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## HISTORY WRITING AND NATIONAL MYTH-MAKING IN RUSSIA

■ The Politics of the Past in Russia By Alexey Miller, Moscow	2
■ OPINION POLL Russian Opinions on History Textbooks	5
■ The Victory Myth and Russia's Identity By Ivo Mijnsen, Basel	6
■ OPINION POLL Russian Attitudes towards Stalin	10
Russians on the Disintegration of the USSR	15
■ Overcoming the Totalitarian Past: Foreign Experience and Russian Problems By Galina Mikhaleva, Moscow	16

## The Politics of the Past in Russia\*

By Alexey Miller, Moscow

### Abstract

Active political intervention in the politics of memory and the professional historian's sphere began no later than in 2006 in Russia. Today all the basic elements of the politics of the past are present: attempts to inculcate in school a single, centrally-defined, politicized history textbook; the creation of special, politically-committed structures, which combine the tasks of organizing historical research and controlling the activities of archives and publishers; attempts to legislatively regulate historical interpretations; and, as is typical in such cases, efforts to legitimize and ideologically justify all of these practices.

### The Origin of History Politics in the Post-Communist Space

In 2004 a group of Polish historians announced that Poland needed to develop and propagate its own politics of the past or history politics. They did not hide the fact that they borrowed the term *polityka historyczna* from the German *Geschichtspolitik*. Thus, the rapid political intervention into the politics of memory and domestic historical research in the post-Communist countries received a "name." As typically occurs with new phenomena, it is not easy to grasp and concisely describe the politics of the past, particularly since its practitioners make a conscious effort to hide its mechanisms and tasks.

The phenomenon of history politics is particularly powerful in the post-Communist societies, but the prominence of this issue is only partly explained by increased public interest in the history and "blank spots" left by the legacy of Communist censorship. The gist of the matter is that we are dealing with *post-Communist* societies, that is societies freed from previously tight forms of authoritarian ideological control. Strictly speaking, one should only apply the concept of history politics to democratic societies, or at least more or less pluralistic societies that recognize democratic values, including freedom of speech. Only in these conditions is there a form of politics that functions as a competition among various political actors, parties and points of view. In the authoritarian regimes of the Soviet type, the intervention of the authorities in the study of history and the politics of memory was based on the official presumption of an ideological monopoly, censorship, and administrative control over professional historiography.

In a society claiming to be democratic, all these mechanisms evolve. In contrast to the previous Communist party-state system, the group or party which holds power at a given time is no longer the same as the state. The social sphere becomes pluralistic and the authorities no longer seek to control it, particularly through repressive means. Schools become more pluralistic and history teachers, in keeping with educational standards, are free to choose their textbooks and interpretations of the events and processes studied. The historian, in his professional activities, should benefit from independence and intellectual freedom. Access to the archives should be equal to all and regulated by law rather than administrative decisions. State financed schools and research should not give the group or party currently in power the ability to dictate the contents of instruction and research since the funds are not party money, but the budget of the country, formed from the taxes of citizens. The political group currently in power cannot claim an ideological monopoly.

In these post-Communist conditions, where efforts to establish democratic practices are more or less successful, well organized political groups seek to establish a specific interpretation of historical events as the dominant version. In other words, using the administrative and financial resources of the state, the political groups in power ideologically indoctrinate society in the sphere of historical consciousness and collective memory. In particular, they focus on those historical events and processes for which there is no consensus in society and which are a topic of discussion.

To understand the phenomenon of history politics, one must know more than simply what is to be propagated. More important is to understand how it is done and what methods are used in this propaganda work. Contemporary history politics cannot fully return to the previous, Soviet methods and impose a single correct view, even if we supposed that in some cases there

\* This is an abridged version of the article "Rossiya: vlast' i istoriya" by Alexey Miller. The article was originally published in *Pro et Contra* (Vol. 13. 2009. No 34. May–August). © 2009, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Reprinted with the kind permission of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

were people who wanted to do this and were forced to invent new methods of interfering in history and the politics of memory, and also new strategies for legitimizing this intervention.

### New Mechanisms

What are these new methods? Institutionally, most important is the appearance of the Institutes of National Memory in Poland and Ukraine and the founding of similar organizations that have the same functions and principles in many other countries. Another example of the institutional dimension of the politics of the past is the creation of museums under the direct patronage of specific political groups. Typically, these institutions completely ignore the positions of political opponents.

Historical politics also appears at the legislative level, when parliaments adopt laws incorporating a specific interpretation of historical events as the single true version. Sometimes the drafts of these laws and even the eventual laws themselves set out criminal punishments for those who oppose such interpretations. This practice is characteristic not only for Eastern Europe, but also for the West.

### Four Postulates

The ideological justification for employing history politics is based on four key postulates. First, history and memory are presented, above all, as an arena for political battle with foreign and domestic opponents. On this basis, it is possible to argue that history is “too important to leave to the historians.” This approach assumes that historians do not consider the principles of professional ethics obligatory and suggests that they, as rank-and-file fighters on the ideological front, should be placed under the oversight of more “sophisticated” and “patriotic” people.

Second, the practitioners of the politics of the past claim that “everyone does it,” thereby justifying in the eyes of society an obvious violation of the principles of social science used in democratic conditions. They implement this effort by limiting historians’ freedom to speak out, pushing inconvenient views to the fringe of the media, and changing the principles of financial support. For example, instead of distributing grants for research through a system controlled by the scientific community, they hand out money to projects carried out by direct political orders.

Third, they assert that a foreign enemy diligently seeks to spread an interpretation of past events that is harmful to the fatherland. Therefore the duty of historians is to come together in countering the danger, usu-

ally by preparing a strong counter-argument: wherever they say yes, we say no, and vice versa. As a result, the space for dialogue in the country is destroyed since all are required to swear an oath to the official postulate.

The same happens in relation to the external world: supporters of historical politics on both sides of the border engage each other in skirmishes. Since neither side seeks to convince or understand his opponent, such “discussions” can only generate conflict.

Fourth, a further justification for history politics is the supposedly shameful low level of patriotism and history instruction in the schools. For this reason, they propose (temporarily) to sacrifice pluralism in textbooks and concepts so that “children learn at least the most basic things.”

In fact, social interests are only a cover and the true goals of the politics of the past have a political and partisan character.

### How It Works in Russia

In Russia, the active political intervention in history began several years ago, a little later than in many neighboring countries and partially bore a reactive character. Apparently, the team which worked on the so-called Filippov textbook – in fact we are talking about a set of textbooks and teaching aids for the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – was gathered together and received its orders in 2006.

The book produced by Filippov and his coauthors teaches patriotism as loyalty not to the state, but to the authorities. The sins of the latter are explained for the most part by the difficult international situation and the need to mobilize. In essence, this discourse by today’s ruling elite is strikingly similar to the Soviet post-Stalinist narrative without the Communist rhetoric. The last chapter of Filippov’s teaching aid is entitled “Sovereign Democracy” (without quotation marks in the book). This term is not defined as an ideological concept developed by one of Russia’s political parties, as it is in reality. Rather, “sovereign democracy” is used as an objective description of the contemporary political regime in Russia, which has overseen, as the material explains, the successful development of the country during the last ten years. Danilov’s textbook does the same thing.

However, the question of whether the version of events in this textbook is convincing is not our main topic. With a wide choice of textbooks, this one would have the right to exist. While the starting point for Filippov-Danilov is rejecting the concept of totalitarianism, a number of other textbooks use this concept.

Danilov's textbook immediately after it was ready was published with a print run of 250,000 copies. For comparison, other textbooks are published today with print runs of 10,000, maximum 15,000 copies, and some only have 5,000 copies. A print run of 250,000 is a political decision; no publisher would print so many books at its own risk if it is guided only by commercial considerations. The publisher "Prosveshchenie" ("Enlightenment") clearly must have received an advance and guarantees that there would be enough demand to buy that many books. Providing such an advance and using administrative levers to successfully "introduce" the textbook as the "correct one" is historical politics in its purest form.

Russia has also seen efforts to regulate historical questions with the help of legislation, a typical practice of history politics. The first official to speak about the need to adopt a law threatening legal consequences for "incorrect" statements about the history of World War II and the USSR's role in it was Emergency Response Minister Sergei Shoigu, one of the leaders of the United Russia party, in the winter of 2009. Today the Duma is considering two bills developing these ideas.

Another example of the Russian version of historical politics is President Medvedev's decree, promulgated in May 2009, creating a presidential Commission on Countering Attempts to Falsify History in a Manner that Damages Russian Interests. The commission is an instrument of history politics although it has clear structural and functional differences from, for example, the Polish Institute of National Memory.

There are several reasons for these differences. First, in contrast to Poland, the contemporary security services in Russia are direct descendants of the security services of the Soviet era. As a result, in Russia the security services did not lose control of the archives from the Soviet regime. The membership of the Russian commission, which includes several representatives of the special services, makes clear that they want to preserve the status quo in Russia regarding access to the archives. Currently, the law on unclassifying documents after a period of thirty years simply is not implemented. According to this law, all documents of this age should be automatically declassified and researchers should have access to them. Only special decisions can preserve the secret classification on specific documents. By contrast, in Russia

there is a practice in which each document is declassified by special agency commissions. This practice will continue in the future and access to the documents will be provided only to select researchers, working on projects defined from above. It is possible that institutional archivists could make a selection of documents or even excerpts from them on appropriate topics for these privileged researchers.

Second in the Russian version of the politics of past there was clearly a decision that both research and publishing functions would be concentrated in several institutions and centers. In both cases, the institutions were not chosen for their academic reputation, but for their ability to conduct effective political campaigns.

### Conclusion

Thus it is possible to find all the key elements of the politics of the past approach without difficulty in the Russian practice of recent years. First, there is a clear attempt to inculcate in school a politically and centrally-defined history textbook. Second, there are special, politically-committed structures, which combine the tasks of organizing historical research and controlling the activities of archives and publishers. Third, there are clear attempts to define historical interpretations of key events through legislation. And, finally, as is typical in such cases, there are efforts to legitimize and ideologically justify all of the practices listed above. As in the majority of neighboring countries, the sharpest features of history politics are for domestic consumption. If in Russia the historical politics of neighbors arouses, with complete justification, contempt and indignation, then the masterminds and organizers of our history politics can hardly expect the reaction to the fruits of their labor to be any different abroad! By following the path of historical politics trod by its neighbors, Russia only promotes a hardening of the "dialogue of the deaf" atmosphere which increasingly defines the discussion of questions regarding the recent past.

The destructive consequences of historical politics inside Russia possibly are more serious than in other countries. The reason is that the potential for society and the community of historians to counter the politics of the past is smaller in a society where the elements of pluralism and democracy are weaker.

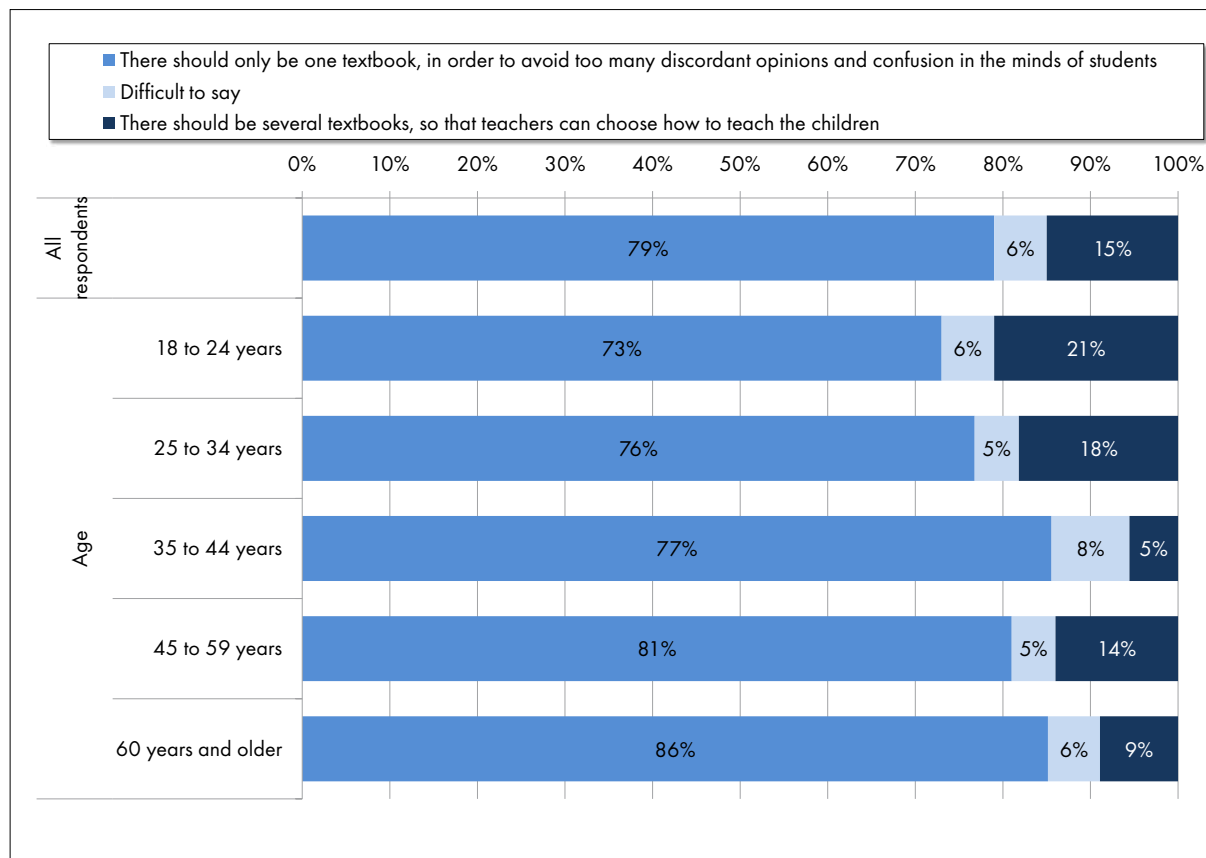
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## Opinion Poll

### Russian Opinions on History Textbooks

What is your opinion – should there be only one history textbook approved by the Ministry of Education, or can there be several textbooks?



Source: representative poll of the Russian population conducted by VTsIOM on 3–4 October 2009,  
<http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12631.html>

## The Victory Myth and Russia's Identity

By Ivo Mijnsen, Basel

### Abstract

The Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany is again a central tenet of Russian national identity. The Russian government sees the dissemination of the victory's "true," uncritical interpretation, particularly among the youth, as a crucial task, in which it is being supported by "patriotic" youth organizations such as *Nashi*. While these groups seem to be rather successful domestically, their efforts cause resistance in the non-Russian post-Soviet space. The victory myth, as well as the demand for a powerful Russia that goes along with it, contributes to a consolidation of Russian identity. Simultaneously, the country finds itself caught up in numerous bitter disputes over history with its neighbors.

### Nashi and Russian History

For large parts of the Russian population, the victory of Soviet forces over Nazi Germany has once more become a keystone of the country's identity. Since a wave of "Color" Revolutions swept through the former USSR, the Russian government has increased its efforts to defend and promote the "correct" interpretation of history. Challenges to its view in the countries of the former USSR are condemned as anti-Russian, possibly "fascist" and detrimental to Russian national interests. The establishment of a presidential commission in May 2009 to counter attempts at the "falsification" of history to damage Russia illustrates that the leading politicians in Russia see control over the correct view of history as a government task and as essential to the country's national interests.

To broaden the scope of the fight against "falsification," various actors within those parts of Russian "civil society" that is loyal to the Kremlin join in to support the dissemination of the official version of history, particularly among the younger generation. One of the most prominent is the "Democratic Antifascist Youth Organization Nashi."

### A New Elite

Founded in late February 2005, *Nashi's* (*Ours*) stated goal, according to its 2005 manifesto, was to become the kernel of a new, patriotic elite that would help Russia reclaim its rightful place in the world as a great power. *Nashi* vows to support Vladimir Putin against all enemies, internal and external, since he has consolidated the country and thus laid the groundwork for future greatness. Considering that Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin-mastermind and ideological father of the "Sovereign Democracy" concept, played an important role in the foundation of the youth organization, its loyalty to those in power is not surprising. *Nashi* promis-

es its members an active role in building a Russia that is politically powerful and economically competitive. Some of the leaders of the organization today work for the government, others have received loans to jumpstart their business projects.

The combination of material promises and a blueprint for a shared identity appealed to a large number of youth who would like to be upwardly mobile, yet have few chances for economic success in the current system, where good personal ties are essential. Although the organization has been downsized considerably in the past two years, it maintains its presence in the media. The summer camp it organized in 2009 was visited by Vladimir Putin and attracted 40,000 young people from 83 regions in Russia. *Nashi* claimed to have had 120,000 supporters in 2007, as well as 20,000 active members – so-called "commissars". Today, the number of "commissars" has decreased to about 2,000.

This identification with Soviet times is not accidental. *Nashi* makes ample use of historical symbols: It not only uses the suffix ".su" (Soviet Union) for its website, but also marches under a red and white banner (instead of the white and blue Andreevskiy flag, symbol of the Russian fleet since Petrine times): "Red is the color of our heroic past, while the white cross points to a future in freedom", states the organization. *Nashi* has thus shown itself to be quite adept at using historical symbolism for the creation of a consolidated Russian identity. The most important symbol it uses is the Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War.

### Defending Russia

In spite of the organization's insistence on modernizing Russia, the Great Patriotic War has been *Nashi's* central point of reference since its inception. The war not only shapes the organization's worldview of a powerful Russia that is surrounded by enemies but also serves as



an important mobilizing device. The first time a broader public became aware of *Nashi's* existence was on 15 May 2005. On that day, 60,000 young people marched through downtown Moscow in matching t-shirts. At the end of their route, they met up with thousands of veterans from the war. The soldiers handed the marchers bullet shells from 1940 with the inscription "Remember the war, defend the fatherland". Finally, the commissars swore an oath: "I take the homeland from the hands of the older generation. Yesterday, you fought at the front for freedom, independence and a happy life. (...) Today I continue this fight – wherever my country needs me."

The carefully staged ceremony sought to emphasize the continuity of generations, as well as the historical continuity between the defenders of the Soviet Union and those of Russia. Moreover, whereas the veterans defended the USSR against fascist Germany, *Nashi* claims in its manifesto to have taken on the task of defending Russia against today's "fascists": "Napoleon and Hitler dreamt of conquering Russia. Today, the US on one hand and international terrorism on the other strive to control Eurasia. They have their eye on Russia." For *Nashi*, being "antifascist" means the same as being an opponent of Russia's enemies.

Terrorism/separatism and the hegemonic ambitions of the United States are for *Nashi* the main threats to Russia. Conceptualizing the United States as an immediate military threat to Russia, however, requires some clever rhetorical manipulation. In his 2006 essay "Sovereignty is the Political Synonym of Competitiveness," Surkov develops the concept of "soft absorption" (*myagkoe pogloshchenie*) to make the US threat palpable. According to Surkov, this absorption proceeds by way of "weakening values, declaring the state as inefficient and provoking internal conflicts." A prime example in his view is the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, which official discourse in Russia presents as a coup d'état that replaced the Russophile elite with one friendly to the West.

The Russian government did not miss the role that youth movements such as *Pora* played in the "Orange Revolution". Thus, in addition to *Nashi*, the Kremlin supported the establishment of several youth organizations loyal to various factions within the country's political elite in 2005; these included *Mestnye* (*Locals*), *Molodaya Gvardiya* (*Young Guard*), and *Rossiya Molodaya* (*Young Russia*), to mention only a few. All of them were used to mobilize Russian youth in support of the government and infuse them with "patriotic values" to counter the threat of a "soft absorption". On a practical level, the large demonstrations they held were

a clear sign to any potential "orange" sympathizers that the "patriotic" forces were in control and ready to counter any street protests if they should appear.

## Challenged Identities

Considering Russia's history during the last two decades, one suspects that the problem may be less the "weakening" of pre-existent values, but rather the fact that Russia is still struggling to conceptualize its identity. The Russian sociologist Boris Dubin diagnoses a "poverty of symbols" in today's Russian society, since Soviet concepts and tokens of identity are still present but can no longer be integrated into a post-Soviet identity. Moreover, the fact that the seemingly homogenous political community of the USSR has ceased to exist and been replaced by 15 states and numerous contested areas, not to mention the millions of ethnic Russians living outside of Russia, leads to insecurity concerning the mental and geographic borders of the current Russian community.

The Russian government has sponsored a number of programs that are meant to promote "patriotic values." Two federal five-year-programs for the "Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation" in 2001 and 2006 sought to focus these efforts. They emphasize two interconnected pillars of Russian identity: The millennium-old history of one and the same Russian state and the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. Hence an attack on either of these two is seen as equivalent to an attack on Russian identity and thus, potentially, on Russia itself.

## Defense of a Myth

A large body of journalistic and academic writing in Russia claims that an international campaign is under way that aims at soiling the great history of Russia. Even the "liberal" president Dmitry Medvedev claimed in his Victory Day blog in 2009: "We are increasingly confronted by (...) historical falsification. These attempts at falsifying history are becoming increasingly acrimonious, vicious and aggressive". The defense of the historical "truth" is considered tantamount to a defense of the Russian identity. *Nashi* considers itself a part of the effort to protect this identity.

The organization thus contributes to the dissemination of a version of history that Vladimir Putin fully developed in his Victory Day speech marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nazi defeat in 2005: He spoke of a "sacred" victory and developed a narrative according to which an innocent Soviet Union was brutally assaulted by an inhuman aggressor. In spite of huge materi-

al and human losses, however, the Red Army stood its ground and went on to liberate Europe and ultimately humankind: “Good triumphed over evil and freedom over tyranny.” Victory thereby attains a mythical status. Through this mythical lens emerges a powerful, united country that attained the greatest victory in history.

Now, official, state-sponsored versions of history tend to simplify and glorify the deeds of the nation and the army in countries around the world. What is different in Russia, though, is the thoroughness with which the official narrative excludes and combats all competing versions of history, of which there are many: The official discourse refuses to even address the question of how the Hitler-Stalin Pact may have contributed to the beginning of the war. It remains equally silent about Katyn, the annexation of the Baltic States, crimes committed by the Soviet state against its own and other populations and the tightening of the repressive Stalinist system after the war. Violations of this code of silence are interpreted as an attack on Russia’s interests by forces hostile to it. The establishment in May 2009 of the presidential commission, consisting to a large extent of generals, Federal Security Service officials and “patriotic” historians, is presented as the only adequate countermeasure.

### Past and Present

It is precisely this link between historical “truth” and the national interests of the current Russian state that turns the myth of victory into a factor for Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. The myth appears to provide a basis for the identity of Russian society, yet the political community that attained victory was Soviet, not Russian. However, since ethnic Russians played a leading role in the victorious Soviet community, the historical outcome in this interpretation legitimates Russian demands for close cooperation in the post-Soviet space under its leadership. A challenge to the myth of victory thus amounts to a challenge of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space today. This mindset has contributed to the diplomatic tensions between Russia and its neighbors. Each time, *Nashi* was involved.

When the Estonian government removed the monument to the Soviet soldiers who had fallen in the Great Patriotic War from downtown Tallinn in 2007, *Nashi* picketed the country’s embassy in Moscow for an entire week. The activists called Estonia a “fascist” state and equated the Estonian police’s violent suppression of ethnic Russians’ protest against the removal in Tallinn to the methods of National Socialism. After activists of the organization assaulted the Estonian ambassa-

dor Marina Kalyurand during a press conference, she was forced to leave the country, which *Nashi* celebrated as “Our victory.”

The events provoked an international diplomatic incident. German chancellor Angela Merkel called Putin and reminded him of Russia’s obligation to protect diplomats. Shortly thereafter, the picketing ended. *Nashi*’s actions were condemned almost unanimously outside of Russia. The government’s tacit support for the protesters did little to improve relations between the EU and Russia. Domestically, however, the protests were popular.

A second, more recent example of the struggle over memory took place in Georgia. Georgia once was part of the “core” of the USSR. Even today, one often hears in Russia, how closely connected the two peoples once were and still are. Since Saakashvili came to power after the “Rose Revolution,” however, the country has followed a distinctively pro-Western, pro-American and anti-Russian course. At the same time, there are efforts in Georgia to articulate a national identity and history distinct from the Soviet one: A case in point was the construction of a “Museum of the Soviet Occupation” in Tbilisi in 2006. For the Russian government, Saakashvili’s policies represent a challenge to its version of history, and his policies a threat to the geopolitical interests of the Russian state.

The peak of tensions in the realm of identity politics was reached in December 2009, when the Georgian government detonated a monument to Soviet soldiers in the city of Kutaisi. The Georgian government declared that it wanted to make way for a new parliament building, as part of an effort to revive the depressed economy in the region. However, it appears clear that the monument’s removal was also intended to be a political statement. The demonstration of strength backfired when a poorly executed blast on 19 December killed a woman and her eight-year-old daughter and injured another two bystanders.

The actions of the government immediately sparked protests and demonstrations in Russia and Georgia. Vladimir Putin said on 22 December: “This is only the most recent attempt to efface from the peoples of the former Soviet Union’s historical memory the recollection of our common past.” The foreign ministry condemned the action as “state vandalism” and “sacrilegious.” The fact that both the Prime Minister and the foreign ministry commented on the blast underscores that the Russian government saw the “attack” on the monument as an attack against the interests of the Russian state.



Again, *Nashi* picketed the embassy and released statements that almost word for word matched those of the government. Again, the organization linked past and present by accusing Saakashvili of acting against his own people. Through his war “with the heroic past of his country (...) people that are alive today had to die.”

*Nashi*, as bearers of an official discourse, skillfully used the struggle over the monument in Kutaisi to portray the blast as a war against the Georgians’ own past and thus against their own people. This argument is linked with the demand for the removal of the Georgian president, who is depicted as an incompetent, “fascist,” uncivilized leader gambling with the fate of his people. They charge him with not representing the interests of the population. To back up this assertion, the Russian media devote a lot of attention to the criticism of Saakashvili by opposition movements in Georgia and the Georgian Diaspora. A close alliance with Russia is presented as Georgia’s “natural” path, as opposed to the pro-American policy of the president.

### The Myth’s Effectiveness

“Patriotic” youth organizations such as *Nashi* fulfill an important role in Russia’s political system. They amplify the messages of the government – particularly in the realm of identity politics and package them in a manner that targets them at a young audience inside of Russia.

The marketing of a trendy type of patriotism by means of concerts, summer camps and orange-black ribbons on Victory Day appears quite effective. Besides, the protests that *Nashi* organizes allow for a channeling of dissatisfaction among youth and its projection outwards. By putting the victory myth at the center of its message, the government and *Nashi* struck a chord in Russian society. Regaining pride in its long history after the decline of the Nineties appears to be a genuine need in Russia. The myth is the most important embodiment of this pride.

Internationally, the victory myth has fared less well, however. The examples cited suggest that on the international stage, the uncritical assessment of the USSR’s role in the Great Patriotic and Russia’s undiplomatic demeanor towards its neighbors – *Nashi*’s actions are part of this – enables politicians in Estonia to avoid confronting that country’s historic dark spots and present-day discrimination against its ethnic Russian minority. In the former satellite states and the West, Russia’s apodictic view of history draws broad criticism and contributes to an antagonistic perception of the country. Paradoxically, Russia’s rabid defense of the victory myth, a symbol of Russia’s cooperation with the West in the defeat of a dictatorial and murderous regime, serves to strengthen those forces that try to deny this contribution.

### About the Author

Ivo Mijnsen works as a researcher at the University of Basel, in the project “Democracy and the Nation in Russia,” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

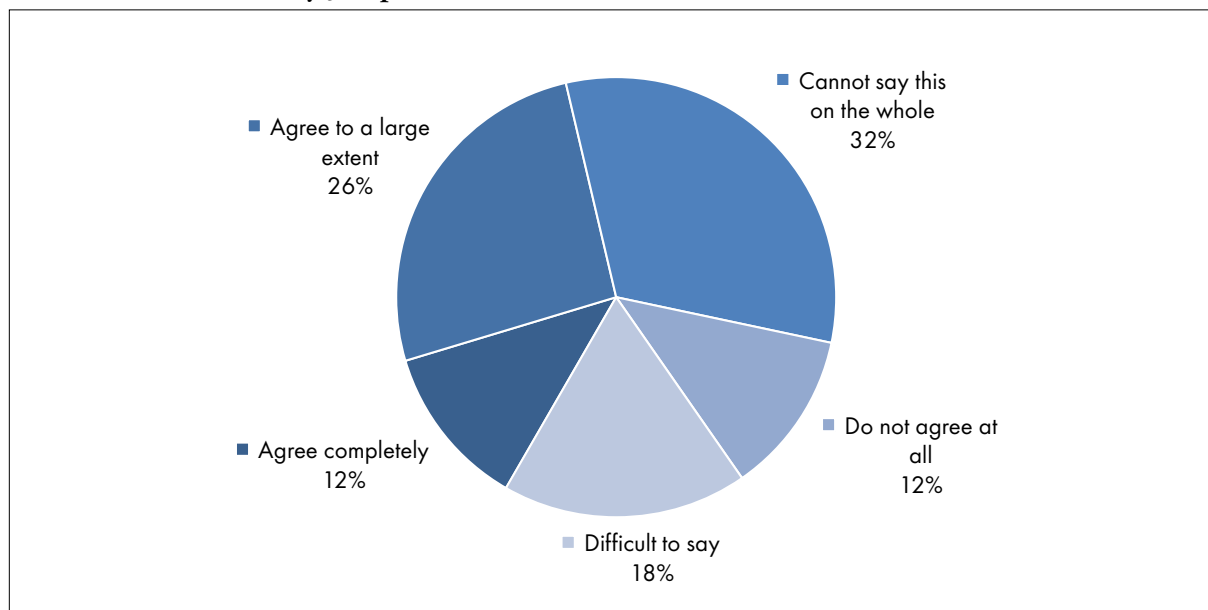
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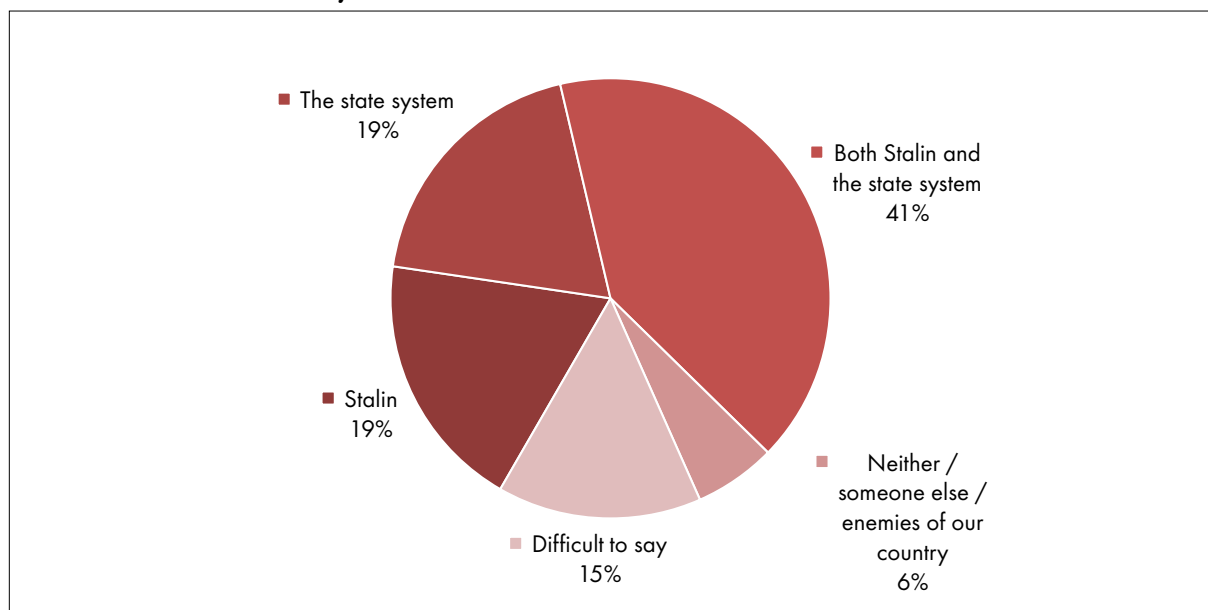
## Opinion Poll

### Russian Attitudes towards Stalin

Taking into account the scale and scope of repressions during the time of Stalin and the forcible relocation (deportation) of several ethnic groups, do you agree with the statement that the leader of the country Joseph Stalin was a state criminal?

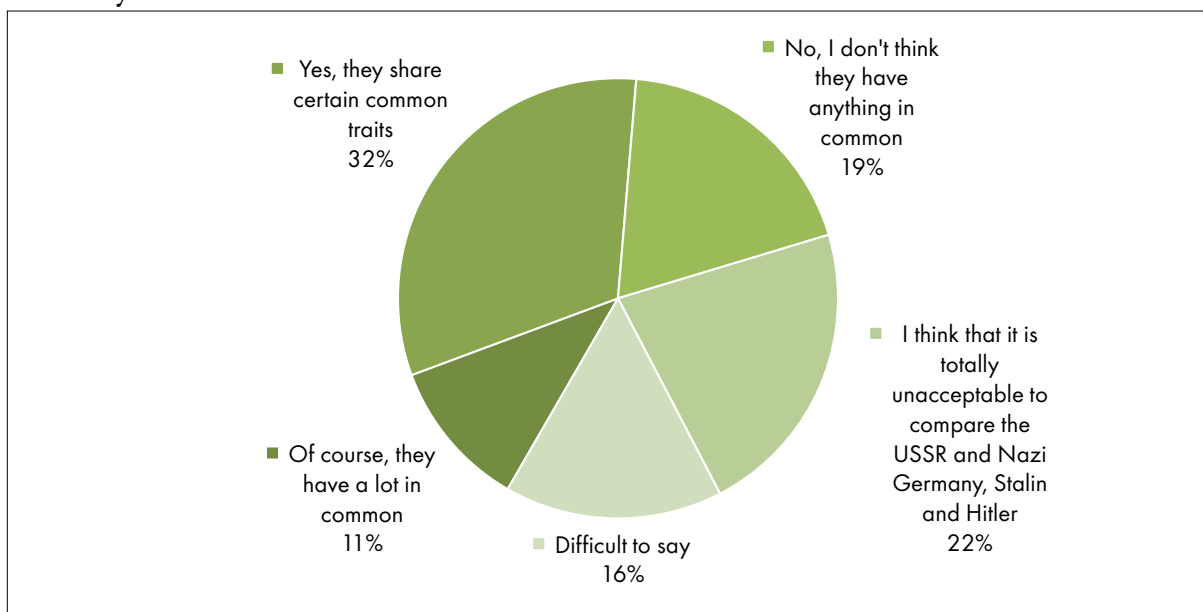


In your opinion, who is above all responsible for these repressions and for our country's losses from the 1930s to the early 1950s?

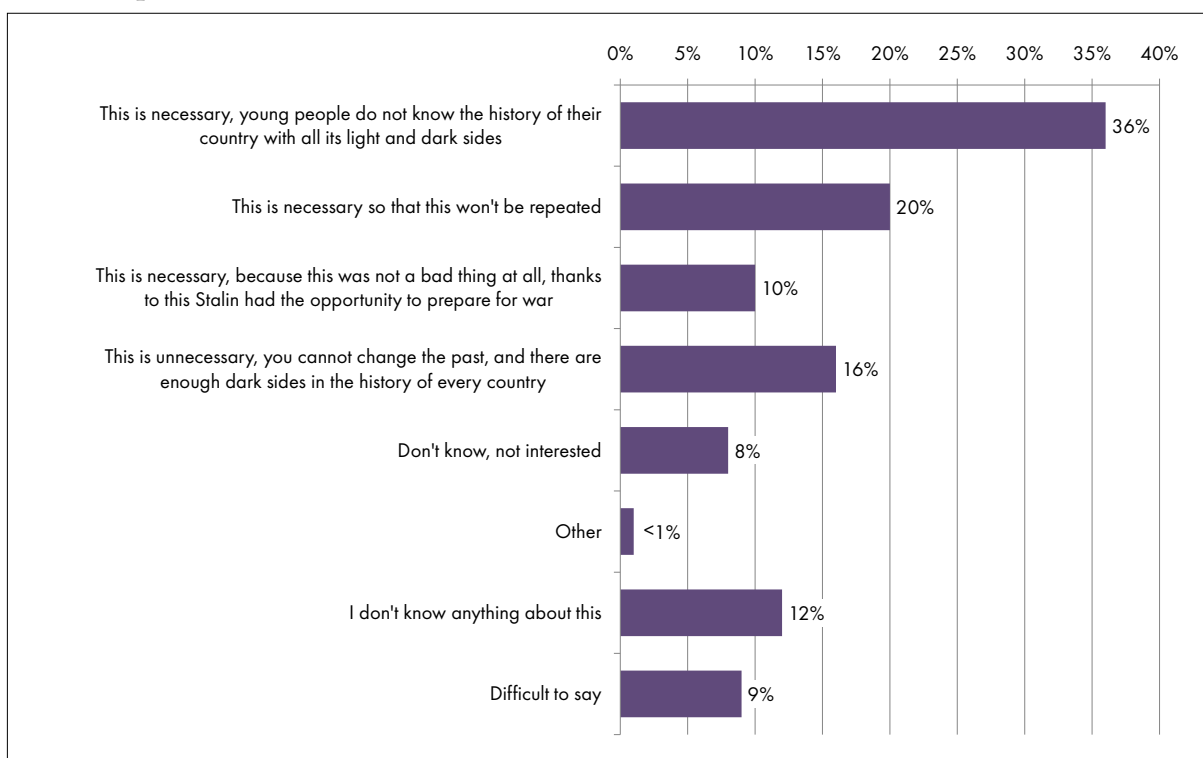


Source: representative poll of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center on 23–31 August 2009,  
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2009090404.html>

**Did the state systems that Stalin created in the 1930s in the Soviet Union and Hitler in Germany have common traits?**

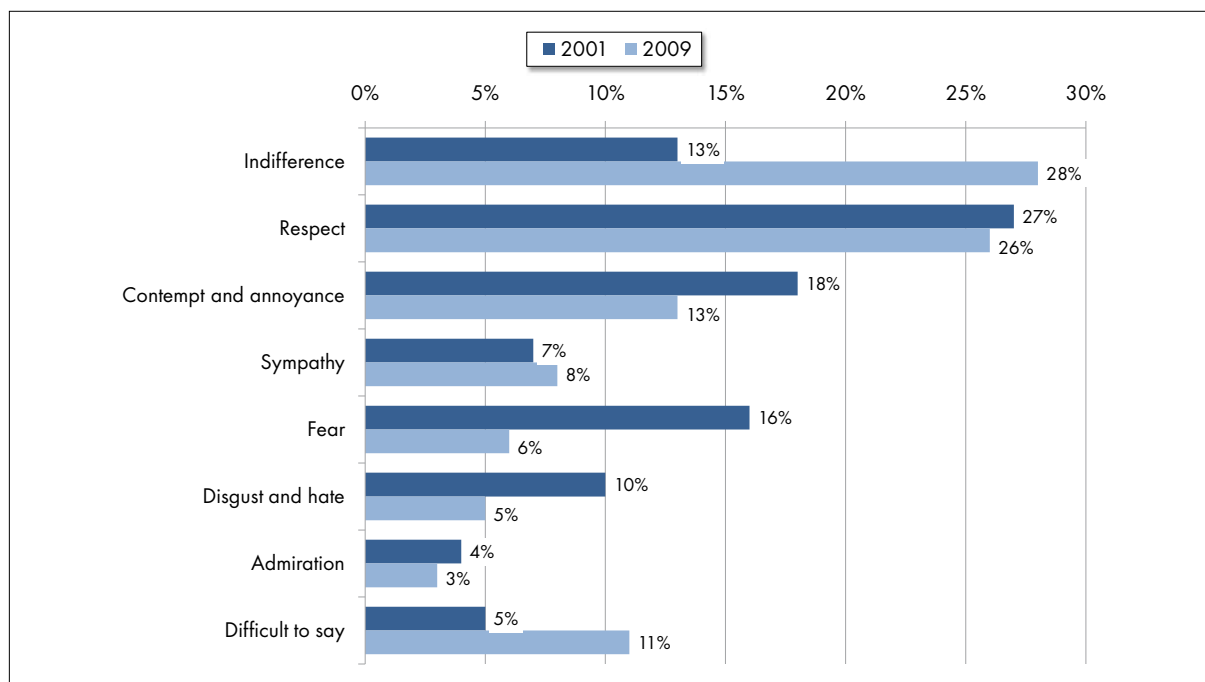


**Is it necessary to extensively cover the events of September 1939, when troops of the Red Army entered Poland and occupied territory as agreed on in the secret plan of Molotov and Ribbentrop?**

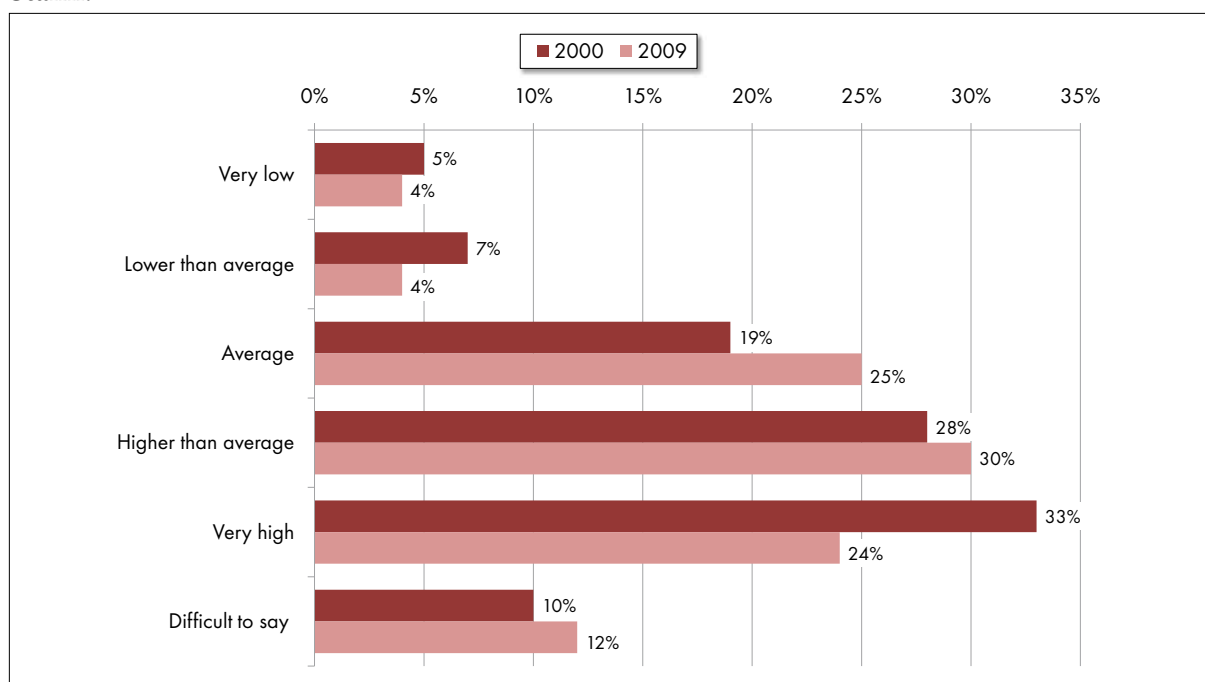


Source: representative poll of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center on 23–31 August 2009,  
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2009090404.html>

## What is your attitude towards Joseph Stalin?



## How would you rate the leadership abilities and the capability to govern the country of Joseph Stalin?



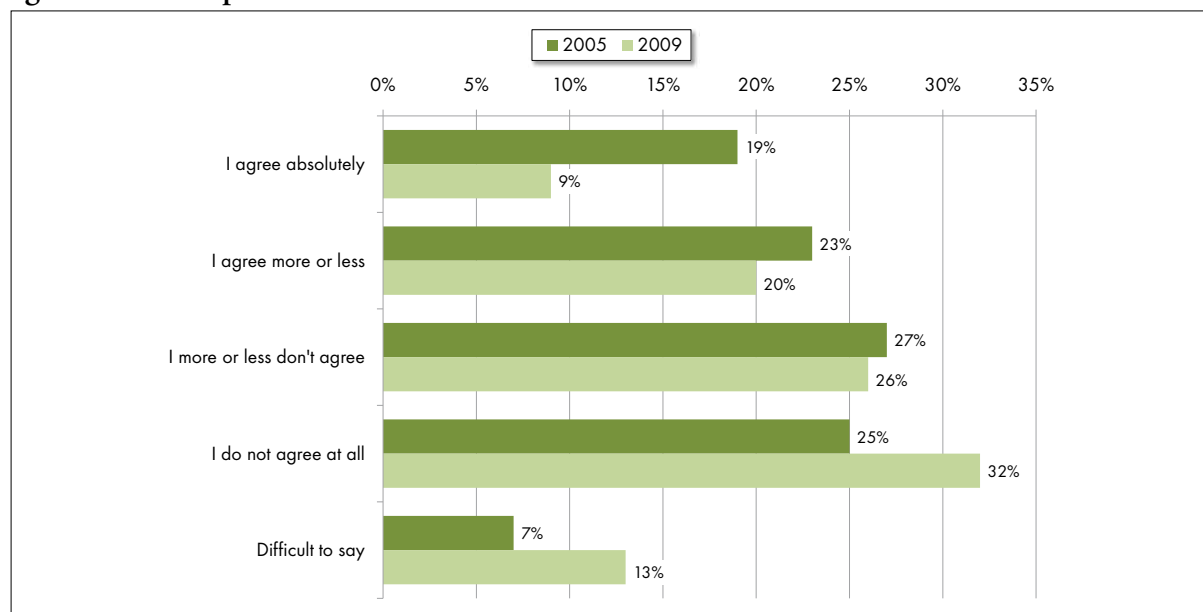
Source: representative polls of the Russian population conducted by VTsIOM in 2000, 2001 and on 5–6 December 2009,  
<http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12945.html>

The 130th anniversary of Stalin's birthday will be in December of this year. Controversy about the appraisal of the man and his role in the history of our country does not cease. With which of the following opinions on Stalin would you be likely to agree?\*

	1998	1999	2009
Stalin was a cruel and inhumane tyrant who was guilty of the death of millions of innocent people	28%	29%	35%
Regardless of the mistakes and flaws that are ascribed to Stalin, the most important thing is that under his leadership our people emerged as victors from the Great Patriotic War	31%	34%	35%
We do not know the entire truth about Stalin and his actions	28%	32%	26%
Stalin was a wise leader who led the USSR to power and prosperity	16%	20%	21%
The politics of Stalin (purge of the officer corps and collusion with Hitler) resulted in the country's unpreparedness for war in 1945**	16%	18%	17%
Only a cruel ruler could maintain order in the state under the conditions of acute class struggle and external threat	15%	22%	15%
Our people will never manage without a leader such as Stalin, sooner or later such a leader will come and establish order	13%	18%	11%
Stalin distorted the ideas of Lenin, he created a system that was far from the ideals of true socialism	11%	9%	8%
Stalin continued the work begun by Lenin and other Bolshevik revolutionaries	6%	7%	6%
Stalin is maliciously reviled by people to whom the interests of the Russian people and our state are alien	3%	5%	4%
Difficult to say	9%	7%	6%

\* Wording of 2009 poll; wording different for the earlier polls; \*\* sic; this should most probably be 1941

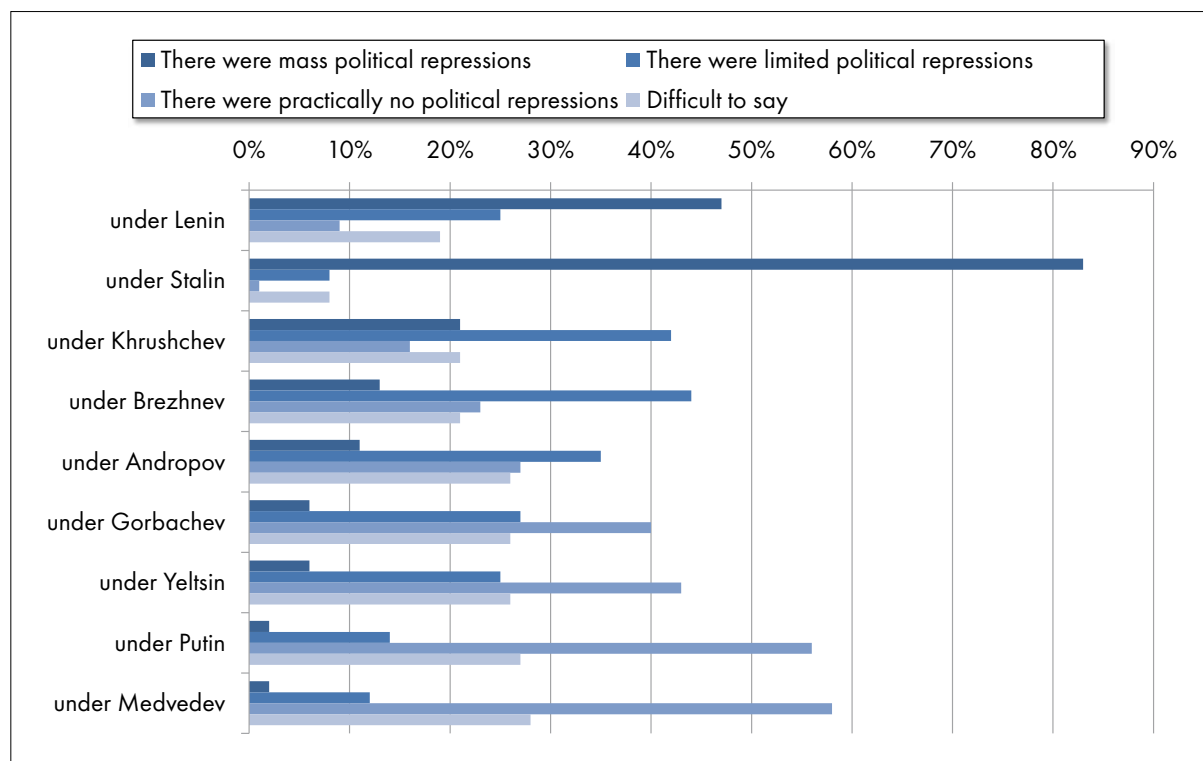
Some people believe that we now need a politician such as Stalin to lead our country. Do you agree with this opinion or not?



Source: representative polls of the Russian population conducted by VTsIOM in 1998, 1999, 2005 and on 5–6 December 2009, <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12945.html>



Russia has been ruled by very diverse regimes. In your opinion, what was the situation with regard to political repressions during various times in history?

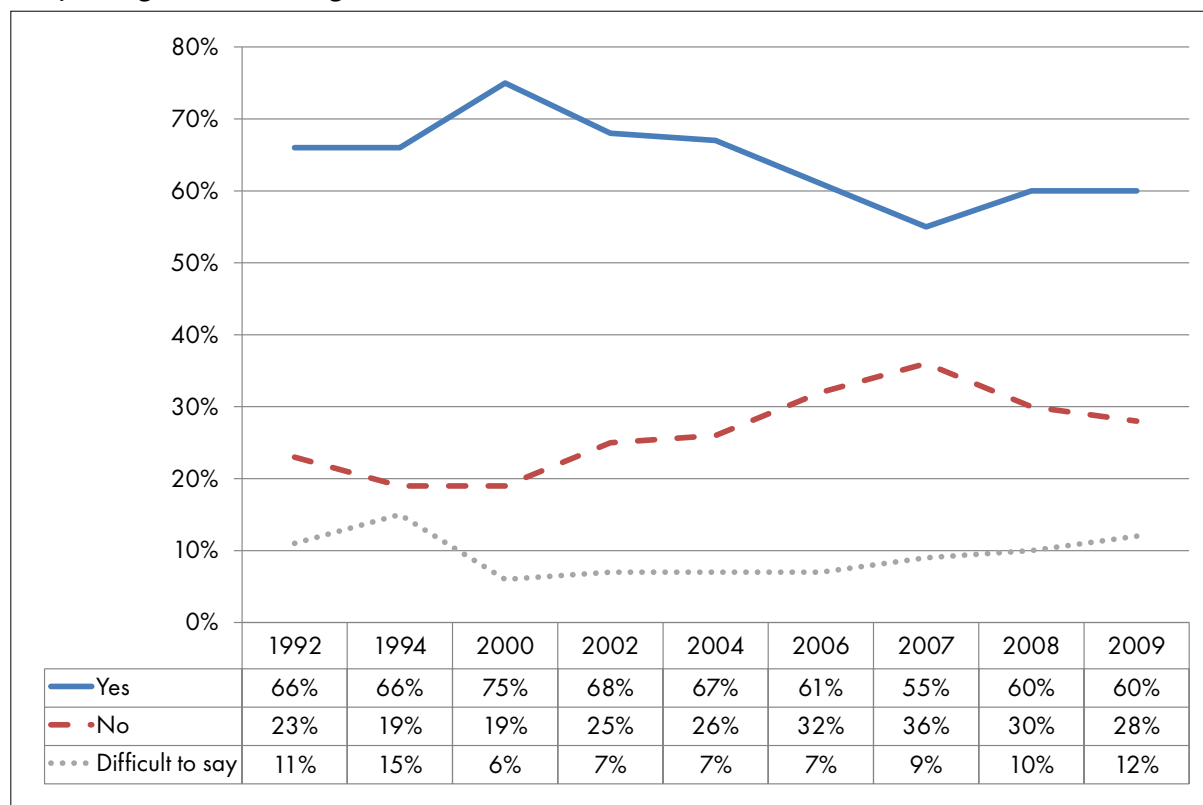


	There were mass political repressions	There were limited political repressions	There were practically no political repressions	Difficult to say
under Lenin	47%	25%	9%	19%
under Stalin	83%	8%	1%	8%
under Khrushchev	21%	42%	16%	21%
under Brezhnev	13%	44%	23%	21%
under Andropov	11%	35%	27%	26%
under Gorbachev	6%	27%	40%	26%
under Yeltsin	6%	25%	43%	26%
under Putin	2%	14%	56%	27%
under Medvedev	2%	12%	58%	28%

Source: representative polls of the Russian population conducted by VTsIOM on 24–25 October 2009,  
<http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/12697.html>

## Russians on the Disintegration of the USSR

Do you regret the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991?



Source: representative polls of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center, 1992–2009 (last poll on 20–23 November 2009), <http://www.levada.ru./press/2009122101.html>

## Overcoming the Totalitarian Past: Foreign Experience and Russian Problems

By Galina Mikhaleva, Moscow

### Abstract

Russia's leaders are looking to the country's history to find ways to justify renewed imperial ambitions. While a study of foreign experience shows that there are numerous ways for a country to deal with its totalitarian past, the problem is complicated in the post-Communist context because politicians seek to use history as a tool for their own purposes. The YABLOKO party recently adopted a resolution dealing with the uses of history to stimulate democratic transition, but it so far has had no impact on Russian society.

### Seeking a New National Identity in Russia

The discussion of how to evaluate the Soviet past is taking up an increasing share of public affairs in Russia. The reasons are numerous: shock from the results of the television show "The Name of Russia" (Stalin won third place in public voting for the greatest figure in Russian history), the discussion of "Stalin as an effective manager" in connection with Aleksandr Filippov's text book material *Modern History of Russia: 1945-2006*, and the broadcast of numerous pseudo-historic films on Russian television. In addition, President Dmitry Medvedev created a presidential Commission on Countering Attempts to Falsify History in a Manner that Damages Russian Interests, whose membership and tasks aroused concerns among many historians, human rights defenders, and politicians.

According to the president, the commission will fight falsifications of historical events "directed at depreciating the international prestige" of the country and to prepare recommendations for "an adequate response" to the attempts to falsify historical facts and "neutralize possible negative consequences." The membership of the commission – with the presidential chief of staff as the chair and representatives of the siloviki and politicians with nationalist and great power points of view – makes clear how they will identify cases of "falsification" and what the "adequate responses" will look like. The main objections to the creation of such a body are clear. Why should a group of people, among whom there are practically no professional historians, take responsibility for making, in the name of the government, "correct" or "incorrect" evaluations of various historical events? This is not only absurd since no one can have a monopoly on the truth, but dangerous because it inevitably arouses the next round of alarms and warnings from our neighbors.

The reason for the active and constant appeals to the past, whether consciously or unconsciously, can be

found in the tortured search for the foundation of a new national identity, a national idea. The renewed imperial ambitions of an "energy superpower" demand a form of legitimacy that justifies claims to dominance in the post-Soviet space and helps the population overcome its feelings of inferiority after the collapse of the USSR. It does not matter that this legitimacy is nothing but a mythological construction, strengthened by the mediatization of politics, within whose framework the real war in Georgia and a soccer game in Holland fit into the same category. While skipping over the problem of providing stability and the mechanism for legitimizing autocracy using artificially-created models defining its historic role, I would like to discuss the significance and complexity of evaluating the totalitarian and authoritarian past within the conditions of a democratic transformation.

### Foreign Experience in Overcoming a Totalitarian Past

In the vast majority of post-totalitarian countries, the experience of rethinking the totalitarian past was a necessary part of the process of strengthening democratic institutions and democratic cultures. Special commissions – whether focused on conciliation or truth – in Latin America, South Africa, and Morocco actively drew a clear picture of the violation of human rights and the actions of the state's repressive agencies during the period of dictatorship. Additionally, the German experience of de-Nazification and "overcoming the past" serve as an example for Europe, including the former socialist countries.

The German historian Helmut König defines "overcoming the past" as a combination of action and knowledge on the base of which new democratic states relate to their predecessors, interpret the structural, personnel, and mental legacy of the totalitarian states, and evaluate their own compromised history in the country's

political culture. In Germany, overcoming the national-socialist past began with legal measures – punishing the guilty (including during the Nuremberg process), rehabilitating the victims of Nazism, and reevaluating the race-based laws. This process took several decades. Behind it stood historical research about national-socialism and in parallel there were personnel and ideological denazification, accompanied by a critical evaluation of the norms and values of the Nazi period. The measures adopted were inspired by the state authorities to show the broad public the anti-people character of the previous values and contrast them with democratic values. The entire process of “overcoming the past” was initiated by the Western allies, who sought through a law-based method to deal with past injustice, soften the suffering of the victims, reduce to a minimum the possibility of events repeating themselves, as well as understanding the reasons for why the crimes were committed and documenting them. Not only has this procedure yet to be completed, it has become an important part of the national and cultural self-identification of contemporary Germans.

Although the process of overcoming totalitarian pasts evolved differently in different countries, they all have several common features:

- After the abolition of the previous regime, particularly an ideologically-based dictatorship, the new state made clear to society that the previous state system was based, in principle, on correct ideas that were poorly realized. This was the case in Germany after 1945 and in the post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe after 1989.
- In the post-totalitarian countries there usually was a demand to complete the historical discussion about historical memory, reach closure about the past, and declare a moratorium on its interpretation. In Poland, for example, this course is associated with the so-called “thick line” [gruba kreśka] that the first democratic government of Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki insisted on. In defense of such an approach, its advocates usually refer to the need to preserve civil peace and the unity of national consciousness. Likewise they stress the need to build a radiant future after overcoming the dark past.
- Most frequently demands for a serious reevaluation of the past come from groups that were in opposition before the end of the old regime and that continue to seek a consistent rejection of the old institutions and traditions after the end of the dictatorship. Among their key demands are rehabilitation of

the victims, revealing the historical truth, and naming and punishing those responsible. All of these actions should be codified in a state act.

- One of the consequences of the destruction of an ideological regime is the exit of citizens into private life. They have no desire to participate in politics, which does not help in overcoming the past. While victims and executioners are still alive, their mutual dislike and efforts to push this issue to the periphery of social consciousness exists in the social conversation.

The cultural and historical peculiarities of specific countries and regions influence the forms, intensity, and depth of overcoming the past. In Japan, for example, the deeply rooted respect for elders complicates this process and in Latin America the corporatist structure of society, which envisions a strong role for the Catholic church, state patronage, and clients on the lowest level, hinders it.

On the basis of current political experience, it is possible to identify several typical reactions, characterizing state relations to the totalitarian past:

1. Ignore and remain silent – Spain after the Franco dictatorship and Russia after 1991.
2. Carry out political purges with extensive use of force in relation to collaborators – France and Yugoslavia after World War II.
3. Overcome the past through legal methods – Germany and Austria after WWII, lustration in the Czech Republic after 1989.
4. Amnesty and forgive people responsible for the crimes of the previous regime
5. Guarantee a compromise between legal investigations and political sanctions – South Africa after apartheid.
6. Compensate the victims of repression, including those living in other countries – Germany and Austria after 1945.

From the list above it is clear that some measures can be used together or can replace each other in different historical periods. Thus, in Spain after the death of Franco, at first there was a consolidating decision among all political forces to support a “pact of oblivion,” but a quarter of a century later it became clear that this did not heal the wounds of civil war and dictatorship. Therefore, today in Spanish society the time is ripe to provide answers to the questions of the past. In Argentina and Chile, on the other hand, at the beginning of the democratic path, commissions were created to study and evaluate the scale of political force used and the violation of human rights. They chose the path of remem-

bering and disclosure. In other countries such commissions did not tie memories and punishment to each other under the important condition that those guilty of crimes openly admitted their previous activity. If the former executioners did this, then they had a chance to avoid legal consequences; however, if they hid their actions, then a legal investigation might start. In the final case, the links “memory-punishment” and “oblivion-amnesty” were replaced by the tie linking memory with forgiveness. The exposure of criminals in this case does not lead to punishment; thereby encouraging public repentance. Such a choice is based on the conviction that for society rethinking the past is much more useful than punishing criminals. South Africa used this principle most completely after the end of apartheid.

### Historical Memory and Communism

The countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe that took part in the last wave of democratic transformations have still not made their final choice in relation to the past and their approaches to it are constantly changing. The matter is complicated by the fact that national history in this region is often a political instrument used by the authorities of various states for their own legitimacy or to justify unfriendly or openly inimical acts against other peoples or countries. Regardless of whether the past is viewed positively or negatively, its evaluation forms a collective identity and the accompanying political loyalty. Therefore in the post-Communist world, memory is always a field for political competition.

This situation applies in particular to the post-Soviet space which has suffered a series of wars and dictatorships over the course of the last century. The peoples, living through the trial of Communism, lost and then regained their national independence, though each time in this process they suffered new insults and indignations. Each such nation has its own historical memory, which does not coincide with, and sometimes directly contracts the historical memory of neighbors. As a result in almost all of the countries of the “socialist camp” there are evaluations of the historical past making it possible to present one’s own trials exclusively as a result of other’s evil will. Under such an approach, the Communist dictatorship and its accompanying terror are presented as political instruments for national oppression. They prefer to ignore or forget the fact that a significant part of the “local” society everywhere supported the Communist regimes. As a result, they make historical-legal evaluations in a maximally one-sided manner, as evidenced by the use of the term “genocide”

in the political lexicon of numerous post-Communist countries to describe the recent past.

Russia traveled a particularly difficult path. Victory in the Great Fatherland War cannot be separated from the events that occurred before it or took place in parallel to it, particularly the massive repressions, the Stalin-Hitler pact, and the deportation of entire peoples. In present day Russia, instead of thinking about the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in all its completeness and tragedy, the Soviet great power patriotic myth has revived, presenting Russia’s history as a sequence of glorious and heroic accomplishments. In this myth there is no room for guilt or responsibility; it designers and propagators do not recognize the very fact of tragedy. Many Russian citizens are not in a position to more or less objectively evaluate the degree of the Soviet Union’s historical responsibility toward our current neighbors or the scale of the catastrophe that befell Russia. Rejecting the strength of memory and replacing it with a brightly colored, but primitivistically positive picture is for Russia no less of a social danger than cultivating national resentment is for its neighbors. As a result, history is becoming an instrument for achieving momentary political goals and a weapon in the hands of people who in essence have no interest in the national memories of other peoples, the tragedies that befell their own peoples, or the past in general.

In Russia’s social discourse, there are several well defined positions regarding history which are represented by well-defined political and social forces:

- Maximum openness and free discussion, represented by Memorial and several other human rights organizations, a part of academic society and society in general. They support discussing the most difficult historical topics without state dictates, including within the framework of international dialogue.
- The relativist position, according to which the events of the past can be considered arbitrarily and history serves as a type of raw material for all sorts of falsifications. According to this approach, “wasting strength on the arguments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you do not answer the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” according to L. Radzikhovsky, writing in the official newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (June 2, 2009).
- The instrumental-preservationist position, most clearly represented by Presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Naryshkin, who announced that his Commission on countering falsifications of history will become an “organizational basis for guaranteeing the defense of our history from dishonest attempts to distort it.”



The first and so far only political party that has answered the question of how people should relate to the totalitarian Soviet past in the new Russia is the Russian United Democratic Party YABLOKO. On February 28, 2009, its Political Committee adopted an important decision entitled “Overcoming Stalinism and bolshevism as a condition for modernizing Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Many experts and human rights defenders participated in preparing the document, including the author

of this article. In thinking about and developing this resolution, the Political Committee drew considerably on the already existing experience of other countries in overcoming the totalitarian past. The document elicited active discussion in the media, drawing committed supporters and ardent opponents. However, in general there have been no changes in the way that Russia relates to the past since the document was adopted.

#### *About the Author*

Galina Mikhaleva is the Director of the Center for the Study of Contemporary Politics at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow.

#### *Suggested Reading*

- YABLOKO, “Преодоление сталинизма и большевизма как условие модернизации России в XXI веке [Overcoming Stalinism and bolshevism as a condition for modernizing Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century],” March 11, 2009, [http://www.yabloko.ru/resheniya\\_politkomiteta/2009/03/11](http://www.yabloko.ru/resheniya_politkomiteta/2009/03/11)
- Имя России [The Name of Russia], <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/>
- «В демократическом обществе свобода истории – это свобода всех» [“In a democratic society, the freedom of history is freedom for all,”], <http://www.polit.ru/institutes/2009/06/01/let.html>
- An appeal from the International Memorial Society: “On national images of the past,” [http://www.memo.ru/2008/03/27/Memorial\\_obrazy\\_proshlogo\\_Eng.htm](http://www.memo.ru/2008/03/27/Memorial_obrazy_proshlogo_Eng.htm)
- “Нарышкин: Историческая комиссия не будет переписывать источники, [Naryshkin: The history commission will not rewrite the sources]” June 17, 2009, <http://www.grani.ru/Politics/Russia/m.152475.html>

## About the Russian Analytical Digest

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de)), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), and the Institute of History at the University of Basel (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/seminar/>). It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen ([www.laender-analysen.de/russland](http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.res.ethz.ch](http://www.res.ethz.ch)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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### Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist countries, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email services with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

### The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, area studies, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) in public policy degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS); offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students; and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

### The Institute of History at the University of Basel

The Institute of History at the University of Basel was founded in 1887. It now consists of ten professors and employs some 80 researchers, teaching assistants and administrative staff. Research and teaching relate to the period from late antiquity to contemporary history. The Institute offers its 800 students a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in general history and various specialized subjects, including a comprehensive Master's Program in Eastern European History (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/bereiche/osteuro-paeische-geschichte/>).

Any opinions expressed in Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

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Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2010 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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