post-Soviet states, this and similar moves will cause a defensive reaction that will undoubtedly strengthen the hand of those wishing to narrow public space further and to stifle academic freedom. Such alternative attempts to protect a “correct” regime of historical truth are at best premature and at worst counterproductive.

What is needed is a global debate about the key turning points in twentieth-century history. This may lead, in time, to the establishment of a truly pan-European regime of truth. To make this possible, and to prevent the debate from turning into a clash of histories, we must be patient, open-minded, and committed to the freedom of expression as a necessary condition for any sound historical judgment.

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