

After the Soviet Empire

Legacies and Pathways

Edited by

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Contents

Foreword XI

Craig Calhoun

Acknowledgements XIV

List of Tables XV

About the Authors XVI

Keynote Address: The International Institute of Sociology and the
Sociology of Empires, Civilizations, and Modernities XXI

Björn Wittrock

Introduction: Challenges of the Disappearance of the “Second World” 1

Sven Eliaeson, Lyudmila Harutyunyan and Larissa Titarenko

PART 1

Utility of the Classics

1 The Significance of Myrdal for Post-1989 Transformations:
His Apocryphal Letters 29

Sven Eliaeson

2 On some Observations by Max Weber about Long-Term Structural
Features of Russian Policy 54

Karl-Ludwig Ay

3 Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Situations. Legitimation of Authority
and of Social Change in the Perspective of Classical Sociological
Theory: The Cases of Russia and France 64

Christopher Schlembach

4 Heidegger within the Boundaries of Mere Reason? “Nihilism”
as a Contemporary Critical Narrative 87

Jon Wittrock

5 To Build a Nation: Alva Myrdal and the Role of Family Politics in
the Transformation of Sweden in the 1930s 108

Hedvig Ekerwald

PART 2

Rethinking the Legacy of the Second World

- 6 Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Social Sciences 135
Nikolai Genov
- 7 Decommunisation and Democracy: Transitional Justice in Post-communist Central-Eastern Europe 165
Adam Czarnota
- 8 The Large Second World and the Necessary Shifts in Research Approaches in Macrosocial Dynamics 184
Nikolai S. Rozov
- 9 Zig-Zag Post-Soviet Paths to Democracy 199
Larissa Titarenko

PART 3

The Caucasus: Armenia as a Case Study of the Implosion of the Soviet Empire

- 10 After the Empire: The Migration in the Post-Soviet Space 229
Lyudmila Harutyunyan and Maria Zaslavskaya
- 11 The Geography of Nationalism in Nagorno-Karabakh: Post-Soviet Reality as Post-Colonial Reality 243
Antranig Kasbarian
- 12 Symbolic Geography: Geography as a Symbol in the Post-Soviet-Soviet South Caucasus 250
Hayk Demoyan
- 13 Playing Democracy: Some Peculiarities of Political Mentality and Behavior in the Post-Soviet Countries 264
Arthur Atanesyan
- 14 Globalization and Neo-liberalism: Their Opponents and Their Application to Armenia 273
Levon Chorbajian

- 15 **European Values and Cultural Identity in the Context of
Social-psychological Transformations. Case of Armenia** 296
Gohar Shahnazaryan

PART 4

Widening the Horizons

- 16 **Patterns of Contentious Activity** 311
Henryk Domański
- 17 **(Im)Migrants' Diverse Identities and Their Impact on Host-Society
Ideas and Practices of National Membership** 336
Ewa Morawska
- 18 **The Past as Present: Foreign Relations and Russia's
Politics of History** 358
Igor Torbakov
- 19 **Varieties of Cosmopolitanism** 381
Klaus Müller
- Index** 393

The Past as Present: Foreign Relations and Russia's Politics of History

Igor Torbakov

The past influences everyone, for sure. But it offers so many options that we have to view current decisions and political choices as exactly what they are—choices, with alternatives, and choices that have been made by people who want things to work out their way.¹

The question about the extent to which collective memory and historical narratives influence Russia's international conduct is obviously part of a larger problem, which is the relationship of Russia's history to its present and future. Basically, the issue that has been hotly debated for quite some time by foreign and local scholars is whether Russia is truly unique in its constant striving to (ab)use and manipulate history, being, as many claim, a country with a proverbially “unpredictable past” whose authoritarian present and (likely equally bleak) future are essentially predetermined by its thoroughly undemocratic historical legacy. But from the broader comparative perspective, however, Russia doesn't appear to be that exceptional—after all, many societies use history to forge nation-states, foster social cohesion and patriotic sentiment, and to legitimize the rule of the powers that be.

And yet some aspects of Russia's historical process arguably make its case somewhat special indeed. Two features of Russia's historical development in particular appear to stand out. First, the country's history is characterized by dramatic political discontinuity. In the past century “Russia” changed its (historical) skin three times: following the disintegration of the dynastic Russian Empire accompanied by violent civil war, it was reconstituted as the communist USSR whose breakup 20 years ago led to the emergence of the present-day Russian Federation. Each of the 20th century dramatic transformations powerfully affected the notions of what “Russia” is and what it meant to be Russian. These very upheavals and disruptions make turning to the “treasure trove” of Russian history in search of appropriate symbols, images and meanings—what

1 Catherine Merridale, “The Relevance of History: A View from the Kremlin,” in Kurt Almquist and Alexander Linklater, eds, *On Russia: Perspectives from the Engelsberg Seminar 2008* (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2009): 99.

has come to be known as the “usable past”—quite problematic. Indeed, which of the recent Russian pasts one is to choose as a resource as these pasts seem to be so radically different? Second, alongside Russia’s political instability there is, paradoxically, a striking picture of geopolitical stability, meaning Russia’s quite remarkable longevity as a geopolitical entity. At least since the beginning of the 18th century, “Russia” has been a permanent geopolitical fixture on Europe’s north-eastern margins with its persistent pretence to the status of a great (European) power.²

But whatever Russia’s “special features,” the relationship of its history to its present and future is not principally different from that of other countries. Russia’s current policies (both domestic and foreign) are certainly made under the influence of the past. As Marx famously put it, people act not “under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”³ But he opened this important paragraph by forcefully stating that “[M]en make *their own* history,” which is very true—they make it while pursuing their specific interests, weighing up various options and facing multiple alternatives.

Against this backdrop, I intend to investigate what kind of link there is between Russia’s foreign policy and what is nowadays called the “memory politics” or the “politics of history.” I will start off by briefly looking into the issue of the specifics of the Russian governing elites’ understanding of the importance of the past. The discussion of Russia’s deployment of history politics within a broader framework of its foreign policy will follow. The analysis of the crucial link between history politics and Russia’s (international) identity will come next. I will conclude by summing up the key arguments advanced in this study.

My main thesis is that post-Soviet Russia, like many other countries, does instrumentalize history to achieve certain political objectives, including in the sphere of international relations. However, Russia’s wariness of any political philosophy, its reluctance to be associated with any clearly defined ideological position, and its intention to avoid meaningful ideological debates compel it to opt for the kind of history politics that is characterized by a high degree of ambivalence.

2 John LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); idem, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1963).

Russia: Past and Present

As a rule, policymakers are largely preoccupied with the present. It is of course only natural. After all, it is within the realm of the present that their most vital interests—maintaining security and furthering the prosperity of their respective societies—are concentrated. However, most politicians are not oblivious to the importance of putting a positive spin on their nations' past as well as to the subtle interconnectedness of a nation's past and present. Russian politicians are no exception. It was none other than Count Alexander von Benckendorff who aphoristically formulated—as early as the 1830s—the politicians' preferred view of a historical narrative that combines the desired images of a nation's past, present and future. "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," the head of the Tsar Nicholas I's secret police asserted.⁴ It would be fair to say that policymakers are concerned with the past in as much as the latter—or rather its representation—expands their capacity to attain the objectives of their domestic and foreign policies. Within this context, historical narratives appear to be one of many tools that politicians use while pursuing their ends.

However, the perception of the relative importance of various tools employed by politicians to reach their goals changes over time. It has been increasingly argued of late that in today's world such immaterial phenomena as historical memory, moral capital, symbolic power, legitimacy, and the like have become as (if not more) important as such traditional geopolitical factors as territory, military might, economic power or demographic potential.⁵ This "paradigm shift" appears to have much to do with the growing prominence of the notion of "soft power," which, in Joseph Nye's understanding, implies a nation's ability to influence the behavior of others relying largely on one's international prestige, attractiveness of one's political institutions and culture, high living standards and—last but not least—moral capital.⁶ The latter is usually accumulated in the course of history through the process of national "remembering" and can be of a twofold nature. Some nations can and do invoke the memories of

4 On Benckendorff and his activities, see Sidney Monas, *The Third Section: Police and Society in Russia under Nicholas I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

5 See Alexander Smolar, "Władza i heohrafia pam'iaty," *Krytyka*, no. 5–6 (2010). The Polish language original is Smolar, "Władza i geografia pamieci," in *Pamięć jako przedmiot władzy* (Warszawa: Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, 2008).

6 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

their heroic past that help cast themselves as the trailblazers of human progress, the paragons of “universal values,” the liberators of the oppressed and the fighters against “evil.” Other nations seek to make good use of their image as “victims,” which they do through the energetic championing of “national martyrology” with its special emphasis on the memories of suffering, historical grievances, injustices and wrongs that ultimately have to be made right.

But national “remembering” is a tricky and controversial business. As the late Tony Judt has argued, “Memory is inherently contentious and partisan: one man’s acknowledgement is another’s omission.”⁷ Any interpretation of the past based on national “remembering” would inevitably involve not only the self-image of a given nation but the latter’s relations with the other nations as well. A clash between national memories is thus prone to lead to the growth of tensions between states. This explains, the Estonian analyst Maria Mälksoo points out, why any “national memory” has a “foreign policy dimension and context to it.”

As states seek to strengthen not only their physical security but also their self-perception and self-image in international relations, while they desire to have their stories reinforced by significant others, it is under the umbrella of memory politics that identity policies and security policies meet. If identity is a security issue, it is often the case that memory also becomes a security issue—or is securitised. In addition to classic security dilemmas, new ontological security dilemmas emerge: the certainty of ‘our’ story undermines the ontological uncertainty of ‘them’; they consider our interpretation of history to be hostile to theirs, which is why they launch memory political counterattacks against us.⁸

To be sure, Russia’s ruling elites are perfectly aware of the importance of an inspiring “national myth” for societal consolidation. Likewise, they seem to understand the practical utility of a robust “politics of history”—as the latter could effectively be deployed in the “memory wars” with Russia’s pesky neighbours. However, I would argue that, as far as history is concerned, post-Soviet Russia has found itself in a tight spot—there seems to be precious little in terms of good “construction material” for the elites to craft a viable national myth.

7 Tony Judt, “From the House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory,” *The New York Review of Books* 52, no. 15 (6 October 2005).

8 Maria Mälksoo, “The Memory Political Horizons of Estonian Foreign Policy,” *Diplomaatia*, no. 82 (June 2010).

There are several reasons behind the Kremlin's noticeable ambivalence about history—including the use of historical narratives in Russia's foreign policy. First, Russia's political discontinuity, which I mentioned above, has left in its wake a whole set of mutually contradictory “pasts.” Second, a number of important historical landmarks (like, for example, the 1612 ousting of the Poles from Moscow or Russia's triumph over Napoleon's Grande Armée in 1812) that are often referred to as having the potential to create emotional attachment to the state and nation appear to be too far removed to strongly resonate with the present-day mass publics. Third, Russia's most recent history—the Soviet period—is a veritable minefield as there is no national consensus on how to interpret most of its key events starting with the 1917 Revolution and ending with the ill-starred August 1991 putsch. Almost everything in between the Soviet era's opening and closing dates is a matter of fierce contestation. “Has the 20th century with the three revolutions at its beginning and another one at its end finally become history?” asks one Russian pundit. “To be sure, it has not,” he asserts. “Passions are still swirling around these events, and their [differing] interpretations to a significant extent define our present-day political life.”⁹ The sole exception seems to be the “Great Patriotic War,” the victory in which is seen by the majority of Russians as the most important event of the 20th century and thus deemed suitable to serve as modern Russia's “foundation myth”. (Yet the “Victory myth” is not unproblematic as the invocation of the Russian people's heroism in World War II inevitably entails the necessity to assess Stalinism and the post-war Soviet policies in East Central Europe. I will address this issue later.)

Finally, and most important, the Kremlin's ambivalence towards history is rooted in the nature of Russia's current political system. As some astute analysts have noted, the authoritarian regime that matured under Vladimir Putin's watch thrives on ambiguity and flexibility.¹⁰ The thing is that the Soviet breakup and the birth of “new Russia” were not accompanied by the emergence of a new, post-Soviet ideology or any coherent system of values shared by the majority of Russians. Instead, some leading Russian sociologists argue, the shock of the “transition” and the “great depression” of the 1990s appear to have thoroughly undermined any basis for ideologically driven politics and

9 Igor Shishkin, “Antisistema i rossiiskii krizis,” APN.ru, 19 January 2011, <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article23549.htm>.

10 Samuel Greene, Maria Lipman and Andrey Ryabov, “Engaging History: The Problems and Politics of History in Russia,” in Samuel A. Greene, ed., *Engaging History: The Problems and Politics of Memory in Russia and the Post-socialist Space* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2010): 6.

turned Russia into an atomized society longing for a respite from political and economic turmoil and ready to accept the “stability” offered by the authoritarian regime of a personalized nature. The latter, priding itself on being completely de-ideologized—in contrast to the militantly ideological Soviet Union—and making good use of the Russian publics’ aversion to any ideology, consciously seeks to eschew any ideological debate or values-based assessment. In other words, the Kremlin is extremely wary of taking any unambiguous ideological stand—including on matters of history. There seems to be good reason for the Russian governing elites’ refusal to take a clear stand.

Taking a stand, after all, would require identifying and then defending a position, while simultaneously providing opponents with the opportunity to stake out alternative positions. By refusing to take a stand, the [Russian] state effectively occupies all the ground at once, leaving potential opposition with no traction.¹¹

The reluctance of the authorities to seriously engage with the past is reflected in the tendency towards commercialization and trivialization of Russian history. In the state-controlled electronic media, various historical figures, symbols, slogans and icons tend to be bundled together in a post-modernistic manner—seemingly with the sole purpose of championing the ideal of strong power and legitimating the current political regime. Symptomatically, over the last two decades, as some shrewd observers note, “Soviet history was stylized and commercialized *before* it was properly assessed and studied.”¹²

It is this highly ambiguous relationship to the past that seems to inform Russia’s approach to the “historical political” aspect of foreign relations.

Europe’s Shifting Memory Landscape: Foreign Policy Implications

The tectonic shifts in European geopolitics caused by the collapse of communism and the Soviet breakup—above all, the EU’s eastward expansion and the accompanying change in Russia’s position in Europe—inevitably led to shifts in the European memory landscape. The unraveling of the Eastern Bloc, the unification of Germany and subsequent EU enlargement have undermined a historical consensus that used to exist—throughout the entire period of the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Arkady Ostrovsky, “Teaching Soviet History,” in Almquist and Linklater, eds., *On Russia*: 19.

Cold War-era “stability”—within Europe (including Soviet Russia) with regard to WWII and post-war experiences.¹³ As history is written by the victors, two principal historical narratives for decades dominated the scene—one advanced by the Western Allies, the other by the Soviets. These narratives had quite a lot in common—both highlighted the glorious victory over Nazi Germany, successful post-war reconstruction and the long period of post-war peace and economic development. Other (potentially dissenting) European voices were hushed up and basically inaudible. But the crumbling of the Cold War order revealed the plurality of Europe’s “mnemonic communities.” Some scholars refer now to the three main narratives, adding an East European story to the previously dominating two.¹⁴ Others suggest there are actually four stories as they single out the unique German experience within the Western European group.¹⁵ Still others, arguing that East Central Europe seen as a single entity is a “fiction,” distinguish within this broad region at least four areas. The latter are defined according to their memorial modes—largely based on the regional countries’ attitudes towards their communist past.¹⁶ Finally, there are commentators who contend that in Europe there are as many memories of WWII and post-war experiences as there are nations.¹⁷ In the words of Claus Leggewie,

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- 13 Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); John Gledhill, “Integrating the Past: Regional Integration and Historical Reckoning in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 4 (July 2011); Siobhan Kattago, “Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History: Memory, Pluralism and Europe after 1989,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 3 (2009); Richard S. Esbenshade, “Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe,” *Representations* 49 (Winter 1995); Tony Judt, “The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” *Daedalus* 121, no. 4 (Fall 1992).
- 14 Timothy Snyder, “The Historical Reality of Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 23, no. 1 (February 2009); Norman Davies, *No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
- 15 Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 16 Wolfgang Schmale, “Osteuropa’: Zwischen Ende und Neudefinition?” in Jose M. Faraldo, Paulina Gulinska-Jurgiel, Christian Domnitz, eds., *Europa im Ostblok. Vorstellungen und Diskurse (1945–1991)* (Köln: Böhlau, 2008); Stefan Troebst, “Jalta versus Stalingrad, Gulag versus Holocaust. Konfligierende Erinnerungskulturen im Grosseren Europa,” *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 15, no. 3 (2005).
- 17 Adam Krzeminski, “As Many Wars As Nations: The Myths and Truths of World War II,” *Sign and Sight*, 6 April 2005, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/96.html>. Polish original is in *Polityka*, 23 March 2005.

“Europe’s collective memory after 1989 is just as diverse as its nations and cultures.”¹⁸

For the purposes of this paper, what is particularly important is that some of the new EU entrants’ attempts to correct the “European mnemonic map” are perceived in Moscow as putting Russia’s self-understanding, prestige and international status into jeopardy. Arguing that “Eastern European memories of World War II are still *les lieux d’oubli* rather than parts of *les lieux de memoire* of the officially endorsed collective European remembrance of the war,”¹⁹ some Eastern Europeans—particularly the Balts and the Poles—assert that in today’s European Union “the integration of historical perceptions and interpretations is still out of sync with institutional integration.”²⁰ But make no mistake—this is not a mere historiographical issue. The champions of the new European historical consensus are fully cognizant of the fact that historical narratives and collective memories are also “a source of power” and thus aspects of power relations. “This is why the memory war over the meaning of Communist heritage simultaneously represents a fight for symbolic power and for the right to define the frontiers of the joint memory community in Europe.”²¹ As I argued elsewhere, “Most Eastern European nations now view the wartime and post-war period as a ‘useable past’—crucial for strengthening separate identity, giving a boost to populist nationalism, externalizing the Communist past, and casting their particular nation as a hapless victim of two bloodthirsty totalitarian dictatorships.”²² As East Europeans are pushing for the reintegration of their disastrous war and post-war experiences into a (pan-) European narrative, two main pillars of the erstwhile historical consensus—the ones particularly cherished by Russia, namely the notions of the anti-fascist good’s triumph over Nazi evil and of the Red Army’s liberation of Eastern Europe—have come under severe attack. By contrast, the new interpretation advances the notion of the Nazi-Soviet equivalence and rejects the Soviet/Russian claim to the mantle of “Europe’s liberator” by branding the Soviet post-war policies in Eastern Europe as an act of occupation. Again, this is not just an academic controversy. In a number of East European countries, the new historical

18 Claus Leggewie, “Seven Circles of European Memory,” *Eurozine*, 20 December 2010.

19 Maria Mälksoo, “The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 654.

20 Mälksoo, “The Memory Political Horizons.”

21 Ibid.

22 Igor Torbakov, “History, Memory and National Identity: Understanding the Politics of History and Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Lands,” *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 215.

narratives are used to justify certain political moves in what can be called a perfect example of history politics. As Mälksoo notes,

East European MEPs have made it their political mission to devise a framework for the treatment of Communist crimes similar to that of Nazi crimes. This has led to the adoption of relevant resolutions by the European Parliament and political declarations by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. The European Commission has organised hearings on ‘Crimes committed by totalitarian regimes’. These hearings are hoped to develop into a concrete institutional instrument in the longer perspective.²³

Moreover, as if to additionally underscore the *political* dimension of the ongoing memory wars, East Europeans assert that

[T]hese debates are conducted, and lances are broken, in the name of Europe—and, of course, for Europe—to make one’s historical narrative ‘more European’. This also serves to highlight one’s Europeanness to the detriment of the opposing party’s Europeanness.²⁴

This is exactly how the matter is perceived by Russia’s ruling elites. As Moscow sees it, what is at stake in the acrimonious debates over historical narratives with the former Eastern Bloc satellites and ex-Soviet republics is no less than Russia’s status as a “European nation” and great (European) power. When a number of Western and Eastern European historians and policymakers set forth a thesis concerning the “Soviet occupation” and then pile on top of it another thesis about the “Hitler—Stalin equivalence,” this is viewed by Moscow as something very much akin to adding insult to injury. It is not difficult to understand the reason for Russia’s nervous reaction to the new historical narratives of the origins of WWII and the interaction between Europe’s two totalitarian regimes as well as to the reinterpretations of the relationship between the totalitarian states and the “free world.” The traditional overall representation of WWII based on the erstwhile historical consensus has been that this was a global confrontation between good and evil—with Nazi Germany being habitually associated with absolute evil. “Thirty years ago there seemed to be no doubt” as to what the Second World War was about, notes the Russian historian Yaroslav Shimov. “The Russians, the Americans and the majority of

23 Mälksoo, “The Memory Political Horizons.”

24 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

the Europeans perceived WWII as the colossal tragic epos—a history of the joint struggle against global evil and of the victory over this evil that was won due to the enormous sacrifices in blood and treasure.”²⁵

In the new narrative, though, the picture gets somewhat more nuanced and new accents appear: WWII has come to be interpreted not only as the struggle between good and evil but also as the struggle between freedom and tyranny, democracy and totalitarianism—with the notions of democracy, freedom and liberalism being unambiguously equalled with the notion of good. Seen through this (updated) conceptual lens, the following storyline is emerging. Two equally vicious totalitarian empires secretly divided up their respective spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and, having jointly attacked Poland, triggered the pan-European conflict that subsequently became global. Following Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, the liberal West pragmatically allied itself with one totalitarian predator against the other. The victory over Nazism, attained due to the massive Soviet war effort in the European theater, inadvertently led to Stalin’s occupation of half of Europe with the enfeebled West (particularly the war-ravaged Western European nations) being unable to adequately respond to what was the brazen act of Soviets building their “outer empire” against the will of the “captive nations” in Europe’s East. However, the confrontation between good and evil continued in the post-war period, having taken on the form of the Cold War, which was waged for several decades between the democratic Western nations on the one hand and the communist USSR (“the evil empire”) and its satellites on the other. The “liberation of Eastern Europe” and the Soviet breakup appear to symbolize the ultimate triumph of good (meaning freedom and democracy) over evil (meaning tyranny and totalitarianism). The bottom line seems to be this: the West has made an enormous contribution to the liberation of humankind from the curse of the 20th century—totalitarianism in its dual form of Nazism and Stalinism. For its part, post-Soviet Russia, not unlike the (vanquished) post-war Germany, has yet to go through the painful process of repentance, atonement for the committed crimes and thorough de-Stalinization.

It’s difficult not to see how these historiographical debates over the “correct” interpretation of past events are effectively a struggle over power. The thing is that so long as the old historical consensus remained intact, Russia’s victory over Nazism legitimized its great power status in Europe and its sphere of influence in the eastern part of the continent. The new historical controversies

25 Yaroslav Shimov, “Vtoraia mirovaia: konets eposa,” *Gazeta.ru*, 1 September 2009, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2009/09/01_a_3254449.shtml.

over the nature of Soviet “liberation” of Eastern Europe and over Stalin’s purported equivalence with Hitler effectively undermine Russia’s status as the “liberator of Europe” and erode whatever symbolic capital it might claim in order to prop up its “Europeanness.” What we are witnessing is basically a “clash” of two very different notions of “liberation.” In today’s Europe (and, for that matter, the United States), the liberation of Europe in WWII is inseparably welded with the idea of democracy—the restoration of democratic order in that part of Europe which was cleansed by Western Allies of the “brown plague.” Such an interpretation presupposes that whatever the Soviet Union did in the eastern half of Europe, which fell under Stalin’s control, could be called anything but “liberation.”

What had actually happened “on the ground” was, of course, much less neat than the descriptions offered by the traditional “totalitarian” model or a stark dichotomy of the “Western liberation” and the “Soviet suppression” that is currently being advanced by many Western policymakers and ideologues. The Hitler—Stalin comparison has kept analysts busy ever since the 1930s. However, the totalitarian model, as its contemporary critics rightly note, mainly “focused on similarities rather than differences [between the two dictatorships] and... contained far more description than explanation.”²⁶ As recent historical research has demonstrated, “while the two regimes often rested on similar power structures and methods of control, nevertheless they were the product of entirely different social forces, ideas and aspirations.”²⁷ Moreover, some scholars argue that the thesis of the Nazi-Soviet equivalence and of a “double genocide”—which, for instance, figures quite prominently in Timothy Snyder’s acclaimed recent study *Bloodlands*²⁸—blurs the undeniable fact that ultimately it was Nazi Germany and not the Soviet Union which was responsible for the outbreak of WWII and the ensuing carnage. The critics also assert that Snyder and other like-minded scholars unwittingly help the far right politicians in the Baltic region (and in some other “new accession” states in the eastern half of the EU) to pursue their “politics of history” fuelled by anti-Russianism and the desire to exculpate the region’s Nazi collaborators and participants in the

26 David Wedgwood Benn, “On Comparing Nazism and Stalinism,” *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 189. See also Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (London: Penguin, 2005); Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: Fontana, 1993).

27 *Ibid.*, 191.

28 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

Holocaust.²⁹ Notably, the leading Stanford historian Norman Naimark—who, in his latest book, seeks to forcefully make the point that Stalin was a mass murderer and an exceedingly brutal dictator of the worst kind—appears to concede that the Stalin-Hitler equivalence thesis is flawed. Although Naimark concludes that “the points of comparison between Stalin and Hitler, Nazism and Stalinism, are too many to ignore,” he also admits that there are key differences and that the Holocaust was, on many counts, “worse.”³⁰

Nor is the issue of the “Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe” that straightforward. Stalin *is* the main culprit, for sure. But the Western powers are not unblemished either. In Eastern Europe, for more than half a century, “Yalta” has become a grim symbol of betrayal, with the Western Allies being perceived as accomplices in Stalin’s expansion and, in Milan Kundera’s words, the ensuing “tragedy of Central Europe.”

The criticism of the Allies’ compliance with the demands of the Stalinist Soviet Union at Yalta and the consequent Western moral responsibility for the closing off of Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War thus runs as a red thread through the memopolitical discourse of Poland and the Baltic states.³¹

Eastern Europeans have a point. After all, John Kenneth Galbraith, then a top official in the U.S. Office of Price Administration, who appeared to consider the Soviet Union a compelling social experiment, suggested that “Russia should be permitted to absorb Poland, the Balkans, and the whole of Eastern Europe

29 See Efraim Zuroff, “A Dangerous Nazi-Soviet Equivalence,” *Guardian*, 30 September 2010; David Katz, “Why Red Is Not Brown in the Baltics,” *Guardian*, 1 October 2010. The German historian Wilfried Jilge specifically points to the tendency of East European intellectuals to construct what he terms the “national Holocausts” and thus confer on their nations a status of victim—and the perceived moral high ground that goes along with it. “From this position of moral superiority, the crimes of one’s own nation are justified as defensive actions” writes Jilge in an article tellingly titled “The Competition of Victims”—the phrase he borrowed from the former Polish Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski. “In this context,” Jilge goes on, “national stereotypes serve to distance ‘one’s own’ national history from ‘false’ Soviet history and thus to ‘cleanse’ ‘one’s own’ nation of everything that is Soviet.” See Wilfried Jilge, “Zmahannya zhertv,” *Krytyka*, no. 5 (2006).

30 Norman Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also the review of Naimark’s book by Paul Hockenos, “The Fine Line of Blood,” *Internationale Politik Global Online*, 23 August 2011, <http://www.ip-global.org/2011/08/23/the-fine-line-of-blood/>.

31 Mälksoo, “The Memory Politics,” 662.

in order to spread the benefits of Communism.” For his part, George Kennan, at the time a counselor of the American embassy in Moscow, privately advised Charles Bohlen, Roosevelt’s interpreter and adviser on Soviet affairs in Yalta, to “divide Europe frankly into spheres of influence—keep ourselves out of the Russian sphere and the Russians out of ours.” Ultimately, it was Realpolitik and not the lofty ideals of freedom that defined the contours of postwar Europe.³²

Notably, some East European pundits readily admit that their countries heavily exploited Western Europe’s feeling of guilt and the sense of owing a debt to Eastern Europeans in their nations’ quest to join the Euro-Atlantic institutions. As a result, they assert, all counter-arguments notwithstanding, the dual NATO and EU enlargement “was framed *entirely* as the undoing of historic injustice towards Eastern European states.”³³

Having thus received some satisfaction from the erstwhile Western supporters of the despised “Yalta order,” the “political historical” activists in ex-communist countries have set their sights on the East. At a minimum, their objective appears to be as follows—to force post-Soviet Russia, too, to face up to its “dark past” and to apologize for the crimes of Soviet totalitarianism. To this end, East European lawmakers had pushed hard for the adoption, in 2009, of two international documents that couldn’t fail to rile official Moscow—a resolution of the European Parliament entitled “On European Conscience and Totalitarianism” and a resolution passed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe entitled “Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21st Century.”³⁴ Both resolutions branded Nazism and Stalinism as similar totalitarian regimes, bearing equal responsibility for the outbreak of World War II and the crimes against humanity committed during that period. The resolutions strongly called for the unconditional international condemnation of European totalitarianism. Moscow’s reaction to all of this was unambiguously negative. In particular, Russian lawmakers, incensed at Stalinism and Nazism being lumped together, called the OSCE resolution an “offensive

32 See Fraser J. Harbutt, *Yalta 1945: Europe and America at the Crossroads* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Serhii M. Plokhyy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (New York: Viking, 2010); Alonzo L. Hamby, “Endgame: How the Big Three Concluded the Good War,” *Weekly Standard* 16, no. 1 (2010).

33 Mälksoo, “The Memory Politics,” 662.

34 For the texts of resolutions, see <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+IM-PRESS+20090401IPR53245+0+DOC+XML+Vo//EN> and http://www.oscepa.org/images/stories/documents/activities/1.Annual%20Session/2009_Vilnius/Final_Vilnius_Declaration_ENG.pdf.

anti-Russian provocation” and “violence over history.”³⁵ It is also no mere coincidence that in May 2009 Russia’s President Dmitry Medvedev announced the formation of a new presidential commission dedicated to “analyzing and suppressing all attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia’s interests.”³⁶

Russia’s irascible response is instructive in that it accurately reflects the Russian elites’ utter discomfort at being pressured as well as their appreciation of the sensitive history—foreign policy nexus. The country’s governing elites appear to perceive memory and history as an important ideological and political battleground: Russia’s detractors—both foreign and domestic—allegedly seek to spread interpretations of past events that are detrimental to Russia’s interests, and there is an urgent need to resolutely counter these unfriendly moves. Several elements of such politics of history have already been introduced in Russia: a set of officially sponsored and centrally approved textbooks with a highly pronounced statist interpretation of 20th-century Russian history;³⁷ the attempts to establish the “regime of truth” using legislative means;³⁸ and the creation of a bureaucratic institution to fight the “falsification of history.”³⁹ The Kremlin’s official position was well epitomized in Vladimir

35 Yulia Taratuta and Vladimir Vodo, “Rossiya popala v plokhuyu istoriyu,” *Kommersant*, 2 July 2009.

36 See the text of the Russian President’s decree No. 549 “O Komissii pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii po protivodeistviu popytkam fal’sifikatsii istorii v ushcherb interesam Rossii” at <http://graph.document.kremlin.ru/page.aspx?1;1013526>.

37 For a detailed analysis of the narratives contained in the Russian history textbooks, see David Wedgwood Benn, “The Teaching of History in Present-Day Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010); idem, “The Teaching of History in Putin’s Russia,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2008); Vera Kaplan, “The Vicissitudes of Socialism in Russian History Textbooks,” *History and Memory* 21, no. 2 (2009); Taras Shul’ga, “Kakaya istoriya nuzhna sovremennoi Rossii? Obzor uchebnikov i posobii po noveishei istorii Rossii,” *Russkii vopros*, no. 2 (2009); Thomas Sherlock, “History and Myth in the Soviet Empire and the Russian Republic,” in Elizabeth A. Cole, ed., *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007); Maria Ferretti, “Obretennaya identichnost’: Novaya ‘ofitsial’naya istoriya’ putinskoii Rossii,” *Neprikosnovenny zapas*, no. 4 (2004); Vladimir Berelovich, “Sovremennye rossiiskie uchebniki istorii: mnogolikaya istina ili ocherednaya natsional’naya ideya?” *Neprikosnovenny zapas*, no. 4 (2002).

38 For a comprehensive discussion of the attempts to pass a “memory law” in Russia, see Nikolai Koposov, *Pamiat’ strogogo rezhima: Istoriya i politika v Rossii* (Moscow: NLO, 2011).

39 For a discussion of history politics in Russia and in some of the ex-communist states, see Alexei Miller, “Istoriya imperii i politika pamyati,” *Rossiya v global’noi politike* 6, no. 4 (2008); idem, “Istoricheskaya politika’ v Vostochnoi Evrope: plody vovlechnnogo nablyudeniya,” *Polit.ru*, 7 May 2008, http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2008/05/07/miller_print.html; *ibid.*, “Istoricheskaya politika: update,” *Polit.ru*, 5 November 2009, <http://www.polit>

Putin's remarks at the June 21 2007 meeting with the participants of the All-Russian history teachers' conference. Putin's main message was twofold: "Past events should be portrayed in a way that fuels national pride" and "We cannot allow anyone to impose a sense of guilt on us."⁴⁰ In general, the transcript of the meeting makes a fascinating read in that it gives an intriguing picture of the attempts to forge a broad consensus within Russia's ruling and intellectual elites—the picture in which the emotional, the historical, and the political are closely intertwined. The academics who took part in the gathering at Putin's countryside retreat expressed their firm conviction in the *political* significance of the past. The latter, as one pundit put it, is not some *curiosa* assembled in an antiquarian's store but rather a vital "mechanism, functioning within the structure of the present." After all, the argument goes, all decisions taken are nothing but a projection of a worldview that is formed within the consciousness of those who take decisions. For its part, an individual's worldview is shaped, to a significant degree, by history—the dominant master narratives about the past. Thus, history might well be understood as past politics, whereas politics—as present history. No wonder, then, that Putin's guests found themselves in unanimous agreement with the famous Orwellian maxim: he, who controls the past, also controls the present and the future.⁴¹

Likewise, the meeting's participants agreed that particular interpretations of the past can be (and often are) the effective instruments of power politics

.ru/lectures/2009/11/05/istpolit_print.html; Thomas Sherlock, "Opyt lakirovki istorii," *Rossiya v global'noi politike*, no. 1 (2012); idem, "Confronting the Stalinist Past: The Politics of Memory in Russia," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2011); Mikhail Logvinov, "Istoricheskaya politika na postsovetском prostranstve, ili: Na vostochnom fronte bez peremen," *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropskoi istorii i kul'tury*, no. 1 (2009), http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/inhalt_russ11.html; as well as four thematic publications: *Russian Analytical Digest* ("History Writing and National Myth-Making in Russia"), no. 72, 9 February 2010; *Pro et Contra* 13 ("Istoricheskaya politika"), no. 3–4 (2009); *Evropa: Zhurnal Pol'skogo instituta mezhdunarodnykh del* 9 ("Trudnoe nasledie proshlogo: Rossiya v poiskakh istoricheskoi pravdy"), no. 2 (2009), and *Caucasus Analytical Digest* ("Writing National Histories: Coming to Terms with the Past"), no. 8, 17 July 2009.

40 Stenograficheskii otchet o vstreche s delegatami Vserossiiskoi konferentsii prepodavatelei gumanitarnykh i obshchestvennykh nauk, Novo-Ogarevo, 21 June 2007, available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/>. On Putin's personal sense of history, see Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, "Putin and the Uses of History," *National Interest*, no. 1 (January–February 2012); Olga Malinova, "Tema proshlogo v ritorike prezidentov Rossii," *Pro et Contra* 15, no. 3–4 (2011).

41 Ibid. Symptomatically, this appears to be a point of contact of sorts between some Baltic pundits and their Russian ideological opponents. "Let us give another high five to Orwell—who controls the past, controls the future!" notes Mälksoo in her analysis of East European memory wars. Mälksoo, "The Memory Political Horizons."

and levers deployed to influence the other nations' position. At one point, a scholar bemoaned Russia's "humiliating" treatment by the West which allegedly sees it as an eternal apprentice. "How long will we continue putting up with being treated as pupils? We are a country, a gigantic country that can take pride in its extraordinary achievements, but we are still perceived as pupils," the political science professor Leonid Polyakov complained. Responding to his remark, Putin was quick to note that it's truly intolerable when "someone takes on the role of a teacher and starts lecturing us." But, he pointedly added, besides being an irritant, "this is undoubtedly an instrument to influence our country's conduct."⁴²

Putin's concluding remarks at the gathering with historians are noteworthy for both their defiance and his attempt to normalize and relativize Russian history—in particular the Soviet period. "As far as the problematic pages of our history are concerned, they were a reality," Putin said. "But they were a reality in the life of any state! And in fact we had less of them than some others, and they were not as horrible as those inscribed in the history of some other countries...other countries had even more horrible things." In a word, this was Putin's advice to Russia's detractors to leave it alone and mind their own business. "Let them think about themselves," he blurted.⁴³

Against this backdrop, it would seem that historical interpretations began to be increasingly viewed in Moscow as the means that various international actors use to assail Russia's international standing, seeking to undermine its symbolic power—possibly with the view of extracting concessions. A number of influential Russian historians have argued that following the geopolitical shifts of the late 1980s—early 1990s, Russia became the chief object of Western pressure as the leading Western nations and their new East European allies seek to cast Russia as the ultimate loser in the Cold War and a country that could now be presented with all sorts of claims.⁴⁴ "The most vicious attacks are directed at the [Russian-supported] interpretations of World War II and at the Yalta-Potsdam system," write Aleksandr and Yelena Senyavsky in the journal published by MGIMO, the prestigious Moscow School of Foreign Relations. The reason for this, they explain, lies in the fact that this system had confirmed the results of the war, making the Soviet Union the dominant power in Europe. Moreover, having recognized the immense Soviet war losses and the USSR's decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany, its Western wartime allies had also

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 See Natalia Narochitskaya, *Velikie voiny XX stoletia: reviziia i pravda istorii* (Moscow: Veche, 2010); idem, *Za chto i s kem my voevali* (Moscow: Minuvshee, 2005).

recognized its significant role in the construction of a postwar “modern Europe.” Following the Soviet breakup, Russia has found itself in a much less favorable geopolitical situation, the authors concede, but, they contend, “the new Russia’s principal interest is in the maximally possible preservation and perpetuation of those aspects of the system of international relations” that had emerged in the wake of WWII.⁴⁵

Indeed, to get a better sense of why Moscow is so uneasy about the attempts to “reinterpret WWII results” one has only to recall three things: the persistence of Russia’s self-image as a great power; its constant concern about falling behind relative to its main (Western) competitors; and the simple fact that 1945 represented the absolute pinnacle of Russia’s geopolitical might. Some scholars have long argued that following its defeat in the Crimean War in 1856 and until the Soviet victory in WWII Russian power has been in a relative decline.⁴⁶ The USSR’s triumph over Nazi Germany—associated with Stalin’s policies—reversed this trend and restored Soviet Russia to an enviable position of a country “without whose permission not a single gun in Europe could fire a shot,” as the Prince Aleksandr Bezborodko, Russia’s 18th century top diplomat, had once colourfully put it. We appear to be dealing here with a remarkable case of geopolitical continuity. “Don’t forget,” Judt reminded us:

that as seen from a historian’s perspective, a historian of contemporary Europe, Stalin was in many ways the natural successor to Catherine the Great, and the tsars of the 19th century, expanding into the Russian near west, and to the Russian southwest in particular—territories that Catherine began her expansion into, which have always been regarded as crucial by Russian strategists, both because of access to resources, access to warm water ports, and because it gives Russia a role in Europe, as well as in Asia.⁴⁷

45 Aleksandr Senyavsky and Yelena Senyavskaya, “Vtoraia mirovaia voina i istoricheskaia pamiat’: obraz proshlogo v kontekste sovremennoi geopolitiki,” *Vestnik MGIMO—Universiteta*, Special issue (2009): 300; idem, “Istoricheskaia pamiat’ o voynakh xx v. kak oblast’ ideino-politicheskogo i psikhologicheskogo protivostoianiiia,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 2–3 (2007).

46 See Winfried Baumgart, *The Peace of Paris: Studies in War, Diplomacy, and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1981). The German-language original of this work is *Der Friede von Paris: Studien zum Verhältnis von Kriegsführung, Politik und Friedensbewahrung* (München, 1972). This thesis is also discussed in Leonid Luks, “Predchuvstvie zakata Evropy i strakh pered Rossiei,” *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeskoj istorii i kul’tury*, no. 1 (2005), <http://www.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/inhaltruss3.html>.

47 “Interview with Historian Tony Judt,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 1 October 2009.

Just consider two plain historical facts: Russia was among the biggest losers in WWI and saw its statehood crumbling and the borderlands seceding, while the WWII results confirmed at Yalta and Potsdam turned Russia (in the form of the Soviet Union) into the world's second superpower—a status which included Moscow's immense geopolitical clout in Europe.⁴⁸ Remarkably, a history textbook that was unveiled at the 2007 historians' conference opens with the telling phrase: "Moscow, between 1945 and 1991, was the capital not only of a country but of an entire world system."⁴⁹ However, Russia's four decades-long dominance over Eastern Europe was brought down in a series of "velvet revolutions" in 1989. As one pithy comment put it, "Russia was the main victor in WWII and the main loser in 1989."⁵⁰

That is the crux of the matter: Russian elites felt tremendously aggrieved by the loss of international influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. But now, 20 years on, "Russia is back"—having lived through the decade of "national humiliation" (1990s), it has rebounded and experienced a significant revival in the 2000s. The Russian leadership's "historical political" moves are meant to complement the country's increasingly assertive foreign policy—in particular, to reclaim the lost historical moral high ground. Yet Russia's international identity remains—possibly intentionally—highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it claims legitimacy in Europe as a post-Soviet *European* state; on the other, it presents itself as the direct successor to the Soviet Union—a stance that entails two important implications: Russia's claim to a status of great power with a sphere of "privileged interests" and its reluctance to fully recognize Soviet/Stalinist crimes.

Facing up to the Past, Sorting Out the Identity Problem

A number of Russian academics and policymakers appear to understand that the "new Russia's" identity, particularly its genetic link with the USSR, is not unproblematic—not least because it engenders mistrust between Russia and

48 See Natalia Narochnitskaya, ed., *Yalta-45: nachertaniia novogo mira* (Moscow: Veche, 2010).

49 Aleksandr Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii, 1945–2006 gg.: kniga dlia uchitelia* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2007): 6. Notably, Filippov, the principal author of this history manual, is deputy head of the National Laboratory of Foreign Policy, a research institute affiliated with the Kremlin. For an English language review of the book, see David Wedgwood Benn, "The Teaching of History in Putin's Russia," *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2008).

50 "European Histories: Toward a Grand Narrative," *Eurozine*, 3 May 2005, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-05-03-eurozine-en.html>.

its (East) European neighbors, which, ultimately, is at the heart of all recent “memory wars.” “Europe still doesn’t fully trust the new Russia,” one Russian commentator argues. The reason for this wariness, says he, is that Europe still perceives Russia not as a truly *post-Soviet, post-imperial* nation but as a “truncated, weakened and embittered USSR—the core of the Soviet ‘evil empire.’”⁵¹

Various segments of Russian elites suggest differing ways of dealing with the problem of the “Soviet legacy” and the question of historical responsibility—as the two are inseparably intertwined. One school of thought has recently come up with the seemingly straightforward scheme aimed at obviating the issue of Russia’s responsibility for any past misdeeds, while preserving what is deemed most valuable in the Soviet geopolitical inheritance. In June 2010, Konstantin Kosachev, the then head of the Russian State Duma’s Committee on Foreign Relations, suggested that it was time for Russia to elaborate what he called a comprehensive “set of principles, an ‘historical doctrine’ of sorts” that would help Moscow to disclaim, once and for all, any political, financial, legal or moral responsibility for the policies and actions of the Soviet authorities on the territories of the former USSR and the states of Eastern Europe. Kosachev’s proposal boils down to two key points: (1) Russia fulfils all the international obligations of the USSR as its successor state; however, Russia does not recognize any moral responsibility or any legal obligations for the actions and crimes committed by the Soviet authorities; (2) Russia does not accept any political, legal or financial claims against it for violations by the Soviet authorities of international or domestic laws in force during the Soviet period.⁵²

Remarkably, Kosachev has correctly defined the core reason for Russia’s current predicament: it lies, he notes, in the simple fact that present-day Russia is a legal successor to the Soviet Union. He also notes, again correctly, that this legal continuity has both positive and negative implications. But then, when he spells out the key points of his “historical doctrine,” he takes on a markedly contradictory stance. Russia, Kosachev suggests, can carry on as the USSR’s successor state, but is not responsible—politically, morally, financially or otherwise—for any criminal acts committed by the Soviet regime.

But this stance is untenable, the other school of thought counters. As some leading scholars (such as Andrei Zubov and Sergei Kortunov) have long pointed out, the issue of legal continuity is the crux of the matter and this is exactly

51 Sergei Kortunov, *Stanovlenie natsional'noi identichnosti: Kakaiia Rossiia nuzhna miru* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2009): 53.

52 Konstantin Kosachev, “Sovetskaia li Rossiia?” *Ekho Moskvy*, 29 June 2010, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/kosachev/691501-echo.phtml>.

what differentiates Russia from all the other countries of Eastern Europe.⁵³ While in 1991 Russia chose to become, in legal terms, the continuation of the USSR, all ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe (including some former Soviet republics) opted to re-establish historical continuity with their pre-communist state entities.⁵⁴ Thus, if today's Russia is a direct successor to the Soviet state—a fact that all Russia's ruling bodies willingly accept—then it bears full responsibility for the actions and crimes committed by the Soviet regime against both its own people and foreign citizens throughout that regime's entire history. The unwillingness to do this—which the Kosachev proposal unambiguously declares—will only raise suspicions among Russia's neighbors. The inevitable result will be a continuation of the “memory wars” in Europe.

Back in 1991, Russia, too, had two options: to re-establish legal continuity with the 1917 pre-revolutionary Russia or choose to become a legal successor to the USSR. Remarkably, Boris Yeltsin appeared to have understood the difference between the options and the possible implications. In his memoirs, having explained the reasons for the actual choice that the Russian leadership made at the time, he then mused over what might have happened had the Russian Federation chosen to become a successor to pre-revolutionary Russia. Russia, Yeltsin suggested, would have become a different country, living according to a different set of laws that would give priority to personality and not to the state. And he added, tellingly: “The outside world would have treated us differently, too.”⁵⁵

Now, a number of Russian political thinkers argue, the country's leadership has to revisit the issue of Russia's identity and finally sort it out for good. The only way to resolve this issue, they assert, is to resolutely do away with the lingering aspects of the Soviet identity and re-establish historical-legal continuity with what they call “historical Russia,” i.e., the Russian state that was toppled in the 1917 Bolshevik *coup d'état*. Indeed, as the situation stands today, the Russian Federation—in fact, the only one of all the ex-Soviet republics that didn't declare formal exit from the USSR (although it did proclaim its “independence”)—is

53 Andrei Zubov, “Vostochnoevropeiskii i postsovetskii puti vozvrashcheniia k pliuralisticheskoi gosudarstvennosti,” *Polit.ru*, 8 October 2009, http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2009/10/08/zubov_print.html; Kortunov, *Stanovlenie*, 284–312.

54 Johan Matz, *Constructing a Post-Soviet International Political Reality: Russian Foreign Policy towards the Newly Independent States, 1990–1995* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2001).

55 Boris Yeltsin, *Presidentskii marafon* (Moscow: AST, 2000): 196–197. The English-language version of these memoirs is: Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*; translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Public Affairs, 2000).

the legal continuation of the Soviet Union and thus inheritor of largely Soviet, rather than “historic Russian,” legacy.⁵⁶

A brief survey of the country’s moral-political foundations, its legal regime, property relations, and symbolic sphere appears to confirm this thesis. Notwithstanding all the Russian leadership’s occasional pronouncements criticizing past totalitarian practices and Stalin’s misdeeds, the 70-odd years long Communist period of Russian history and Soviet political regime have never received a comprehensive moral and historical assessment. The regime’s crimes were not condemned and the nationwide act of atonement did not take place. Thus the process of the nation’s moral revival has not yet begun. In legal terms, the present-day Russian Federation is a direct successor of the Soviet regime: while the November 22, 1917 Bolshevik decree that abolished all the laws of the Russian empire en bloc is still a valid legal act, not a single Russian law preceding the Bolshevik takeover would be considered in the country’s courts today. At the heart of economic relations in today’s Russia is the recognition of the legality of Soviet “all-people’s” property, which was then “privatized” as if it previously had indeed belonged to “no one.” Such “privatization,” which ignored the property rights of previous owners—and which thus upheld the illegal Soviet “expropriation” and “nationalization” following the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917—has in fact spawned the atmosphere of lawlessness and insecurity—not least in property relations. Finally, the Russian Federation’s symbolic sphere appears to be a post-modernistic collage of icons and symbols belonging to different epochs of Russian history and coexisting quite harmoniously—if improbably, given the reality of Russian political discontinuity—in a curiously eclectic symbiosis. Yet even in this realm, the Soviet component seems to dominate—simply due to the origin of Russia’s current ruling elites, who, as one comment aptly notes, perceive “all the things Soviet as ‘their own,’ whereas anything belonging to the pre-revolutionary era is viewed as mere folkloric decorum.”⁵⁷

It would appear that Aleksandr Yakovlev, one of the leading “architects” of Gorbachev’s perestroika, had a similar perspective on the nature of post-Soviet Russia’s identity. Not long before his death in 2005, he sat down for a long talk with Jonathan Brent, the editorial director of Yale University Press and founder of the “Annals of Communism” series. “In conversation,” Brent writes in his recent book:

56 Andrei Zubov, “It is Time to Declare the Soviet Union Illegal,” *Moscow Times*, 27 July 2010.

57 Kortunov, *Stanovlenie*: 303.

Yakovlev always returned to the fact that *Russia was never fully desovietized*. There was no Nuremberg trial, no general accounting, no public reconciliation between victims and victimizers, no restoration of property or adequate compensation to the many millions whose lives were permanently damaged or destroyed by Stalin's 'utopia'. Instead the country drifted...into indifference and forgetfulness, hardly knowing whether it wanted freedom or not—hardly remembering freedom at all.⁵⁸

The persistence of Soviet elements in the present-day Russian identity has important foreign policy implications. Sergei Kortunov, for one, explicitly stated that unless Russia transforms its current identity and evolves into a truly republican, democratic, and dynamic society, Moscow's relations with its major Western partners will continue suffering from mistrust, mutual misunderstandings, and suspicions. Moreover, Russia will never have its wish granted—to be perceived by the leading Western powers as truly equal and belonging to the “elite international club.”

Western countries, with whom Russia seeks to associate, will not accept it in their company as being equal in terms of [shared] values and principles and will continue to conclude with it only temporary and ad hoc agreements, like they did during the Second World War, while harboring mistrust towards Moscow. [This is because Russia] doesn't demonstrate resolute rupture with its totalitarian past and cannot clearly define either its borders or national interests.⁵⁹

Concluding Remarks

Yet following the Russian liberal-minded thinkers' advice would inevitably involve a comprehensive and serious process of “coming to terms with the past”—what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. But this is precisely what Russia's powers that be are very reluctant to do—not least because the present-day Kremlin is wary of taking any clear ideological stance. Some segments of the Russian elite style themselves as supporters of conservative ideas. But conservatism presupposes respect for institutions. Others say they are the champions of a political system that is led by a wise and strong “national

58 Jonathan Brent, *Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia* (New York: Atlas & Co., 2008): 252. Emphasis added.

59 Kortunov, *Stanovlenie*: 306.

leader.” But an ideology of a charismatic leader demands a grand vision. If anything, post-Soviet Russia is not a country that holds institutions in high esteem; nor is it the home of big ideas.

As some analysts aptly note, the Putin-Medvedev regime is completely *colorless*—that is, devoid of any ideological content.⁶⁰ In both its domestic politics and foreign policy it sticks to what the authorities tout as the *pragmatic* operation mode—the one that is marked by an utter aversion to any meaningful ideological debates. This fully applies to Russia’s approach to the “politics of history.” At home, the governing elites are largely preoccupied with strengthening the legitimacy of the regime. To this end, they will continue protecting the “scared memory” of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, highlighting those aspects of the story that they think would help perpetuate their rule—for example, the alleged unity of rulers and the ruled, the ideal of individual sacrifice for the sake of state interests, the benefit of governing with an iron fist. Other—murkier—aspects of Soviet history are better left untouched.

Likewise, in foreign relations one of the Russian leadership’s main concerns is to uphold the country’s image as a great power. Thus Moscow seeks to promote those historical narratives that prop up this image, while rebuking the interpretations that are perceived to undermine it. This is being done in a highly ambiguous way, with the Kremlin demonstrating its trademark flexibility. When it suits their interests, the Russian leadership would officially recognize that the Katyn crime was committed on direct order by Stalin; they would allow the screening of the Polish film “Katyn” on Russian television and even award the Order of Friendship to Andrzej Wajda, the film’s celebrated director.⁶¹ They would apologize to the Hungarians for 1956 and to the Czechs for 1968. But these moves do not mean that Russia is going to recognize the fact of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. Russia’s conduct might well be characterized as the intent to maintain “plausible deniability on all fronts.” While apologizing to Eastern Europeans for individual misdeeds, Moscow doesn’t apologize for the occupation; while defending the Soviet war monuments in the Baltics, it doesn’t defend the occupation.⁶² Instead of a well-defined attitude towards the past we are witnessing the proliferation of the fuzzy.

60 Sergei Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Anatoly Reshetnikov, “Great Projects’ Politics in Russia: History’s Hardly Victorious End,” *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 2 (2011).

61 Inessa Iazhborovskaya, “Katynskoe delo: na puti k pravde,” *Voprosy istorii*, no. 5 (2011).

62 Greene et al., “Engaging History”: 6.