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Russian politics and the Soviet past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Evidence drawn from the intersection of historical memory and politics in Russia underline not only on-going framing battles over the Soviet past. The evidence suggests that the Kremlin is unwilling to develop and impose on society historical narratives which promote chauvinism, hypernationalism, and re-Stalinization. Although such an agenda has some support among incumbent elites and in society, it remains subordinate in terms of political influence as of early 2016. Instead, the regime is now extending support to groups in society and the political establishment which favor a critical assessment of the Soviet era, including Stalinism. This emerging criticism of the Soviet past serves a number of important goals of the leadership, including re-engagement with the West.

To this end, the Kremlin recently approved new history textbooks critical of the Soviet past as well as a significant program that memorializes the victims of Soviet repressions. Yet the regime is unlikely to usher in thorough de-Stalinization which would threaten its power. Instead, the Kremlin is attempting to assemble a grand narrative that approves, as well as criticizes – in different measures – each of the regimes that existed in the 20th century (tsarist, communist, and post-communist). This incipient narrative constitutes a form of *bricolage*, which involves the retrieval and reassembly of diverse, often conflicting, elements to solve a problem. Here the problem is the long-standing, divisive issue of how to evaluate the history of 20th century Russia and its different regimes. The Kremlin now seeks to knit together the diverse identities of these regimes through the unifying historical thread of the Russian state. This act of *bricolage* also seeks to reconcile the contradictions *within* each regime: elements of the new narrative can be expected to condemn the inhumanity of Stalin and Stalinism while other facets will extol industrialization and the Great Patriotic War as the achievements of Russian-led Soviet society. From this perspective, neither re-Stalinization nor de-Stalinization is likely to occur in Putin's Russia. Nevertheless, if recent initiatives remain in place, critical assessments of Soviet foreign and domestic policies will become increasingly commonplace.

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1. Introduction

Is the Russian regime under Vladimir Putin now undergoing re-Stalinization, as some experts argue? (Kuzio, 2016) Other scholars suggest that Russia today meets the “fascist minimum” (Eatwell, 1996; Paxton, 2004, pp. 14, 20) – the presence of sufficient traits that justify the use of fascism as a concept to evaluate politics in Russia (Motyl, 2007, 2010). In both instances,

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the assumption is that the Russian regime, with the support of much of Russian society, is increasingly despotic, aggressively nationalistic, and neo-imperialist. Official praise for Stalin and his domestic and foreign policies is said to provide vital ideological support for this turn toward greater authoritarianism and chauvinism.

A close examination of competing historical narratives among elites and within Russian society provides an alternative assessment of the Russian regime. Two related propositions are offered: 1) guided by instrumental considerations and political pressures, the Russian regime has increasingly shifted to historical representations that are more critical of the Soviet era, including the rule of Josef Stalin. Although the Kremlin's positive assessments of Stalin, as the personification of Russia as an authoritarian great power, are increasingly muted, it still rejects a full condemnation of the dictator or the Soviet era; 2) The regime's search for equilibrium on the Soviet era is due in large part to the requirements of the regime's legitimacy, particularly through the sacralized memory of the Great Patriotic War, and to the persistence of deep divisions among political elites and Russian society over how to evaluate the Soviet period, particularly Stalinism. As a form of political compromise, the regime now favors a grand narrative for the controversial 20th century that elevates the patriotic unity of the Russian state and people above the more discrete (and divisive) political traits of the tsarist, communist, and post-communist regimes.

The future of this incipient grand narrative, which is a form of *bricolage* offering political and ideological conciliation, is uncertain. The regime may not provide sufficient commitment or resources to the project, or the preferences of Vladimir Putin might abruptly change, as has happened in the past on the issue of historical politics. Influential groups will also continue to press for the hegemony of their preferred narratives, which support either re-Stalinization or de-Stalinization.

If the current, more critical official interpretation of the Soviet era survives, it will blend censure, neutral detachment, and approval, in amounts that vary according to the Soviet period and issue under review. As such, the new narrative will provide uncertain support for authentic democratization. At the same time, it will not motivate Russians to embrace aggressive nationalism or a more repressive regime. Official and societal attempts to mythologize the Soviet past, particularly the Stalin era, will persist. But with the exception of the Great Patriotic War, these efforts are likely to remain selective and episodic, lacking purpose, persistence, and coherence. This evaluation contrasts with those of Western scholars who argue that Vladimir Putin has created a hegemonic cultural system whose manipulation of Soviet history legitimates his rule and regime (Liñán, 2010). In sum, efforts to understand the future course of Russia's domestic and foreign policy are assisted by an examination of the nature and strength of the symbolic resources of the regime rooted in narratives about the Soviet system.

2. Roadmap

The article first examines the current ambivalence and division within the Russian regime over how to evaluate the Soviet era. It then turns to an assessment of the divergent narratives of successive regime-supported history textbooks over the past decade, with a focus on the appearance and rapid decline of the regime's anti-Western texts of 2007–2008. In its examination of the protracted conflict over how to depict and evaluate the Soviet era, particularly Stalinism, the article describes the political forces within the regime and society that advocate an organized public rejection of the Soviet experience, often from different perspectives. Several developments which recently advanced critical representations of the Soviet period are examined: the new high school history textbooks issued in the summer of 2015; the opening of the new Gulag Museum; plans to build a monument to the political victims of the Soviet system; and the revival of a comprehensive project (of which the proposed monument is an integral component), to memorialize the victims of Soviet repressions.

The most significant evidence that the regime is not engaged in re-Stalinization in ideological or symbolic terms is the protracted struggle within the political elite and society over how to evaluate the Soviet past, particularly Stalinism, and the regime's recent support for measures that commemorate the victims of the Stalinist repression. The divisions among incumbent elites demonstrate that the regime cannot be treated as a unified institution on the issue of how to evaluate the Soviet past.

After describing recent anti-Stalinist initiatives, the article provides an explanation for the counterintuitive emergence of such efforts. Given current strained relations with the West and a fraying social contract at home due to Western sanctions, the long-term drop in the price of oil, and the costs of an archaic strategy of national development, one might have expected the Kremlin to use a mythologized past, with a strongly nationalist narrative, to distract society and generate legitimacy for itself. Yet, in important ways, the Kremlin under Vladimir Putin has moved away from – not toward – a depiction of the Russian past that is imbued with intolerant, revanchist, and imperialist myths.

3. The Russian regime and the Soviet past: conservative voices

Western observers often assume that widespread nostalgia for the Soviet past in Russia reflects elite and popular attitudes that are rooted in an authoritarian ethos shaped by aggressive nationalism and political intolerance. Such assessments often recall that Vladimir Putin characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as a “major geopolitical disaster of the [20th] century.” (President of Russia website, 2005) As a respected journal noted in 2009 in its introduction to a special issue on Russian history and politics: “turning a blind eye to the crimes of the communist regime, Russia's political leadership is restoring, if only in part, the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism...” (Miller et al., 2009) Western scholars also maintain that expressions of support in Russian society for Stalin reflect the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to foster anti-Westernism as well as nostalgia for

the Soviet era. Russia's youth are viewed as highly susceptible to this messaging (Mendelson and Gerber, 2005–2006). These perspectives suggest that the impulse in the Russian state and society to denounce the Soviet era, in whole or part, is weak.

In seeming support of these evaluations, Vladimir Medinsky, Russia's current Minister of Culture, criticized Russian liberals and the West for “blackening” the Soviet past for political motives, a view commonly held by members of the *siloviki* and other conservative forces (Yazov, 2015). Medinsky first made his reputation as the author of popular books that flayed the West for propagating over time negative stereotypes of Russia (aggressiveness, backwardness, drunkenness and others) as a form of psychological warfare. For Medinsky, such attacks have generated self-loathing in Russia for hundreds of years (Sabov, 2009). The condemnation of the Soviet era by the West and its supporters in Russia is yet another stage in efforts to impose cultural dominance over Russia, and with it, political control. For this reason, Medinsky warns, the representation of the Soviet era remains a crucial battleground between the Kremlin and the West. In an interview in August 2015 Medinsky stated that no event for the last two thousand years had a greater impact on the future of the world than the October 1917 revolution. Medinsky repeated his conviction that efforts to denigrate or minimize Soviet achievements should be considered “taboo” while Soviet heroes should be treated with the same reverence as “canonized saints.” (Medinsky, 2015)

Marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the minister leveled his strongest criticism against Russians and foreigners who perceive the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 not as a heroic crusade against the evils of Nazism but as a death-struggle between two totalitarian systems (Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia) which brought vast human loss and enabled the Soviet victor to strengthen repression at home and in newly communized lands (Medinsky, 2015). In July 2015, Medinsky presided over the dedication of a house in Tver oblast, where Stalin stayed one night during World War II, as a museum to memorialize the dictator's wartime role (Coynash, 2015). In the summer of 2015, major museum exhibits in Moscow devoted to the wartime victory ignored Stalin's disastrous military and political policies that enabled the German invasion.¹

One of the most significant conservative attacks against critical assessments of Stalinism came a few months earlier with the closure of the Memorial Center of the History of Political Repression, a museum founded by the human rights organization Memorial in 1994 and dedicated to the preservation of Perm-36, a former camp of the Stalinist Gulag or prison system. The progressive administration of the museum was replaced by local conservative forces (supported by a new regional governor appointed in 2012) who quickly recast the camp's historical identity, now as a model penal institution and regional economic hub.

An American historian recently summed up a common Western judgment: “To impose the state's [sanitized and heroic] version of history, Russia's government is using both carrots and sticks. Those who do not toe the line are denied government grants and have difficulty finding publishers for their books or venues for their performances. Critics who are particularly vocal are hounded out...” (Khodarkovsky, 2015).

Despite the behavior and statements of Medinsky and frequent efforts by the regime to ignore the crimes of Stalin, the assessment that the Kremlin uniformly burnishes and simplifies the Soviet past is itself a simplification. Although Medinsky clearly enjoys support among various strata of incumbent elites, his statements do not command *ex cathedra* status; his perspective on the Soviet past is far from hegemonic, whether in the ranks of the regime or in Russian society.

As for Vladimir Putin, over the past 15 years he has forcefully advocated at times an “appropriate” interpretation of history which promotes patriotism and tamps down efforts to discredit the Soviet system, particularly Stalinism. However, Putin has recently supported a potentially far-reaching program dedicated to the condemnation of mass political terror under Stalin. Whether this project survives, and if so in what form, is as yet unclear; its emergence, however, points to the regime's instrumental treatment of the Soviet past over time and to its current disuse of historical events and myths that might provide symbolic support for interstate aggression and domestic despotism.

4. Manipulating the past and political legitimacy

Changes in the depiction of the Soviet era in history textbooks supported by the Kremlin over the past ten years provide evidence of the regime's instrumental manipulation of the Soviet past as well as ongoing political struggles within the regime and society over the selection of a dominant narrative for the Soviet era. Russian history textbooks are politically important: over 70% of Russians form their views about the past from the information and perspectives obtained from high school history books (Rudakov, cited in Profile, 2008). How an individual understands the past and its lessons helps shape his or her political preferences in the present.

All political systems attempt to socialize youth by crafting historical narratives that instill patriotic support for the regime and the state. Normative appeals and effective socialization are valued by elites in all political systems as the most efficient and economical means to secure the political obedience of citizens. This interest in the past is particularly strong – and history texts especially subject to manipulation – in authoritarian systems. Such regimes rely on historical myths more than their democratic counterparts because they usually face greater challenges in securing public support (Sherlock, 2007).

Even in non-democratic systems, the development and dissemination of an official account of a nation's past often faces numerous political obstacles. In post-Soviet Russia, the struggle among competing narratives of the Soviet era reflects not only a contest among rival factions in the political elite but also the changing perspectives and policy needs of these elites.

¹ Author's review of the exhibit on the Great Patriotic War at the Istoricheskii muzei, Ploshchad' Revoliutsii 2/3, June 2015.

Societal forces, including counter-elites, also exert important pressures on the process of how to frame the Soviet past. In this sense, the inability of the Kremlin to develop and enforce a hegemonic account of the past, at least thus far, underlines the distance between the contemporary Russian regime and its Soviet predecessor in terms of institutional capacity and ideological cohesion.

5. The rise and decline of the defense of Stalin

The textbook struggles of the past decade are grounded in the efforts of the Kremlin to craft and impose a hegemonic, or at least dominant, narrative of the Soviet era.² Yet these efforts have been marked more by reconsideration and retreat than success. In 2015, the Russian government approved new history books that represented a rejection of the aggressive nationalism of the books promoted by the Kremlin in 2007. The central theme of these earlier textbooks on the history of Russia in the 20th century was one of deep anti-Westernism. While hostility toward the West became increasingly common among the Russian political elite and parts of Russian society after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by 2006 a number of factors encouraged the Kremlin under Putin to promote history texts that not only denounced the West but also sought to deflect criticism of Stalin and Stalinism. Emboldened by high oil prices but also confronted by a new round of NATO expansion, the condemnation of Soviet history in much of post-communist and post-Soviet space, and the “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia became increasingly fearful of Western regional influence and democratic contagion, which the Kremlin now openly portrayed as a threat (Sherlock, 2011).

Seeking to inoculate Russian society from its own “color revolution,” the Kremlin attempted to mobilize nationalist, anti-Western sentiment by advancing the notion of “sovereign democracy.” This concept held that Russia’s political institutions were both democratic and sound, and that Russia must not bend to Western criticism and pressure. The Kremlin also placed greater controls on Russia’s media, civic organizations, and opposition groups. In a typical example, Putin criticized as misguided and unpatriotic the authors of Russian high school history textbooks who had received financial support from Western NGOs.

Using the Soviet past to legitimate its anti-West perspective, the Kremlin in 2007 promoted new history books for teachers and upper-grade students. Alexander Filippov was the primary author of the most controversial of these works, a handbook entitled *The Modern History of Russia, 1945–2006: a Teacher’s Manual*. Filippov also served as one of the editors and authors of a textbook for students entitled *History of Russia: 1945–2008*. A second, multi-author textbook for students under the editorship of Filippov and Alexander Danilov, the respected, prolific author of history books, is entitled *History of Russia: 1900–1945* and addresses the great controversies of Soviet foreign and domestic affairs in the 1930s (Danilov and Filippov, 2009).

Putin himself held a meeting with teachers and school officials at this time to emphasize the need for the new books. Criticizing the West for purportedly using the memory of Stalinism to humiliate and weaken Russia, Putin relied on *tu quoque* arguments to defend Stalin: “Regarding the problematic pages in our history, yes, we do have them, as any state does. We have fewer such pages than some countries do, and they are less terrible than in some countries. We do have bleak chapters in our history; just look at events of 1937. And we should not forget these moments of our past. But other countries have also known their bleak and terrible moments.” Putin argued that Russia had “never used nuclear weapons against [Japanese] civilians” or dropped “more bombs on a tiny country [Vietnam] than were used during the entire Second World War.” Nor, according to Putin, had Soviet Russia ever descended to the crimes of Nazi Germany (President of Russia website, 2007). Earlier, in a thinly veiled comparison, Putin likened U.S. foreign policy to that of the Third Reich, possessing “the same contempt for human life and claims to world exclusiveness...” (Chivers, 2007).

With the new textbooks, the Russian state sought to master the divisive Soviet past, particularly the Stalin era, by crafting a sharply nationalist narrative. The texts view the West and particularly the United States with deep mistrust, describing American behavior before, during, and after the Soviet period as self-serving and hostile to Russia’s national interests. The explicit theme of the new official narrative is that Russia has always faced a hostile international environment, requiring the concentration of political power and the mobilization of national unity to support a besieged Russian state (Filippov, 2007).

The most controversial section of the teacher’s manual portrays the mass terror of the Stalin years as necessary for the country’s rapid modernization in the face of German and Japanese fascism, and the deliberate inaction of the Western democracies. The manual offers a positive assessment of the dictator when it erroneously attributes to Winston Churchill the statement that Stalin “found Russia working with a wooden plough and left her equipped with atomic piles.” The quote is from Isaac Deutscher, the Trotskyist biographer of Stalin who, unlike Trotsky, was willing to give Stalin his due as a modernizer in the mold of Peter the Great (Deutscher, 1966).

In their examination of the origins of the Great Purges, the new texts suggest that the means of mass repression justified the end of preparation for war with Germany. The Great Terror of 1936–1938 was due to Stalin’s prescient efforts at “preventive repression”: “Stalin was acting in a concrete-historical situation, behaving ... entirely rationally as the persistent advocate of the transformation of the country into an industrial power, directed from a single center, and as the leader of a country which would face the threat of war in the very near future.”

² This section draws on Thomas Sherlock, *Confronting the Stalinist Past*, Washington Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2011), pp. 93–109.

Through their defense of Stalin, the textbooks withhold critical assessments that might convey difficult but essential moral and civic lessons to the students. They also employ arguments that distort historical facts, including the assertion that political conditions in the Soviet Union under Stalin were often more democratic than in the West during the same period.

The books do acknowledge that the “colossal” projects of the Stalinist mobilizational state exacted “high human cost.” Filippov’s manual describes in detail the repressive nature of the post-war Soviet system, pointing to its virulent anti-Semitism, Great Russian chauvinism, and harsh restrictions on Orthodox Russian worship. However, the textbooks argue that no viable alternative to Stalinism was possible. Although the brutality of the system is traced in part to “subjective” factors such as Stalin’s personality, these were “secondary to the role of objective circumstances (that is, demands of national security)... Accelerated modernization ... demanded a corresponding system of authority...” (Filippov, 2007, p. 86) This position is essentially the defense developed by the Soviet Union to explain Stalinism until the advent of *perestroika* under Mikhail Gorbachev (Sherlock, 2007). Claiming that Stalinism was an inevitable consequence of existential external threats, the books assert that Soviet democratization would likely have emerged in the post-war period but was thwarted by new pressures in the form of the Cold War (Danilov, Filippov, and Utkin, 2008, p. 39). In sum, the West is held ultimately responsible for the calamity of Stalinism, not the Soviet state or even Stalin himself.

These efforts to portray the West as treacherous and hostile are supplemented by equivalency arguments which hold that states under external threat tend to act in similar ways. The textbooks maintain that Stalin’s foreign policy was no less principled than that of Western countries. In their discussion of the secret supplementary protocol of the August 1939 pact which established a Soviet sphere of influence over Finland, eastern Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Bessarabia – and anticipated a future territorial and political “transformation” – Danilov and Filippov dismiss Western criticism that Soviet policy was coercive and unethical. Western democracies at that time routinely “manipulated” the fate of small countries, including that of Czechoslovakia, without compunction. For the authors, contemporary Western criticism of Stalin’s pact with Hitler is part of a broad, cynical effort by the West to distort history in order to undermine Russia’s international standing and exclude it from the ranks of the great powers.

The authors also attempt to justify Stalin’s behavior by maintaining 1) that Western treatment of its citizens and foreign nationals, particularly during wartime, was often brutal and essentially no different than that of the Soviet Union. The atrocities committed by the Soviet state against its citizens, foreign nationals, or war prisoners during World War II were due to “the severe laws of war that applied to all countries and with the same harshness” and 2) that American history textbooks today carefully exclude events – such as the historical treatment of American Indians or Japanese-Americans – that might undermine a legitimating grand narrative for the American state and regime. A core assumption of the authors is that the primary purpose of history instruction is to cultivate in students “a positive attitude toward his country.” From this perspective, any extended criticism of a country’s historical record might well have a powerful, negative impact on the cohesion of the state and the polity.

Despite the initial, strong support of the Kremlin, the Filippov textbooks failed to emerge as the dominant official interpretation of the Soviet era. The books were subjected to strong criticism from international as well as domestic forces, demonstrating that Russian civil society, although considerably weakened under Putin, was not moribund. Liberal, minority segments of the Orthodox Church forcefully struck at the textbooks, including a few senior clerics who were usually cautious in their public statements about the Soviet past. Archbishop Hilarion, then head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations, stated that “...Stalin was a spiritually-deformed monster who created a horrific, inhuman system of ruling the country ... He unleashed a genocide against the people of his own country and bears personal responsibility for the death of millions of innocent people. In this respect Stalin is completely comparable to Hitler.” (Kishkovsky, 2009)

Most important in producing a *volte face* on Soviet history was the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 and the rise to the presidency of Dmitrii Medvedev. Although Medvedev was Putin’s protégé, he did not share his mentor’s deep suspicion of Western motives or his unwillingness to contemplate structural reform of Russia’s archaic political economy. Instead, Medvedev conceptualized modernization as a process that relied less on the Russia state and significantly more on individual initiative and societal problem-solving than Putin seemed willing to tolerate.

Both men were driven by economic necessity in 2008 to use the past to mend fences with the West, particularly the European Union. Medvedev called for a “paradigm shift” in July 2010, informing Russia’s ambassadors that Russian foreign policy must now emphasize pragmatism and reject “confrontation” and “stereotypes.” The priority of Russian foreign policy was to forge “special modernization alliances,” first and foremost, with the European Union and the United States (Medvedev, 2010).

Attempting to resolve divisive historical issues which weakened economic ties with the West, the Kremlin adopted a more truthful examination of Stalinist repressions, particularly in relations with Poland. Now an important economic and political actor in Europe as well as a source of deep mistrust toward Russia, Poland was an important gateway to the EU. The Russian government now moved to officially commemorate the tragedy of the Stalinist massacres during World War II of Polish officers and others at Katyn and elsewhere, ending years of foot-dragging.

Medvedev also advanced his Westernized perspective of modernity – and modernization – by condemning the despotic nature of Stalinism. In September 2009, Medvedev publicly rejected the exculpatory approach to Stalinism of Filippov’s textbooks, offering instead a harsh moral evaluation of Russia’s pattern of state-led development. For Medvedev, “the two greatest modernizations in our country’s history – that of Peter the Great and the Soviet one – unleashed ruin, humiliation, and resulted in the deaths of millions of our countrymen.” (Medvedev, 2009a)

Medvedev's periodization of state terror marked another important shift in reframing the Soviet past: he acknowledged that “for 20 years before World War II entire strata and classes of our society were eliminated.” (Medvedev, 2009b) This temporal framework attacked the strategy of Stalinist apologists who attempted to confine the discussion of Stalin's crimes to the Great Purge of 1937—a method employed by Putin in the recent past. In 2009 the Russian government broadened its criticism of Stalinism by mandating that sections of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* be a required reading in Russia's high schools (Lebedeva, 2009). Putin himself approved this decision, swayed in part by Solzhenitsyn's status as an exponent of Russian nationalism and critic of Western values. At this time, Putin also condemned Stalin's “mass crimes,” maintaining that it is both “unacceptable” and “impossible” to achieve economic development through coercion. Both Medvedev and Putin now described the Soviet system as “totalitarian,” an adjective and term that was previously criticized during Putin's presidency as an ideological weapon used by the West during the Cold War to denigrate the Soviet Union and, by implication, Russia. The repeated use of “totalitarianism” was significant, since it aligned Russia's official discourse conceptually with the anti-communist liberalism of the Yeltsin decade, when the term enjoyed political legitimacy, and with the dominant political language of Russia's critics in many of the post-Soviet and post-communist states.

These critical assessments of the Soviet past by the Kremlin stimulated a significant debate in Russian society and among incumbent elites over the proper direction of Russia's domestic and foreign policy. In mid 2010 Konstantin Kosachev, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma, proposed an “historical doctrine” that would clearly define Russia's official position on the Soviet past. For Kosachev, the benefits of Russia's efforts to defend the Soviet era in the international arena were increasingly outweighed by the costs to its reputation and its foreign policy goals (Kosachev, 2010).

In calling for the Kremlin to distance itself from the Soviet era, Kosachev found the government's previous efforts to defend the Soviet era to be “strange because [Russian] society was no less the victim of the erstwhile regime, was no less articulate in condemning the crimes of Stalin's totalitarianism, and acted on its own, without external intervention and democratically, to remove the Communist ideology from power.” (Kosachev, 2010) Kosachev's proposal revealed the growing sensitivity of a segment of the political elite to the international costs of defending the Soviet past, including Russia's self-encirclement due to its avoidance of the ethical and moral questions raised by Soviet repression. Kosachev's proposal also sought to quell the widespread apprehension among the political elite that if Moscow acknowledged crimes had been committed by the Soviet Union, aggrieved states would demand crippling compensation from Russia as the legal successor to the Soviet state.

Other establishment figures called for a reckoning with the Soviet past. Sergei Karaganov, an influential scholar, government advisor, and public intellectual, proposed that monuments to Stalin's victims be erected throughout Russia. Revealing his disapproval of Kremlin-supported youth groups, Karaganov called for a “truly patriotic” movement of Russian youth that would inscribe the names of Stalin's victims on memorial obelisks and mobilize support for renaming towns and cities after them. Like other establishment voices, Karaganov also stressed that responsibility for Stalinism was not limited to Russians, an approach which presumably made his proposal for memorialization more acceptable to Russian conservatives since it would help neutralize foreign demands that Russia alone must repent for Stalin's crimes. For Karaganov, remembrance and penance “could unite the peoples of the former Soviet Union. It could unite us [because] ... the regime destroyed the best representatives of all peoples: Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Kazakhs, Estonians, Tatars, Jews, Hungarians, Poles, Czechs and others. At the same time, representatives of all these peoples were among the executioners.” (Karaganov, 2010)

Karaganov's call for Russians to “overcome the cursed legacy of the 20th century” stimulated state-supported efforts to better understand the effects of the “malignancy of totalitarianism” on Russian society. Equally significant was the extensive public discussion generated by the resolution of the liberal and politically marginalized Yabloko party, entitled “Overcoming Stalinism and Bolshevism as a Condition for the Modernization of Russia in the 21st Century,” which was published in February 2009. The resolution traces the obstacles to Russian political and socio-economic development to the survival of the totalitarian values inculcated under the communist regime. Depicting the contemporary Russian regime as an altered continuation of Soviet authoritarianism, the resolution called on the Russian government, with the support of civil society, to embrace the following policies: infuse Russia's civic and political culture with positive qualities through state-supported programs that would appraise unambiguously in legal, political, and moral terms the regime created by the Bolsheviks; define the status of the current Russian state as the legal successor to the tsarist, rather than the communist, state; define Russia's identity as a European country guided by postwar European values; implement a comprehensive program of public education about the full dimension of the human cost of Soviet totalitarianism; and dismiss officials who extol Stalin or deny the Stalinist purges (Yabloko Political Committee, 2010).

Amid these debates, Medvedev in late 2010 appointed Mikhail Fedotov, a well-known liberal intellectual, to head the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights. Working with Karaganov (who was selected as head of the Presidential Council working group on Historical Memory), Memorial (the prominent human rights organization), and other progressive forces, Fedotov's Presidential Council in early 2011 appealed to Medvedev for an official assessment of Stalinism as well as the creation of a permanent “infrastructure” to commemorate and document the Stalinist “genocide.” The program proposed a comprehensive system of memorialization and education that would encompass post-Soviet space, since “all were victims, and among the executioners were also representatives of all nations.” (Presidential Council, 2014) Similar to Yabloko's program, Fedotov's initiative sought to inject contemporary relevance into the current debates over the past by placing the survival of Stalinist and neo-Stalinist political and socio-economic culture at the center of analysis, not the dictator himself (Fedotov, pers. comm., July 2014, June 2015).

6. Incipient de-Stalinization?

Soon after the emergence of this regime-sponsored movement to reassess the Soviet past, Putin returned to the presidency and moved to place greater control over history instruction, leading one liberal critic to expect a new Stalinist “Short Course.” (Svanidze, 2013) Of several factors which influenced Putin’s decision to call for a “unified textbook” covering the entirety of Russian history, two were particularly important. The first underlined the potential fragility of the Russia regime, the second the possible weakness of the Russian state. In 2011 and 2012, Putin faced mass political demonstrations in which young Russians, many of them not long removed from their high school history classes, were prominent participants. These events exposed the declining political legitimacy of Putin’s government among narrow segments of the population, including the educated, urban youth. In early 2013 Putin called for a single set of history textbooks for Russian high school students that would instill patriotic sentiment and strengthen national cohesion, and presumably, bolster the legitimacy of his rule.

Rising government concerns over inter-ethnic discord, rooted in public expressions of Russian xenophobia as well as separatist sentiments on the part of ethnic minorities – concerns located at the level of the state – also influenced the Kremlin’s decision to adopt a “historical-cultural standard” for writing history textbooks. Putin introduced the idea of developing a “unified concept” for teaching history that would reflect “the single logic of continuous Russian history” at a meeting of the Council for Interethnic Relations held in February 2013 at the recently opened Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. The Council was created to oversee a National Ethnic Policy Strategy so that, in the words of Putin, “our people feel that they are citizens of a single country regardless of their ethnicity and religious beliefs.” In support of this goal, the state must advance “projects related to national history.” Russians “must learn the true story of our country’s unification, the joining of Russian lands into a single powerful multiethnic state, and not all kinds of pseudo-scientific, biased speculations of the subject.” (President of Russia website, 2013)

This highly publicized push for a “canonical version of our history” is noteworthy as the first attempt by the Kremlin since the Soviet collapse to directly manage the production of an official narrative of Russian history. Prominent representatives of the presidential administration and the legislature joined the process, which also involved institutions with strong links to the government including the Russian Historical Society, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Military Historical Society.

The Russian Historical Society, the recently resurrected civic-cultural organization with roots in the tsarist era and now under the control of the government, organized the development of the guiding documents for the textbook project: “The Historical-Cultural Standard” in July 2013 and “The Conception of a New Educational–Methodological Complex” in October 2013 (Rossiiskoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo, 2015). Two separate working groups were involved in the production of these documents.³

The first working group (or “authors’ collective”) that produced the basic guidelines (the “Standard”) in August 2013 was composed of respected Russian historians, a development that was unexpected by most foreign and domestic critics of the Kremlin’s announcement several months earlier (in February 2013) that it would develop a unified system of textbooks for schools.

Also surprising was the fact that domestic and foreign criticism of the idea of a single history textbook for each grade led the regime to retreat from its initial position, now permitting several texts if they adhered to the overarching Concept and Standard. Given the lucrative market for educational materials, it is likely that Russian publishing houses also exerted pressure from behind the scenes to increase the number of textbooks offered to each class.

Despite the participation of respected historians and the loosening of initial requirements, the project prompted considerable skepticism from liberal observers who assumed that authentic debate and honest assessments would be in short supply, particularly on the controversial events of the 20th century. The concerns of Russian liberals and others were heightened by the domestic repercussions of the conflict with Ukraine and the West after the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014. The Kremlin seemed willing to restrict historical debate when a prominent historian was fired for comparing the Crimean annexation to the Austrian Anschluss (Kravtsova, 2014) and when a law was introduced that banned the display of Nazi symbols (Miller, 2014). Echoing Medinsky, the patriarch of the Orthodox Church commended the forthcoming appearance of a “unified” series of history textbooks as a means to end Russia’s “historical masochism” (Miller, 2014).

By mid 2015 two history textbooks covering the controversies of the 20th–21st centuries were approved for use in the 10th grade. Developed by the *Drofa* and *Prosveshchenie* publishing houses, the new books confirmed the suspicions of skeptics in at least one important, if not surprising, respect: Putin’s years in power escape critical analysis while those of Boris Yeltsin attract considerable negative assessment (Danilov et al., 2015c; Volobuev et al., 2016).

The new books, however, share little in common with the Filippov texts and their defense of Stalin. Instead, they reflect the survival of the halting cultural liberalism of the Medvedev presidency in their greater objectivity and precision in their investigation of the Soviet era. The texts are noteworthy in their treatment of the external environment during the Soviet period and particularly under Stalin. The books contain none of the anti-Western language that infused the Filippov texts, and more recently, had dominated Russia’s regime-controlled television in the wake of the events in Crimea, the Kremlin-supported separatist insurrection in eastern Ukraine, and the imposition of Western sanctions.

The texts represent a riposte not only to the Filippov narrative but also to Russian Eurasianists whose neo-fascist geopolitical interpretations of Russian history are similarly grounded in anti-Western and anti-liberal frameworks – and in the expectation of constant, zero-sum conflict with the West. Although the new books cast the United States in the post-

³ Both documents and related materials are located on the website of the Russian Historical Society at http://rushistory.org/?page_id=1800

Soviet era as a self-interested hegemon which exploited Russian weakness, they maintain an objective tone and avoid demonizing Washington as an implacable opponent.

In their assessment of the causes for World War II – which remains a highly sensitive political issue for the Kremlin – the texts support the standard Soviet paradigm that the West, through its failure to embrace collective security in the 1930s, left Stalin no choice but to sign the August 1939 pact with Hitler. Yet the textbooks suggest that Soviet behavior was also driven by baser motives. In describing the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR, the *Drofa* book points to the secret protocol of the August 23rd pact, which enabled Stalin to carve out a regional sphere of interest and participate in the destruction of Poland.

Unlike the Filippov books, the *Drofa* text does not offer any justification for Stalin's actions. It also prints Stalin's quote that "the friendship of the peoples of Germany and the Soviet Union" was sealed in blood by their joint invasion of that country (Volobuev et al., 2016, p. 142). The text then describes the new and extensive economic cooperation between the two states, observing that Stalin scrupulously observed the terms of the agreements while Hitler did not (Volobuev et al., 2016, p. 148). The book also informs the reader that 21,857 Polish officers and others taken captive when Poland was overrun by Soviet forces in September 1939 were executed at Katyn and elsewhere by order of the Soviet Politburo (Volobuev et al., 2016, p. 144). The authors conclude this section with a provocative question for class discussion: "How did the USSR and Germany solve the 'problem of Poland'?" (Volobuev et al., 2016, p. 145)

The description of the annexation of the Baltic States by the USSR in 1940 also strays from the sanitized narrative of Soviet textbooks and most of the Russian history books of the post-Soviet period. Reminding the student that the Baltic states fell within the Soviet sphere of influence due to the secret agreements with Hitler in August and September 1939, the text maintains that Stalin placed relentless pressure in 1939 and 1940 on the three countries to comply with Soviet demands for military bases, the ouster of the ruling "bourgeois" governments, and finally incorporation (Volobuev et al., 2016, p. 146).

In this account of the eve of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union often seems as much an aggressor as a victim. Appearing in textbooks approved by the Kremlin, this partial re-framing of the pre-war period challenges to some extent the myth of the Great Patriotic War, which is the only event of modern Russian history which elicits widespread reverence among most Russians, imparts a sense of national identity through shared memory, and legitimates the power of the Russian regime and state.

Although victory in the war is portrayed as a remarkable triumph, both of the new books suggest that the conflict might have been won at less cost. According to public opinion surveys, Russian society is now almost evenly split on this issue (FOM, 2015). Stalin is depicted as entirely unprepared for Hitler's Operation Barbarossa, which left the Red Army reeling in retreat (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 12). The Danilov text reproduces a picture of a long column of Soviet prisoners-of-war, which is an unusual inclusion for a high school textbook (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 15).

The *Prosveshchenie* book, which is likely to become the most popular high school text for 20th century Russian history (Danilov pers. comm., 2015)⁴ also addresses the collaboration of Soviet citizens with the invader. It notes that among various motives, those who cooperated with the Germans were often simply trying to survive. Others, particularly Soviet soldiers in German captivity, anticipated harsh punishment at the hands of their government if repatriated. Still others were driven to collaborate by their painful earlier experiences with the brutal collectivization of rural life or other forms of Soviet repression and regimentation (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 31).

Both texts mourn the enormous Soviet losses in the war and applaud the emergence of the Soviet Union as a world power due to its victory in the conflict. Yet the tone and content of the narrative is not xenophobic or chauvinistic; positive treatment of Stalin is infrequent and subdued. Unlike Filippov's characterization of the West during WWII as treacherous, the *Prosveshchenie* book uses the victory of the Allies as a model for contemporary international behavior, demonstrating how inter-state cooperation might defeat transnational terrorism (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 65). Putin echoed the new textbooks during his 2015 address to the United Nation when he invoked the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany as an example for the war against terrorism (President of Russia website, 2015b).

Nor do the texts blame the West for the Cold War. Rising tensions between the two superpowers are viewed as the result of clashing geostrategic interests. They also note that opposing ideologies fueled the conflict. Emboldened by victory in war and the spread of national liberation movements, the Soviet leadership saw the victory of global socialism as "law-governed." (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 75)

Although the authors of the texts for the most part avoid direct moral assessments of the Soviet system, they do address the crimes against humanity of the Stalin era. For example, the books examine Soviet campaigns against Orthodox believers; the repressions of the 1930s in their many manifestations (political, economic, cultural); attacks on Jews accused of "cosmopolitanism"; the repression of the political and intellectual leaders of minority nations who were branded "bourgeois nationalists"; and the fate of the "punished peoples" who were subjected to harsh internal exile, including Ukrainians, Balts, Chechens, and many other minorities (Danilov et al., 2015a,b). In its explanation of the tragic famine of 1932–1933, the *Prosveshchenie* textbook acknowledges that the government contributed "significantly" to the catastrophe by concealing its existence from the country and the outside world, and by continuing to export grain abroad (Danilov et al., 2015a, p. 138). Complementing the discussion of domestic repression is an examination of how the regime treated in similar fashion the ruling elites in the newly communized states in Eastern Europe, purging all who were suspected of favoring the example of Yugoslavia's national autonomy (Danilov et al., 2015b, p. 104).

⁴ As of October 2015, the *Prosveshchenie* textbook had sold more than 300,000 copies, making it a leader among the many history textbooks then in use. Interview with Alexander Danilov, one of the authors. September 7, 2015.

7. The origin and purpose of the new textbooks

The new textbooks clearly do not provide the sort of cultural preparation that one would expect in the educational program of a re-Stalinizing regime. While the new books fail to offer an explicit moral judgment of the Soviet era, they do not justify or encourage aggressive Russian nationalism, political intolerance, or reflexive patriotism. Their examination of the human toll of the Soviet system and the criminal behavior of Stalin is for the most part unflinching and without defensive justification. Although the textbooks identify victory in the Great Patriotic War, along with Soviet industrialization and the attainment of super-power status, as extraordinary accomplishments, they remind the student of the high cost of these achievements in human suffering and economic waste.

What explains the comparatively open approach of the new textbooks? Here the preferences of the scholars who created the “standard” or guidelines for the books clearly played a role. Although broadly supervised by the regime, the academic participants enjoyed significant latitude in the project. It seems that Putin and his political colleagues had learned that ham-handed attempts at using history as a blunt political weapon, as seen in the Filippov affair, were self-defeating in terms of the negative domestic and international reaction. As Putin remarked as he launched the project: “we must accomplish it [develop new textbooks] through subtle, effective modern methods, and people must understand that all these efforts are to their benefit.” ([President of Russia website, 2013](#)) This political perspective clearly favored a more careful and balanced presentation of Russian history in the 20th century.

Yet it is likely that “high” politics ultimately determined the general approach of the textbooks to Russian history in the 20th century. As the historical debates over the Soviet era during the Medvedev presidency demonstrate, influential elites may favor (or oppose) criticism of the Soviet era, but often for different reasons and to different degrees (a spectrum of opinion also exists for the academic participants who helped develop the Concept). Putin himself occupies an ambivalent position. He seems willing to support greater criticism of the Soviet era as a normative signal to the West, particularly the EU, that would help Russia reduce its current isolation and its damaging effects. Through their criticism of Stalin's repression of minorities and their description of the role of inter-ethnic divisions in the collapse the Soviet Union, the new textbooks also communicate to ethnic Russians and other ethnic groups that Russia is a multi-national polity based on equality, and that the government will not tolerate ethnic chauvinism, which has the potential to undermine the Russian state.

Putin, however, stops far short of rejecting the Soviet era – or Stalinism – for a number of reasons. They include his occupational biography, his unwillingness to alienate conservative elites who view the Soviet era as a source of sectoral legitimacy, a sensitivity to Russia's position as the legal successor to the Soviet state, and a concern that greater censure of the Soviet period, particularly Stalinism, would undermine legitimating historical myths (particularly the Great Patriotic War) and also embroil Russian society in a politically divisive debate.

For these reasons, the textbooks' portrait of Soviet era does not allow negative facts to predominate; instead, the overarching narrative is either neutral or positive in tone and content. Also for these reasons, the books refrain from any moral judgment of the Soviet era. Nor do they offer a causal analysis of Stalinism. Despite their more objective assessment of the Soviet period, the textbooks avoid a clear explanation for why, in the words of the *Prosveshchenie* book, the Soviet Union “developed a political system more repressive than its predecessor.” ([Danilov et al., 2015c](#), p. 108)

It is also likely that the debates among the historians involved in the project worked toward the same cautious outcome. Sergei Naryshkin, the chairman of the State Duma and the head of the resurrected Russian Historical Society, also served as the leader of the working group responsible for producing the concept for the new history textbooks. He and others involved in the process observed that significant disagreements within the group over the “difficult issues” of Russian history were eventually resolved with “compromise language.” ([President of Russia website, 2014a](#)) The underlying causes of Stalinism, such as the lack of effective checks on the power of the Russian state, may have been tabled in a “compromise” or tradeoff that permitted greater criticism, but not analysis, of the era.

8. The politics of memorialization

Although the new textbooks avoid an explicit moral assessment of Stalinism, other events confronted this issue at approximately the same time as the publication of the books in 2015. The catalyst was the revival of the project of memorialization spearheaded under Dmitrii Medvedev by the Kremlin's Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights and its allies in Russia's beleaguered civil society, including the Memorial Society. With Mikhail Fedotov still as its head, the Council had lost considerable political influence since Putin's reelection as president in 2012. Although its ability to admonish the government on human rights abuses had clearly diminished, the Council still pressed the Kremlin to implement the program of memorialization first raised to national prominence in 2010 and 2011. Dmitrii Medvedev remained a valuable ally. Now Putin's prime minister, Medvedev was still committed to developing a normative platform, rooted in the tragic lessons of Soviet history, to justify his more liberal conceptualization of Russian modernization. Significantly, in late 2012 the Council added a new permanent commission devoted to “Civic Participation in the Modernization of the Economy.” This new body included a number of prominent liberals, including Sergei Karaganov ([Karaganov, pers. comm., 2013](#)).

Putin's willingness to support the project underlined his long-standing ambivalence or “mixed feelings” about the Soviet era, particularly Stalinism. While Putin has praised Stalin's role in World War II as well as the Soviet secret police, he has also

characterized the Bolshevik treaty of Brest-Litovsk as treasonous (RT, 2012) and the Stalinist repressions as unforgivable. In his address to the UN on September 28, 2015, Putin criticized the United States for “exporting” democracy in the same manner as the Soviet Union had imposed “social experiments” and pushed for “changes in other countries for ideological reasons,” causing “degradation instead of progress.” (President of Russia website, 2015b)

Several months earlier Putin made a similar point before a domestic audience, acknowledging the reason why many in the West, particularly in post-Soviet and post-communist countries, often equate Stalinism and Nazism, much to the resentment of most Russians. According to Putin, the explanation may not be “...very pleasant for us to admit. But in truth we, or rather our predecessors, gave cause for this. Why? Because after World War II, we tried to impose our own development model on many Eastern European countries, and we did so by force. This has to be admitted. There is nothing good about this and we are feeling the consequences now.” (President of Russia website, 2015a).

Similar to his speech at the UN, Putin then offered a *tu quoque* or equivalency defense: “Incidentally, this is more or less what the Americans are doing today....” Yet, for apparently the first time in public, Putin was willing to offer a clear cause-and-effect relationship between Stalinist repressions and negative regional attitudes toward Russia as the legal successor to the Soviet state. Putin also seemed to suggest, following the long-standing arguments of Russian liberal voices, in both the establishment and opposition, that the Kremlin’s denial, defense, or weak acknowledgment of Stalinist repressions were important reasons for Russia’s strained relations with the West and much of the post-communist world. (President of Russia website, 2015a)

More broadly, Putin’s statement was a dramatic signal that the Kremlin supported international stability and regional reconciliation. His criticism of Soviet revolutionary ideology also sought to strengthen the Kremlin’s advocacy of a ideology rooted in conservative socio-cultural and political values that would weaken the lure of Western ideals in Russia.

On August 15, 2015, Medvedev as Prime Minister signed the Concept of State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of the Victims of Political Repression (Presidential Council, 2015). Influenced by the historical perspective of the Memorial Society and the 2009 Yabloko treatise on “Overcoming Stalinism and Bolshevism as a Condition for Modernizing Russia,” the Concept was developed at the order of President Putin, his presidential administration, and the Council under Fedotov. Prior to its approval, the Concept apparently encountered significant bureaucratic and political interference, requiring Putin to intervene (President of Russia website, 2014c).⁵

By listing legislative, executive, and judicial acts that addressed in various ways since 1991 the rehabilitation and commemoration of the victims of Soviet repression, the approved Concept sought to neutralize future obstacles and legitimate its agenda, which was closely tied to providing normative support for a model of socio-economic and political development that challenged to a significant extent the prevailing state-centric paradigm (Urnov, 2012).

According to the document, Russia cannot develop the rule of law or secure moral leadership in the “world community” without first perpetuating the memory of the victims of Soviet repression. Nor can Russia develop the “intellectual and spiritual potential of society,” the keystone of effective and durable modernization, without memorialization.

The Concept maintains that “practical patriotism” – linking patriotic feelings with specific, civic actions – will promote horizontal cooperation among diverse societal groups as well as vertical collaboration between state and society. In this sense, a fundamental purpose of the Concept is to counter widespread feelings of political and civic inefficacy in society – a condition that has crippled Russian social, economic, and political development.

The Concept echoes in part the language of three government programs inaugurated over the past 15 years and dedicated to increasing Russian patriotism. Yet it is significant that the Concept does not invoke these earlier state-driven, top-down models of education and participation in which patriotism, often via the inculcation of militarized values, is deployed to serve the goals of the state and its central institutions. By contrast, the Concept’s support for “practical” patriotism advocates a very different relationship between state and society, one that rejects the Kremlin’s use of national loyalty to support a hierarchical polity united by vigilance against the West and intolerance of liberal ideology. “Practical” patriotism advocates devotion not to the state and its foreign and domestic policies but to humanity: the betterment of national and international society through the peaceful efforts of freely organized individuals (Bogatov, 1994).⁶

In their call to rebalance state–society relations, the authors of the Concept maintain that the stimulation of civic initiative is essential to strengthening the health and solidarity of society as well as the capacity of the state. To make this point, the document ties its purpose and justification to previous government concepts, including the Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development; the National Security Strategy; and the Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy. The Concept does not call for the democratization of the Russian polity; it justifies its program in moral and instrumental terms that do not directly challenge the authoritarian character of the political system. Instead, it represents the views of liberal voices within and outside the regime who seek to enlist society as an autonomous force and authentic partner of the state in support of Russian socio-economic and political development.

While the Concept supports objective analysis of the “tragic pages” as well as the achievements of the Soviet era, it emphasizes a broad program of research, education, public discussion devoted to the “condemnation of the ideology of

⁵ See Fedotov’s comments at the October 14, 2014 session of the Presidential Human Rights Council with Putin in attendance. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46786>.

⁶ The term “*деятельный патриотизм*” (*deiatel’nyi patriotizm*) can be variously translated as “practical,” “direct,” or “agent” patriotism. It is a term first used by the 19th century Russian revolutionary democrat Nikolai Dobrolyubov (Bogatov, 1994).

political terror” and designed to unfold in two stages leading up to the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 2017 (as well as the 80th anniversary of the 1937 purges). Among the components of the program, the Concept advocates sustained attention to Soviet political violence in museum exhibits and other public venues. It also envisions greater archival access, academic conferences, the creation of public memorials, and special textbooks for schools.

Prior to the formal approval of the Concept, with the Human Rights Council as an organizational hub, important components of the overall project were put in place in 2014 with the support of the presidential administration and the Moscow city government. These initiatives included the development of a new museum as well as plans for a monument to the victims of Soviet repression in Moscow. Moscow was now to have a single “museum-memorial infrastructure” that included the existing state-owned Gulag Museum as well as the hoped-for renovation of sites closely associated with Stalin's terror: the Moscow building which housed the Military Collegium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (where over 30,000 death sentences were passed); the area adjacent to the Solovetskii stone located at Lubyanka Square; and the killing fields of Kommunarka, a village and forest to the south of Moscow which contains as many as 15,000 victims of Stalin's NKVD in mass graves ([Moscow Department of Culture, 2014](#)).

Significant progress on these initiatives occurred even as conservative forces took over the Perm-36 museum ([Filonov, 2015](#)). Moscow's Gulag Museum opened a larger, renovated building which would better support its collection of documents, artifacts, artwork, and oral histories of former prisoners as well as its programs of outreach to Russian society. Founded in 2001 by the dissident Soviet historian Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, the Gulag Museum had worked for years with Memorial, the Sakharov Center, the Butovo Memorial Center and numerous other domestic and foreign organizations dedicated to historical research and the commemoration of the victims of Soviet repression ([Moscow Department of Culture, 2014](#), p. 19).⁷ For Roman Romanov, the director of the museum, the abuse of power and civic paralysis in Russia are direct consequences of the collective trauma inflicted by the Stalinist repressions. In order to restore its moral compass, Russia must better understand the enduring effect of this destructive past on society through the systematic organization of knowledge about the ordeal (Romanov, pers. comm., July 2014).

Discussions also took place in late 2014 with government officials as well as representatives of the Orthodox Church to establish an expanded complex commemorating over 20,000 known victims of Stalinist terror at Butovo, located in Moscow region. Initiated by the Orthodox Church under Boris Yeltsin, the preservation of the execution site, which now includes an Orthodox Church as well as small exhibits, currently celebrates the religion of the victims and their status as modern-day martyrs. For Archpriest Kirill Kaleda, the rector of Butovo's Church of the New Martyrs and Confessors in Russia, the expansion of the site would help knit together secular and religious forces in the common pursuit of remembrance (Kaleda, pers. comm., July 2013).

The same would be true if Kommunarka, as planned, becomes part of the “museum-memorial infrastructure” in Moscow. In 1999, the land of the site was transferred to the Orthodox Church, which erected a monastery and church on the grounds. Apart from the remains of thousands of common Soviet citizens, Kommunarka also contains the bodies of Genrikh Yagoda, the purged head of the NKVD, and his victims, Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov.

Romanov of the Gulag Museum also played an important role in developing plans for a public monument to the victims of political repression for the entire Soviet period. Similar attempts had occurred under Khrushchev, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin, but without result (Romanov, pers. comm., June 2015). In 2014, Romanov and a jury of experts, including Fedotov, solicited proposals for the memorial, to be erected with public and private funds in the center of Moscow at a highly visible location – the intersection of the Garden Ring road and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova ([Rubtsova, 2015](#)). In late September 2015, the museum announced the winner of the competition – the sculptor Georgi Frangulyan, a People's Artist of Russia and Academician of the Russian Academy of Arts. His design is entitled “Wall of Sorrow.”⁸

9. Russian society and Stalinism

The movement in 2015 toward a critical assessment of the Soviet era and particularly Stalin's rule raises the question of whether Russian society supports this initiative. Would most Russians rather see the restoration of Russia as an aggressive great power, equivalent to the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors, even if it meant less freedom and greater economic privation? Public opinion surveys provide important insights. The acquisition and demonstration of military power are core preferences of conservative and neo-Stalinist elites, and the Kremlin's current program of accelerated military spending, coupled with its anti-American rhetoric, is a source of concern for the United States and many of Russia's neighbors.

However, Russians at the mass level have yet to embrace the militarization of Russia's economy or its foreign policy. Respondents were asked in my July 2015 survey whether the Kremlin should build up its military power or support the economic well-being of its citizens.⁹ 69% of the participants felt that the civilian economy should enjoy budgetary priority

⁷ For the extensive list of organizations that the museum cooperates with, see *Muzei GULAGA 2014 god* (Moscow: Department of Culture, 2014), p. 19.

⁸ For depictions of the design as well as details of the competition, see the museum website. Available at <http://www.gmig.ru/>.

⁹ With the support of a grant from the Minerva Initiative, the author commissioned the Levada Center in Moscow to administer a self-designed survey of 1602 respondents in late July 2015. On the issue of whether survey data is reliable in Russia's authoritarian setting, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/24/why-we-should-be-confident-that-putin-is-genuinely-popular-in-russia/>. Also see [Babayan \(2015\)](#), “Truthiness in Russia,” at Open Democracy, November 23. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nelli-babayan/truthiness-in-russia>.

while 21.8% believed that military spending should take precedence. Significantly, only 16% of young respondents (18–24 years), the age group often most susceptible to martial propaganda, supported Russian militarization over civilian investment. It is interesting to note that in its discussion of the causes for the collapse of the Soviet Union, the *Prosveshchenie* textbook states that the Soviet “militarized” economy “ruined the country.” (Danilov et al., 2015c, p. 8)

Mass Russian attitudes towards the past, particularly the Soviet empire, also point to the relative weakness of neo-imperialism and hypernationalism among Russians. With Russia's incorporation of Crimea and its support for rebel strongholds in eastern Ukraine, Vladimir Putin seemed to favor the idea of resurrecting the tsarist territory of Novorossia. This preference was implicit in his statement in April 2014 that the oblasts in southeast Ukraine “were not part of Ukraine” in tsarist times (President of Russia website, 2014b). Yet the Russian leader soon abandoned this potentially attractive historical justification for expansionism, infuriating Russia's small but vocal radical nationalist fringe (Kolesnikov, 2015). In its continued military support for the insurgents in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin did not publicly celebrate violent territorial aggrandizement, as one might expect of a regime driven by aggressive nationalism. Instead, the Kremlin adhered to a policy of denial at home and abroad that it was stoking conflict in eastern Ukraine (Sherlock, 2014b,c).

If Putin was ever resolutely in favor of open aggression in Ukraine, the failure of Russian society to embrace jingoistic nationalism likely helped him to reconsider. Because the Kremlin's operation in Crimea was virtually bloodless, Russians in 2014 widely supported their government's action. Such support undoubtedly reflected and also stimulated a degree of imperial nostalgia associated with memories of Soviet global and regional military, economic, and political power. Putin also benefited from a “rally 'round the flag” response to Russia's growing conflict with the West over eastern Ukraine. Yet these emotional sentiments, which might otherwise have increased the Kremlin's capacity to mobilize society for an expansionist foreign policy, were offset by the aversion of most Russians to increased conflict with the West over Ukraine as well as their disinterest in empire-building.

In my July 2015 surveys, respondents were asked whether eastern Ukraine, with its large ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population, should be absorbed by the Russian Federation. Only 15% of the participants in the survey favored annexation. 44% thought that eastern Ukraine should become a sovereign state, while 28% thought that the region should remain part of Ukraine under the existing or a reformed constitution. Strikingly, as early as March 2015, barely a year after the annexation of Crimea, over 50% of respondents in another survey said they followed the events in Ukraine with little or no interest (Levada Center, 2015c).

Another survey question probed the character of Russian nationalism and the presence of neo-imperialism from a related perspective. A long-standing fear of the Baltic states and other NATO members is that Russia will engage in information warfare that condemns the alleged mistreatment of Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, mobilizing public support in Russia for some form of aggression. My survey question asked: “If the rights of Russian speakers in neighboring countries are seriously violated, what should Russia do?” 34% of respondents said that Russia should work toward a peaceful settlement of the problem while 31% believed that Russia should not get involved at all. Only 23% of the respondents felt that “all means” should be used to protect Russian-speakers who might be mistreated in the “near abroad.”

In line with these opinions, other surveys point to the decline in imperial nostalgia precisely during Putin's time in power and particularly amid the nationalist upsurge fueled by Russia's seizure of Crimea. In 1998, during the twilight of Yeltsin's administration and two years before Putin's first inauguration as president, scarcely 19% of survey respondents were satisfied with the borders of the Russian Federation. By March 2015, this number had risen to 57%. The greatest increase in feelings of sated nationalism, from 32% to 57% of respondents, occurred during the year following the incorporation of Crimea in March 2014 (Levada Center, 2015c).

Western scholars sometimes argue that unalloyed support for the memory of Stalin is strong among elites and masses alike and that such attitudes indicate a successful Kremlin campaign to instill approval of authoritarian rule in Russian society (Mendelson and Gerber, 2006). Yet, as we have seen, evidence of a concerted and sustained pro-Stalin campaign by the Kremlin is weak. To be sure, most Russians have contradictory views about the dictator, holding some measure of approval due in part to the natural inclination to defend the leader who presided over the state in its existential struggle with a brutal invader. A majority of Russians living today had a family member killed or wounded in the Great Patriotic War (Levada Center, 2015b), a conflict that brought enormous suffering, much of it Stalin's own doing, but also eventual victory and Russia's elevation to the status of a superpower. Other factors also influence positive assessments of Stalin and his era, including perceptions that the Stalinist system was less corrupt, enjoyed more social-mobility, and was more united by shared values than Russia is today (Sherlock, 2007).

Yet most of Russian society remains disinterested in or wary of any honorific treatment of the Soviet dictator. For example 55% of respondents in 2003 thought that Stalin had “definitely” or “more likely than not” played a positive role in the life of the country. By December 2014 the number of respondents who held such opinions had declined slightly, to 52%. However, the number of respondents who felt Stalin had “definitely” played a positive role had dropped to 16% in 2014 from 18% in 2003 (Levada Center, 2015a, p. 228). In March 2015, despite the growing confrontation with the West and widespread, heady claims in the media that Russia had returned to the global stage as a great power, only 31% of respondents were in favor of changing the name of Volgograd back to Stalingrad. Aware of the symbolic importance of such a change, 69% withheld their support (Levada Center, 2015a,d). The percentage of those who opposed changing the name of the city in 2015 (69%) marks a significant increase over the previous year when it stood at 50%, shortly after the incorporation of Crimea (Levada Center, 2015a, p. 228).

Although Russian society is divided over the memorialization program proposed by Fedotov and others, more Russians than not support most of the components of the project. According to one survey, 71% of respondents agreed that archives relating to Stalinist repressions should be freely accessible; 51% felt that monuments to the victims of Stalinism should be erected in major cities (32% against); 48% approved of bans against naming cities, streets, or squares after individuals responsible for crimes against humanity in the Stalin era (34% against); and 44% were in favor of developing “school resources” on national history which would contain “clear moral, legal, and political assessments of Stalinism as a pernicious phenomenon” (33% against) (VCIOM, 2011).

Although much of Russian society remains at odds over the question of how to remember Stalin, many Russians remain indifferent, particularly Russia's youth (Sherlock, 2011). Respondents were asked in my July 2015 survey if they would support the construction of a monument, approved by the state, to the victims of Soviet repression in order to “restore justice and guard against repeating such crimes.” Overall, 47% of the participants supported the initiative, 18% were opposed, and 35% had “no opinion.” For the 18–24 age group, 46% registered their support. Only 13% were opposed, selecting the response: “it will divide our society by denigrating our country's past.” But 41% did not have an opinion on the issue.

10. Conclusion

The Kremlin's approval of the anti-Stalinist memorialization Concept of 2015 should be viewed in primarily instrumental terms. President Putin has tentatively extended his support to a dedicated but relatively weak coalition of liberal intellectuals and incumbent elites aligned loosely with Prime Minister Medvedev. Putin's primary motives for doing so are broadly the same ones that influenced his endorsement of the new textbooks: as a positive signal to the West (that might revitalize Russia's links to Europe and gradually weaken Europe's ties to the United States), and as a means to strengthen the domestic legitimacy of the Russian state and regime at a time when the capacity of the Kremlin to secure its authority through material payoffs and economic development is declining.

The Kremlin's support for the Concept clearly serves as a bridge to the more educated and productive segments of society. Medvedev's assessment of the catastrophic consequences of Soviet state-led development – noted above – reflects the views of the more liberal, or simply more modern, minority in the ruling party and in Russian society. In 2006, at the height of Russia's war of words over the Soviet past with some of its Western neighbors, a leading member of the United Russia Party observed that keeping Lenin's body on Red Square undermined the prospects for authentic modernization in Russia: “I belong to the group that believes the damage done by Lenin to our country and our society is immeasurably greater than any good he may have done ... he is completely out of sync with the reality of today's Russia.” (Holley, 2006)

This evaluation of Lenin and the Bolshevik movement by members of the political elite is indicative of their willingness to back away, although carefully, from any strong endorsement of the Soviet era while associating the regime more closely with the pre-Soviet, tsarist era. Guided by the results of an online survey of Russian public opinion sponsored by the ruling United Russia Party, Medinsky, who has often praised the October Revolution, advocated the removal of Lenin's corpse from the mausoleum on Red Square, but for reburial “with full military honors.” (Kishkovsky, 2012) Disengaging completely from the memory of Stalin is more complicated and less desirable from the regime's perspective for the reasons discussed above, particularly Stalin's role in Soviet Russia's emergence as an industrial economy and military superpower, and in its victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Given that criticism of the Soviet past is made easier for the Kremlin as it shifts its legitimating narrative to the tsarist era, current trends suggest that the regime will continue to advance an account of the 20th century that combines, through a process of *bricolage*, the tsarist and Soviet periods. Judging by the content and the tone of the new textbooks, the two eras will be linked by the interwoven themes of dramatic socio-economic and cultural development, heroic defense of the Motherland, and the tragic suffering of the people by their own hand (through the Civil War) and that of their political elites.

The Kremlin may withdraw or reduce its support for criticism of the Soviet past under at least two conditions: if its control of the process is threatened or if conservative elites mobilize against attacks on historical narratives they view as necessary for the legitimization of their power and privileges. The first possibility is unlikely in the near term. Most of the project – from new textbooks and museums to memorials – depends heavily on the good will of the state in both political and financial terms. As of early December 2015, the Kremlin had yet to provide clear lines of funding for the different components of the overall Concept. As for disaffected conservative elites: they may demur in private, but Putin's high approval ratings and the seeming absence of viable political rivals are likely to limit their criticism that the president has embarked on a dangerous course in stirring up the Soviet past.

Although criticism of the Soviet past may eventually provide ideological support for liberalizing reforms, the movement to institutionalize the memorialization and study of the Soviet era remains fragile. Political instrumentalism shapes Putin's position on the censure of the Soviet era. As such, his support for the current programs is limited. While Medvedev's criticism of Stalinism is apparently more far-reaching, he is either unable or unwilling to demonstrate strong leadership on the issue. Another handicap is the relative weakness of the liberal forces which have provided crucial support for confronting the nature and legacy of Stalinism. Unlike the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods, when the liberal intelligentsia often played a significant role in shaping elite and public discourse about Stalinism, often in collaboration with the government, today this group is greatly reduced in terms of size and political influence. The opposition of conservative elites and the significant apathy of the Russian public constitute powerful additional obstacles.

Yet the desire to evaluate and judge Stalinism survives in families which were victimized by Stalin's rule, in institutions as diverse as the Orthodox Church and Memorial, in Russian society and its search for moral standards, and in the ranks of the political establishment which are troubled by the failure of state-led development under Putin to foster authentic modernization. The urge to critically examine the Soviet past among these groups is likely to increase as the socio-economic, ethical, and political costs of Russia's authoritarian statist model become more acute. (Sherlock, 2014a, p. 292)

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