

History as an Old-New Political Tool in Eurasia

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History used to be the major ideological discipline in the USSR. Joseph Stalin's "Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)" was a single-volume version of the dominant ideology that included everything Soviet citizens needed to know about politics and society. During Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw" and Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, historical publications about the crimes of the previous epoch drove new ideologies further along the road of reform.

By the 1990s, however, history practically disappeared from public debate in Russia, while the entire previously-known histories of most other post-Soviet states were altered by new versions of national pasts, but almost without discussion. Social reformers no longer needed the past to justify their policies, while the globalizing economy rejected specifically national histories. The first decade after the establishment of new states focused on the future, not the painful or heroic past.

The tide has since turned. In the 2000s, gradually strengthening national identities reached the stage where they began to lead to public conflicts. Divergent historical narratives have created many problems in bilateral relations of post-Soviet states and even in their domestic policies. New national histories contradict each other and, in some instances, construct a "historical enemy" out of a neighbor or even create internal tensions. This trend is a challenge for responsible politicians in all post-Soviet states, as well as for historians.

The Russian State Regains Control over History

Beginning in 2004, the Russian state began to try regaining control over history textbooks. The first casualty of this struggle was a textbook by Igor Dolutsky that challenged high school students by including a provocative assessment of Vladimir Putin's regime by two opposition figures. The Russian Ministry of Education excluded the textbook from a recommended list, and it subsequently disappeared from classrooms.

In 2007, then-president Putin endorsed another school textbook that provided pupils with the emerging “official” view of recent Russian history. The main purpose of the book, *History of Russia, 1945-2007* (by Alexander Filippov, Alexander Danilov, and Anatoly Utkin), was to eliminate from the schools any particularly harsh criticism of the regimes that existed in twentieth-century Russia and the USSR. Critical assessments were “counterbalanced” by a list of positive achievements.

Since then, Putin and his associates have repeatedly insisted that to educate a “patriot” of the country requires the teaching of a heroic history, and that dark pages of the national past are not proper subjects for school textbooks. Many historians and human rights activists have condemned this position and the new textbook, introduced into Russian schools in 2008. Others have been more cautious, stating that while such a view of Russian history is possible, the state’s exclusive role in determining which versions will be taught is problematic.

Russian television also engages the public with quasi-historical constructs aimed at delivering a political message. A prime example of this approach was a “documentary” entitled “Death of an Empire,” filmed by Father Tikhon (Shevkunov), an Orthodox priest and, allegedly, Putin’s spiritual counselor. Built on clear comparisons between Byzantium and contemporary Russia, the main message of the hour-long film was that Russia should be wary of trusting too much in the West. According to the film, it was this mistake, not Turkish conquest, that ruined the Empire.

After the film aired (early in 2008), the British *Economist* noted that “[i]n the minds and language of the ex-spooks who dominate Russia, history is a powerful tool.” While controversial, however, the official Russian approach to history is not unique. There is no direct link between being a “spook” and using history as a political tool. Other leaders in post-Soviet Eurasia have been just as ready to fight neighbors on the battlefield of historical textbooks. Indeed, the processes that occur in Russian history education still tend to arouse less controversy than those that occur in other states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Ukrainian History and the Russian “Other”

In February 2008, then-president Putin met with his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yushchenko. Contrary to expectations, the main subject of their talk was not natural gas supplies but differences in the teaching of their nations’ common history. Over the course of negotiations, Putin even suggested to Yushchenko that they should jointly celebrate the 300th anniversary of Russia’s victory over Sweden at the Battle of Poltava, as well as the 1020th anniversary of the christening of medieval Rus, the state formation both nations regard as their predecessor.

During the last two decades, Ukraine’s national history has changed dramatically, incorporating as new national heroes formerly negative figures in Russian history like the 17th-18th century Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa or the twentieth century anti-Soviet rebel Stepan Bandera. In Russian texts, both these figures remain on the negative side of the historical ledger. Ukraine’s Stalin-era famine, or *holodomor*, has also been a basis of Ukrainian-Russian historical dispute. A result of state extraction of agricultural production for the sake of industrialization and crop failure, the tragic famine of the early 1930s led to the death of millions of peasants, in Ukraine but also in southern Russia. Authorities and historians in Russia argue that the famine was spread over all

peasant regions, that Stalin's regime was cruel but ethnically blind, and that the most ardent executors of the inhuman policies in the region were ethnic Ukrainians. Ukraine, on the other hand, officially insists that the famine was planned and organized as an intentional genocide of the Ukrainian people. This concept is supported by the Ukrainian state, propagated on the international stage, and included in school textbooks. Such an interpretation of historical events results in the deepening of the gap between Ukrainians and Russians.

New national historiographies are present not only in Ukraine, but also in the South Caucasus and the Baltic states. These stand in contradiction to Russian history textbooks that continue to insist, for instance, on a peaceful union of peoples under the Russian imperial scepter. In some states, including in the Baltics and Georgia, historical reinterpretation has included the opening of museums of Russian/Soviet "occupation." Within Russia, these "new histories" of neighboring states are viewed as offensive and unjust.

Why and What For?

While such new historical narratives might appear to have been created specifically to produce conflict between formerly fraternal nations, the initial rationale for them was different.

The states of post-Soviet Eurasia are still in the midst of nation building, a process accomplished in Western Europe by the mid-nineteenth century. This task involves identity construction, which in turn requires the codification of a national language, the invention of national heroes, commemoration of shared tragedies, and, typically, the selection of a "constitutive Other" that helps the nation define itself. All such tasks prescribed by the constructivist theory of national formation force national histories to confront those of their neighbors. National heroes should not be the same as those of neighboring states, as the latter typically fought against each other. National tragedies, in turn, tend to be caused by a neighbor and play a key role in establishing the neighbor as the "Other" that helps the nation gain awareness of itself.

Throughout history, Russia has been an ideal "Other" for most if not all of its neighbors: large, unpredictable, and having a complicated history of relations with all of its neighbors. Thanks in part to new historical education, the national identity of today's generation of youth is defined in terms of alienation and historical hatred. Such a development does not help reconcile peoples or settle political problems. Nonetheless, Russia will retain the role of "Other" until its neighbors have no doubts about their own national identity.

While Russia would seem to be the most suitable "Other" for its neighbors, it is by no means the only one. Abkhazia, for instance, has Georgia (and we may recall how historical arguments helped propel these two peoples to a bloody split), and Armenia and Azerbaijan have each other. Yet every nation in post-Soviet Eurasia builds itself in approximately the same fashion, which makes history textbooks so divergent.

In Russia, too, the creation of a post-colonial discourse has proven difficult. The history of Russia is taught with just minor alterations from the Soviet period, while whole regions of the former Empire have disappeared from school texts, so children gain knowledge of their history from questionable sources like television series or the statements of politicians (Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov is especially active in this field).

Choosing to officially commemorate the 1612 expulsion of Polish occupiers from the Kremlin instead of the Bolshevik Revolution was a flashpoint in the political use of history.

Certainly, Russia is also trying to reinvent its identity, with new meanings of symbols, history, and (re)construction of the Other (in this case, “the West,” NATO, or the United States). However, this identity is more traditional and has aroused less commotion.

The Domestic Dimension

At least in some states, the tension between national identity and history is not only a foreign policy concern but also a domestic one: regional identities are being formed that challenge, for instance, all-Russian and all-Ukrainian myths (like Cossacks or Crimean Tatars). Siberia, Tatarstan, and the North Caucasus have had different relations with the imperial center during various historical epochs, raising questions regarding how they now teach their local histories.

Last winter, for instance, Don Cossack officials demanded the rehabilitation of Pyotr Krasnov, a Cossack leader in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1920 who later allied with Nazi Germany when it invaded the USSR and was hanged in 1946 as a war criminal. Cossack leaders claimed, using the model of rehabilitation Ukrainians used for Stepan Bandera and his peer Roman Shukhevich, that Krasnov fought for the Cossack “nation” against Russian “occupiers.” They also encouraged regional historians to write a history of the Cossack “nation,” which would inevitably have clashed with the nationally distributed textbooks. Nationwide indignation, culminating in Putin’s personal interference, forced Cossack ideologues to repudiate their proposal. However, the idea behind the move was clear, and a scary one for Russian national identity. It also raised questions about the modes of the political usage of history that have persisted since the nation building of the nineteenth century. Does nation building continue to create more and more “Nations,” disintegrating the larger ones, or do we need to rethink all our concepts of “Nation” and “History”?

What to Do, What Not to Do

Some experts call such manipulation of history “historical politics.” Their main recommendation is to leave history to historians and encourage historians from different states to communicate with each other. This much is clear: politicians should not invoke historical arguments if their intent is to resolve international disputes and not to encourage them.

Yet, nation building demands national heroes, tragedies, and “Others,” which historians can provide. This raises several questions. How should the dark pages of (especially common) history be treated in school texts? Should states appear as pure and noble past victims, even if this alienates Russia, or should responsibility be shared? Especially in states that have moved or seek to move toward Europe and the United States, the construction of anti-Russian images in national histories has helped the current Russian regime employ rhetoric to gain support against the “foreign threat” of the West.

In March 2008, the human rights nongovernmental organization Memorial publicly addressed all states of post-Soviet Eurasia on the issue of “National Images of the Past:

The Twentieth Century and War of Memories.” Memorial proposed the organization of an International History Forum, a free association of NGOs, research centers, and educational institutions that would provide a forum for an ongoing exchange of opinions about conflicting historical events of the twentieth century in Eastern and Central Europe. This seems a very important and timely initiative.

Whatever the format, there is an urgent need for the professional collaboration of historians throughout the region. We should understand our responsibility in the face of political demands and agendas. Joint publications, conferences, or at the very least, a dialogue of texts should be pursued in the states of post-Soviet Eurasia, still very much engaged in the building of nations.

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