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CONTROLLING THE PAST

HISTORY AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN RUSSIA

Summary

- History is being used by the political leadership in Russia as a tool to create legitimacy at home, and to frame its behavior at the international arena. It is a policy that has consequences both domestically and abroad.
- It is clear that the Russian political leadership does not consider history as an independent academic discipline, but rather as yet another power instrument to strengthen its national interest.
- In order to work out a long-term strategy of how to respond to the Russian challenge, it is imperative to understand its use of history, which frames Russian security policy.
- This paper examines the drivers between the Russian political leadership's views of the official writing of history and national security. It shows that the use (or abuse) of history by the Russian leadership goes way beyond rhetoric, and that it is an integrated part of Russian security policy that has a direct impact both on domestic politics and on Russia's neighbors.



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*The history of VChK-GPU can be written
only when the need of it disappears.*

Feliks Dzerzhinskii, 18 June 1926¹

Introduction

In the height of the Covid-19 crisis in Russia, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree making it a criminal offense to destroy war monuments both in Russia and abroad.² Soon after, Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defense wrote a letter to the head of the Investigative Committee, Aleksandr Bastrykin, asking him to consider filing criminal charges against representatives of other countries where World War II memorials commemorating the actions of the Soviet Union are demolished. In addition, Shoigu wrote to his Czech colleague protesting the recent dismantlement of the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev, by many Czechs seen as a symbol of Soviet rule after the war.³

In a controversial statement in 2013, Putin claimed that the Soviet Union launched the Winter War with Finland in order to ‘correct mistakes’ that had been made when Finland gained its independence in 1917. In addition, the annexation of Crimea was framed in a similar language, ‘to correct an historical injustice.’⁴

These examples clearly illustrate how history is being used as a political tool in Russian security policy. The Russian leadership uses history in order to create legitimacy at home, and to frame its behavior at the international arena. In fact, the use of history in Russia today is so important that it is treated as a matter of national security. When

1 Plekhanov, A. M. *VChK-OGPU v gody novoi ekonomicheskoi politiki 1921-1928*, Kuchkovo pole, Moskva, 2006: 23.

2 Law establishing criminal liability for destruction or damage of military burial sites and monuments to defenders of the Fatherland, 7 April 2020.

3 “Mid Chekhii otvetil na prosbu Rossii peredat snesennyi pamiatnik Konevu”, RIA Novosti, 10 April 2020.

4 Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 18 March 2014.

assessing Russian security policy this aspect has to be taken into account – in addition to the traditional components of armed forces, nuclear weapons, military organization, and foreign policy.

The use of history as a political tool is not a new phenomenon in Russia, nor is it a phenomenon unique to Russia. But given the authoritarian trajectory of Russia’s political system the consequences of this policy are substantial. It is a development that points to increased tensions – both domestically and externally. Ultimately, the current use of history in Russian security policy is about the political leadership’s search for a national identity under the name of patriotism. The policy of patriotism under Putin has developed slowly but steadily.⁵ In it, history is a vital component.

An analysis of this topic is important in order to understand the mechanisms of Russian security policy and its consequences for neighboring countries. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on the development within Russia.⁶ Some of the key players are the President, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education. This policy of history justification is also used to achieve domestic policy goals, and – as we shall see – it has a military aspect as well.

The importance of history to Vladimir Putin

The political leadership, not least President Vladimir Putin, frequently comments on various historical facts to frame his policies. An example of Putin’s use of history concerns the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with all its implications for Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. Putin has argued for many years that it was a rational decision for the Soviet Union to sign the Pact in order

5 A comprehensive summary is Schmid, Ulrich. *Technologien der Seele*, Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin, 2015: 9-52.

6 For a thorough analysis on Russian use of history in Estonia, see Oksanen, Sofi. ‘What it’s Like to Write About Russia.’ *Upnorth* 14 June 201.

to protect itself. In recent years – not least in December 2019, Putin’s tone has sharpened considerably. In the Russian President’s view today, the Pact was beneficial to the Soviet Union, and Poland fell victim to its own policy in the pre-war years. In a meeting at the Ministry of Defense, he – in effect – accused Poland of being responsible for the start of World War II.⁷ This clearly illustrates a “blame-the-victim” view.

For instance, when President Putin inaugurated the first official monument ever over the heroes of the First World War on 1 August 2014 in Moscow, he said that Russia *almost* won the war, but the victory was betrayed. He stated: “Russia withstood the attack and was then able to launch an offensive. The Brusilov offensive became famous throughout the whole world. But this victory was stolen from our country. It was stolen by those who called for the defeat of their homeland and army, who sowed division inside Russia and sought only power for themselves, betraying the national interests.”

In the wake of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Donetsk and Luhansk, the underlying message was very clear: Those who are against us in Ukraine are to be seen as traitors.⁸

Furthermore, in 2015 the alleged 1000 anniversary of Prince Vladimir’s death was celebrated. Prince Vladimir christened Kiev Rus and was baptized on the Crimean peninsula. On 28 July 2015, Putin said: “By putting an end to feuds and rebuffing outside enemies Prince Vladimir launched the creation of a single Russian people; he actually paved the way towards a strong centralized Russian

7 Zaiavleniia dlia pressy i otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam vstrechi s Federalnym kantslerom Germanii Angeloi Merkel, 10 May 2015; Defence Board Meeting, 24 December 2019.

8 Putin used the words “fifth column” and “national traitors” in his speech when Crimea was annexed.

state.”⁹ The symbolism of a strong leader (and namesake) uniting the country against internal and external enemies could not have been lost on any of the government officials attending the reception in the Kremlin.

So how does history fit in with the political leadership’s search for a national identity? In his millennium article in 1999 Putin outlined his view on patriotism.¹⁰ He wrote: “Patriotism. This term is sometimes used ironically and even derogatively. But for the majority of Russians it has its own and only original and positive meaning. It is a feeling of pride in one’s country, its history and accomplishments.”

Having returned to the presidency for a third period in 2012, he was even more outspoken when he outlined his view on a Russian national identity. In a speech in 2013 at the Valdai Club he stated that “pride in our history” was one of the key elements in Russian patriotism:¹¹

It’s time to stop only taking note of the bad in our history, and berating ourselves more than even our opponents would do. [Self-]criticism is necessary, but without a sense of self-worth, or love for our Fatherland, such criticism becomes humiliating and counterproductive. We must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of. Our entire, uncensored history must be a part of Russian identity. Without recognizing this it is impossible to establish mutual trust and allow society to move forward.

In other words, an official history that focuses on victories and strength is needed to unite the country. It goes without saying that such a history is very far from the academic pursuit of interpreting and re-interpreting historical

9 Priem po sluchaiu tysiacheletiiia predstavleniia sviatogo ravnopostolnogo kniazia Vladimira, 28 July 2015.

10 Putin, Vladimir. ‘Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii,’ *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 30 December 1999.

11 Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba “Valdai”, 19 September 2013.

events. This view of history, with its focus on pride, victories, and patriotic education in the name of the state, and its connection to national security is reminiscent of the views of the German nationalist Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96). It may seem paradoxical that Russia in the era of globalization is propagating for a national self-image of the 19th century, but it dovetails well with the security policy of the Russian political leadership.

Other elements of Russian national identity, according to Putin, are ‘traditional values’ and the primacy of collective decision making in international politics. He explicitly referred to the Congress of Vienna 1815 and Yalta 1945 as models to follow. Those references are employed to legitimize a world order with a few great powers which have a recognized sphere of interest. And the spheres consist of countries that are not a part of the great-power-club. It is a world order of the 19th century.

The use of history in strategic thinking

The views on history expressed by Putin are not simply his alone, they reflect a doctrinal thinking in Russian national security policy. There are several doctrines that outline the general courses of future government policies, and they are determined by the President. This is a part of the strategic planning of Russia.¹²

The National Security Strategy covers several different areas, from ‘the defense of the country, economic growth, healthcare to ecology, science and education and culture’.¹³ The Strategy stipulates that one of the threats to national security within the cultural sphere ‘is the attempts to falsify Russian and World history’.¹⁴ Furthermore, it states that “some countries use information and communication

12 The law was passed after years of political debate in 2014. Federal law No 172-FZ, “O strategicheskom planirovanii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, 28 June 2014.

13 *Strategiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 31 December 2015.

14 *Strategiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti*, §79.

technologies to achieve their geopolitical objectives, such as the manipulation of public awareness (*soznanie*) and falsification of history”.¹⁵ What is new in this strategy compared to the one from 2009 is that even “the spreading of low qualitative production of mass culture” from abroad is a threat to Russian national interests.

The fact that history and Russian traditional spiritual and moral values are considered crucial in the strategy is not surprising *per se*. It dovetails well with the formulations in both the Military Doctrine, and the Foreign Policy Concept and other doctrines. However, it is worth noticing that these values are now specified. Putin has talked about them for quite some time, for instance in April 2014, he argued that a people who lives on a territory with a common culture and history – even climate – develop certain traits. “We are spiritually more generous”, he claimed. In the “Russian world” death is beautiful, he said. “To die for one’s friends, your people, and your country is beautiful. This is the foundation of our patriotism,” he said.¹⁶ In addition, in September 2015 he gave a speech to young scientists aged ten to seventeen who had gathered at a camp for particularly talented people. He talked about the Russian historical tradition of being prepared to sacrifice oneself in the defense of the country. As an example of a Russian invention by young scientists he mentioned the ballistic missile system Iskander.

The National Security Strategy codifies the Russian spiritual and moral values.¹⁷ “Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values include the priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human life and of human rights and freedoms, the family, creative labour, service to the homeland, the norms of morals and morality, humanism, charity, fairness, mutual assistance, collectivism, the historical

15 *Strategiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti*, §21.

16 *Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinym*, 17 April 2014.

17 *Strategiia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti*, § 78.

unity of the peoples of Russia, and the continuity of our Fatherland's history.”

This allows for huge claims such as protecting Russians in other countries, and the need for a strong leader at home. By putting these criteria on paper in one of the most important strategic documents, Russia shows its future policy path. The room for maneuver to change this strategic direction has narrowed considerably.

The Military Doctrine – a document where the main objectives for the Russian Armed Forces are described also involves defending Russia's history.¹⁸ The non-military means of armed conflicts – in the West sometimes called 'hybrid warfare' or 'information warfare' – have been given more attention than in previous doctrines. One of the fundamental domestic military dangers is said to be: 'information operations to influence – above all – the younger part of the population in order to undermine historical, spiritual, and patriotic traditions within the defense of the Fatherland.'¹⁹ The implication is that outside actors – i.e. the West in general and the US in particular – is trying to undermine Russia.

In addition, a number of concrete steps have been taken in order to strengthen the military-patriotic traditions in Russia. The historical names of the Preobrazhenskii and Semenovskii Regiments have been added to modern military units. The first official Russian monument for the "heroes" of the First World War has been erected. The main halls of the Ministry of Defense's National Centre for the Management of Defense have been named after military dignitaries, Suvorov, Ushakov, Kutuzov, Zhukov, Rokossovskii, Ogarkov, and Shaposhnikov.²⁰

18 *Voennaia doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 25 December 2014.

19 *Voennaia doktrina*, § 13.

20 MO RF, "V Moskve sostoialos zasedanie Kollegii Ministerstva oborony Rossii", 26 February 2018.

This development is particularly evident in the way Victory Day, 9th of May, is being used to create a sense of unity. Not only has the military parade on the Red Square in Moscow become bigger and bigger, now also civilians are marching to remember their loved ones. Introduced in 2015 was the concept of the "Immortal Regiment" as a part of Victory Day. Initially, it was a local initiative that was taken over by the government and made into a national celebration.²¹

Russia is trying to come to terms with its tsarist and Soviet past. The imperial Cadet Corps has been reintroduced, and the Suvorov schools for military training and the Cossack movement are being supported. The legacy of the Soviet military organization DOSAAF (Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet) is cherished. After briefly changing its name DOSAAF reinstated its Soviet name in 2003.²²

Contemporary military conflicts are characterized as being "an integrated use of military force and the use of political, economic and informational and other measures of a non-military nature through the use of the protest potential of the population or special forces".²³

Thus, it is within the realm of the military to engage in non-military measures, and to defend Russia's history. In the fight against "colour revolutions", history becomes an instrument of force to exert influence. Alternative views of history are thus seen as potentially treacherous, but also as tools of the enemy.

In the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, one of Russia's objectives is to "strongly counteract /.../ attempts to rewrite history using it to build confrontation and provoke revanchism in global politics and to revise the outcomes

21 Baev, Anton, 'Privatizatsiia pamiati,' *Novoe vremia/New Times*, Nr 16, 18 May 2015, pp. 34-37.

22 *DOSAAF Rossii*.

23 *Voennaia doktrina*, § 15.

of the Second World War.”²⁴ Again, the suggestion is that other countries are using history against Russia, and that Russia has the right to strike back.

These are not just words on paper, but an issue clearly high on the agenda in Russian foreign policy. For instance, on 30 June 2016, the President urged, in a speech to Russian diplomats, to continue to fight against “falsification of history.”²⁵

Moreover, the Nationalities Policy Strategy stipulates that one of the most important tasks for Russia within this area is to take action against “efforts to falsify history in order to seek confrontation and revanchism in world politics, to revise the character and results of the Second World War, and to belittle the feats of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War 1941–45”.²⁶

Regarding the Criminal Code, in April 2016, Aleksandr Bastrykin, head of the Investigative Committee, *Sledstvennyi komitet*, suggested making it a criminal offense to “deny the results of the referendum at Crimea”. He also wanted article 280 of the Criminal Code – the article treats “public calls for performance of an extremist activity” – to describe falsification of historical facts and actions as equal to call for extremist activities.²⁷

However, there is already a paragraph in the Criminal Code making it a criminal offense to “rehabilitate Nazism”, for instance to question the behavior of the Red Army during the Second World War.²⁸ Several people have been

24 *Kontseptsiiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 12 February 2013.

25 *Soveshchanie poslov i postoiannykh predstavitelei RF*, 20 June 2016.

26 *Strategiia gosudarstvennoi natsionalnoi politiki RF na period do 2025*, §21.

27 Bastrykin, Aleksandr, “Pora postavit deisvennyi zaslon informatsionnoi voine”, *Kommersant Vlast* 18 April 2016.

28 Federalnyi zakon ot 5 maia 2014 g. N 128-FZ “O vnesenii izmenenii v otdelnye zakonodatelnye akty RF”.

convicted for this, which shows that this law is working in spite of what skeptics said when it was introduced.²⁹

In sum, the National Security Strategy and all these documents provide a roadmap for how history will be written in Russia. There will be no room for alternative interpretations.

Managing the use of history as a political tool

The Russian political leadership’s effort to combat “falsification of history” is not a straightforward success. There have been setbacks. The presidential commission on “fighting falsification of the history of the Fatherland” was short-lived and existed only between 2009 and 2012 when it was dissolved – ironically the very same year that was the official “Year of Russian History”. But recently the efforts have intensified.

Much has been said about the efforts to create a unified view on Russian history, and the re-writing of history books in schools.³⁰ In addition, there are the governmental programs for patriotic education. According to the latest program, 2016–2020, one of the objectives is to “strengthen the feeling of participation of the citizens in the great history and culture of Russia.” It also stipulates that one of the important tasks of the program is to “activate expert practices to prevent efforts to falsify history”.³¹

The number of military-patriotic organizations are constantly growing. In May 2016 the “Youth Army” (*Iunarmiiia*) was created by the Ministry of Defense.³²

29 “Kak v Rossii sudiat za ’falsifikatsiiu istorii’: doklad ’Agory’”, *Meduza*.

30 See for instance, Persson, Gudrun. ‘Vilka är vi? Rysk identitet och den nationella säkerheten’, *Nordisk Östforum*, vol. 28, nr. 3, 2014, pp. 199–214..

31 Pravitelstvo RF, O gosudarstvennoi programme ‘Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2016–2020 gody’, *Postanovlenie* No. 1493, 30 December 2015.

32 MO RF, ‘Vserossiiskoe voenno-patrioticheskoe obshchestvennoe dvizhenie ’Iunarmiiia’’, May 2016.

According to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu there are around 5 000 patriotic organizations “for those who love our history, those who believe in a great future for the country...”, he said when the Youth Army was created. Furthermore, since 2015 the Ministry of Defense organizes ‘Olympic games’ in military history.³³

In spring 2016, there were two other significant political decisions taken that clearly show the importance of history as a political tool. In April President Putin created a Fatherland History Foundation with the purpose to popularize history.³⁴ On the same day, he put the *Rosarkhiv*, the Russian Federal Archives, under direct presidential control.³⁵ As a consequence the *Rosarkhiv* is now one of the so-called power ministries. There are a total of thirteen federal ministries, services and agencies that are directly subordinated to the president.

Other important organizations to promote a history that focuses on national pride and unity in Russia are the Historical Society lead by Sergei Naryshkin, former Speaker of the Duma, now the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR, and the Russian Military-Historical Society, led by Vladimir Medinskii, former Minister of Culture now Aide to the President.

A double-edged sword

Although, this policy aims to create stability and unity, there are indications that it leads to the exact opposite, both externally and internally.³⁶ This has consequences for

33 MO RF, Komanda Voennogo universiteta Minoborony Rossii stala pobeditelem II Mezhdunarodnoi olimpiady po istorii, 25 March 2016.

34 O sozdanii fonda "Istoriia Otechestva", Ukaz Prezidenta RF, 6 April 2016, № 163.

35 O Federalnom arkhivnom agenstve, Ukaz Prezidenta RF, 4 April 2016, № 151.

36 For the domestic tensions, see for instance Gjerde, Kristian Lundby (2013) “Bruken av historie i Putins Russland: Kremles søken etter konsensus 2000–2010”, *Nordisk Østforum* 27 (1): 31–46.

neighboring countries. Putin’s defense of the Soviet attack on Finland in 1939 is a case in point. Recently, the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Finland for alleged “genocide” in World War II camps in Karelia.³⁷ In December 2019, Putin brought up the subject of Polish responsibility for the Second World War several times, not least at the annual collegium with the Defense Ministry. When Putin invoked a sacred dimension in his Presidential Address 2014 arguing that Crimea was as holy for Russia as the Temple Mount for Jews and Muslims, he used both history and religion in Russia’s security policy. The examples could be multiplied.

Domestically, the use of history seems to be a double-edged sword. Even though Stalin tends to become more popular he is still a controversial historical figure, and public protests around him are not unusual.³⁸ In April 2020, the Duma passed a law changing the date marking the end of the Second World War from 2 September to 3 September. The upper House, the Federation Council, supported the law, later signed by President Putin.³⁹ Although the capitulation of Japan was signed on 2 September, the day of celebration in the Soviet Union (Victory over Japan) was held on 3 September, thus, the argument went “historical justice has been restored.”⁴⁰ This immediately caused controversy, and the Presidential Human Rights Council sent a plea to the Federation Council asking them not to approve this law – in vain. The critics emphasize that 3 September is already a day of remembrance in Russia. It is

37 "Russia launches 'genocide' probe into Karelian WW2 camps", *YLE News*, 21 April 2020.

38 "V Krymu riadom s memorialnoi doskoi v chest Stalina napisali 'Palach'", *RBK*, 7 March 2016.

39 Vneseny izmeneniia v zakon o dniakh voinskoj slavy i pamiatnykh datakh Rossii, Prezident Rossii, 24 April 2020.

40 "Zachem Gosduma perenesla datu okonchaniia Vtoroi mirovoi na 3 sentiabria", *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 2 April 2020.

celebrated to remember the victims of the terrorist attack in Beslan 2004.⁴¹

Not only Soviet history causes controversies. Ivan IV, Ivan the Terrible, has recently revealed divisions in Russia. When the city of Orel announced its plans to raise a statue of Ivan IV in August 2016, protests occurred against placing the monument close to a children's theatre. The Governor had to postpone the event, but the monument was eventually inaugurated in October – albeit at another location in Orel. This is the first monument dedicated to Ivan IV in Russia.⁴²

This policy creates an atmosphere of confrontation and appeals to violent actions. In April 2016, the author Liudmila Ulitskaia was attacked by patriotic activists in Moscow. She was attending an awards ceremony for high school history students arranged by the NGO *Memorial*.⁴³

Concluding remarks

It is clear that the Russian political leadership does not consider history as an independent academic discipline, but rather as yet another power instrument to strengthen its national interest. The motto seems to be “Those who control the past control the future.”

To sum up, at home the Russian political leadership takes aim not only at the Soviet nostalgic electorate, but also at the younger generation. They are to be trained in a nationalistic ideology including a hostile view of the West, allegedly threatening Russia. The Fatherland needs to be defended militarily also with non-military means including the view of history. Externally this use of history will likely create further tensions. In order to work out a long-term

41 ”SPCh prosit Sovfed ne nazachat 3 sentiabria Dnem okonchaniia Vtoroi mirovoi voiny”, 16 April 2020.

42 ”V Orle otkryli pervyi v Rossii pamiatnik Ivanu Groznomu, *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 14 October 2016.

43 ’Russian Nationalists Attack Event For High-School History Students’, *RFE/RL* 28 April 2016.

strategy of how to respond to the Russian challenge, it is imperative to understand its use of history, which frames Russian security policy. As Aleksandr Herzen once wrote: “Like Providence in reverse, the Russian government seeks to arrange for the better not the future, but the past.”