Rethinking the Revolutionary Past

How Color Revolutions Have Led to New Interpretations of Russian History

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Contemporary historical writing in Eastern and Central Europe is filled with "presentism," the idea that major past events should be treated in a way that supports the pursuit of specific, usually political, goals. One prominent example of this is history writing for the purpose of nation-building. In newly independent states, whether in the post-Soviet space or elsewhere, this typically involves the creation of new pantheons of heroes and "historical foes." Other examples include the re-evaluation of the diplomatic failures and betrayals that led to two world wars and the occurrence of genocide in Europe, the study of ethnic and class-based purges, and many more dark and difficult pages of the last century. In many cases, such history writing incorporates different "sides" that are easily associated with contemporary political entities.

The latest foray of post-Soviet "historical politics" into academia developed in the aftermath of the so-called color revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. These events delegitimized notions of revolution and popular sovereignty in the eyes of many local elites. At the same time, anti-Western sentiments were projected into history by television and new textbooks. To grasp the tectonic shift which has taken place in the dominant historical interpretation of these ideas, we need to briefly describe major patterns of past narratives, specifically those disseminated in school textbooks and the public sphere.

Three Dominant Historical Narratives

The Soviet Narrative

Soviet historiographic tradition elevated to a central position in school textbooks the narrative of the "Russian liberation movement," from the eighteenth-century revolutionary writings of poet-philosopher Alexander Radishchev to the nineteenth-century Decembrist revolt, *narodnik* movements, and spread of Marxism. This tradition held that the Great October Revolution was the highest point of the liberation movement, including the struggle of the non-Russian peoples of the empire. The focus in the Soviet era of Russian history was the Great Patriotic War and the USSR's anti-capitalist struggle as the leader of a "progressive mankind," marching from a past of colonialism and dependency to a bright socialist future.

When Joseph Stalin sought to strengthen the power of the state, some of the anti-colonial themes of early Soviet historiography were eliminated, while powerful Russian czars like Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great became positive personages of historical propaganda.

The pendulum began to swing back in the 1960s, as late Soviet historiography expressed a strong interest in the mass and revolutionary movements of the imperial period. Historians during the Brezhnev era, for example, heavily criticized Nicholas I (1825-1855) while lauding the activity of the Decembrists. Some historians employed such portrayals to subversively represent the relationship between Soviet rulers and dissidents.

The Post-Soviet Narrative

The narrative of the 1990s began to take shape during the late Soviet years of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. During this time, historians emphasized liberal developments that had been suppressed by the state and viewed the Russian liberation movement's ultimate success to be not the October Revolution but *perestroika* and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Bolsheviks' ascent to power was forced into the shadows of the democratic revolution of February 1917.

Authors of many new historical works promoted the subject of the suffering and struggle of ordinary people during both Czarist and Soviet rule. Even during his lifetime, Stalin was compared to earlier Russian "tyrant-czars" such as Ivan the Terrible, but it was only in the *perestroika* era that such a comparison was construed to be a negative one. Those who saw in Stalin a reflection of Peter the Great condemned them both for putting the interests of the state above the lives of the people.

The "Post-Color Revolution" Narrative

The next major shift in the official version of Russian history was an outcome of the color revolutions. Today, Russian leaders' understanding of the color revolutions includes three components that have influenced their interpretation of the past: Western influence, mass activity, and the inability of the state to manage the situation.

A new ideology began to be introduced in the aftermath of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, which included a large dose of anti-Western sentiment, negative assessments of all forms of public activism, and a highly critical attitude toward participation in any kind of "revolution." This ideology has not been constrained to politics. It has also constituted a major departure from the historical narratives that previously dominated the educational system and public sphere.

Most importantly, this historical project has not only dealt with recent events but has gone far back in time in search of historic events in need of re-evaluation. One prominent example of this is the 2008 television documentary "Death of an Empire," in which the fall of the Byzantine Empire is interpreted as a result of Constantinople's misplaced trust of the West rather than its military and economic weakness against Arabs and Turks. Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov), the author of the film (said to be a spiritual advisor of Vladimir Putin), clearly drew an analogy between Byzantium and contemporary Russia, finding examples of the fight against "oligarchs," the "power vertical," and the "Orange" threat in the medieval empire.

After the color revolutions, even Russia's Czarist-era liberation movement came under scrutiny. New textbooks questioned the agenda of the Decembrists and compared them to the revolutionaries that carried out the terror of late 18th century France. "If such people…were to come to power in Russia," states a new eighth-grade history textbook by Alexander Bokhanov, "a great misfortune would befall the country."

Even more striking, after the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, Russian state television aired a documentary elaborating on the old hypothesis that the Russian Revolution was organized by the Bolsheviks with German money channeled by the Kaiser's government to undermine Russia's military efforts. While such accusations have existed since 1917, it was the first time that state-owned television disseminated them to a wide audience. Later, the author of the documentary, Galina Ogurnaya, shot several other films developing the idea that the revolution was "in fact" a result of an international plot against Russia. These found their way to the national broadcast media in 2006 and 2007.

Soon the October Revolution even ceased to be an event deserving of public commemoration. In 2005, this long-lasting holiday was transformed into a commemoration of the Polish expulsion of Russians from the Kremlin in the early 17th century Time of Troubles. Anti-Western sentiments replaced revolutionary celebrations. At the same time, new history writers were more sympathetic to Czarist authorities.

This ideological shift among Russian elites has also resulted in the discouraging of all attempts to describe popular movements in sympathetic ways. Such a view has spread widely, even beyond the Kremlin-oriented part of society. Even such a liberal journalist as Yulia Latynina recently said on an Ekho Moskvy radio broadcast that "no social movement in history ever brought about the progress of mankind. The great French Revolution gave mankind nothing but terror and the guillotine."

On the contrary, new interpretations have insisted upon the artificial character of all protests, whether they were paid for or manipulated by various political forces, and have argued that elite schisms are the main cause of all mass mobilization in politics. From this point of view, the history of the "velvet revolutions" in Eastern Europe is entirely one of mass manipulation. Such a contemptuous view has also spread to new scholarly interpretations of *perestroika*. According to the new narrative, these historic developments have nothing to do with democracy. They were steered solely by political elites, and popular movements were just victims or pawns of mighty political interests.

The main intent of such revisionism appears to be to keep people quiet. Democracy as a value has been subordinated to stability. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has referred negatively to the "Ukrainianization of politics," widely understood to be a euphemism for democratization. This, it is suggested, is something Russian elites must not allow.

The other side of this approach has been to indulge all forms of "the state" in Russian history. Post-Orange authorities have tried to establish a narrative uniting Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet pasts into a sequence of "benign states" that neglects the clear gaps between phases of Russian history. This statist approach, which ascribes everything progressive in Russian history to the efforts of the state, has reached new heights in contemporary interpretations. The main intent of an (in)famous school textbook by historian Alexander Filippov was not to rehabilitate Stalin, as many understood it, but to rehabilitate the state: according to the new history, all Russia's rulers moved the country forward. Every step by the government is explained by some historical (often external) threat or challenge; no alternative motivations are considered. The textbook's concept was publicly supported by then-president Putin in 2007.

Soviet victory in World War II has stood for some time at the center of the Russian historical narrative as its most positive event, one marked by enormous sacrifice. In recent years, however, the narrative of the war has acquired new characteristics, including an anti-Western tone and an emphasis on the great organizing capacity of the state. The role of partisan (guerilla) warfare (a strong part of the discourse about the war during the Brezhnev era) has been abandoned. (It should be said that these changes cannot solely be chalked up to unilateral Russian initiatives; they have also been prompted by certain activities in Eastern Europe, particularly post-Orange Ukraine.)

Scholarly and Popular Reaction

The dramatic break with Russian historiographical tradition, supplemented by the creation of certain repressive institutions, including a commission to fight historical "falsification," eventually caused a reaction within society and the professional historians' community.

While some historians have, of course, taken part in recent developments, it is striking how united the majority of historians have appeared in their disapproval of "historical politics." Over the last two years, historians have increased their efforts at professional integration, initiating several organized campaigns (mostly Internet-based) and developing several new organizations. Among recent bestsellers is a new two-volume *History of Russia in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Andrei Zubov), which is written from an anti-statist position, building on the narrative dominant in the 1990s. The Director of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Universal History, Alexander Chubarian (whose official position should force him to side with the authorities), repeatedly expressed his rejection of the "excessive politicization" of historical science.

Distinguished international scholars are invited to Moscow to support Russian historians in their fight to preserve history. In February 2010, for example, French historian Pierre Nora, chairman of the "Liberté pour l'Histoire" association, explained to a Russian audience in the Academy of Sciences that "history is just a long series of crimes against humanity. As authors of those crimes are dead, so the laws against them are targeted against historians that study those periods and professors who teach them."

The historical community tends to see the unlimited reinterpretation of historical events for the sake of present political agendas as a gross misunderstanding of what history is supposed to be, a menace to their professional standards, and potentially dangerous. The intensity and unanimity of protest by Russia's formerly atomized historical community has played some role in bringing about the current thaw.

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