

## Confronting the Stalinist Past: The Politics of Memory in Russia

Attempting to reverse the decline of the Russian state, economy, and society, President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have paid increasing attention over the past two years to the modernization of Russia's socioeconomic system. Aware of the importance of cultural and ideological supports for reform, both leaders are developing a "useable" past that promotes anti-Stalinism, challenging the anti-liberal historical narratives of Putin's presidency from 2000–2008. This important political development was abrupt and unexpected in Russia and the West. In mid-2009, a respected journal noted 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. . . ."<sup>1</sup> In December 2009, *Time* magazine ran a story entitled "Rehabilitating Joseph Stalin."<sup>2</sup>

Although the conflicting interests of the regime and the opposition of conservatives are powerful obstacles to a sustained examination of Russia's controversial Soviet past, the Kremlin has now reined in its recent efforts to burnish the historical image of Josef Stalin, one of the most brutal dictators in history. For now, Medvedev and Putin are bringing the Kremlin more in line with dominant Western assessments of Stalinism. If this initiative continues, it could help liberalize Russia's official political culture and perhaps its political system. Yet

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continued de-Stalinization—which the Kremlin views as an important component of its efforts at modernization—will likely generate clashes among Russia's political elites and within Russian society. The West, particularly Europe, can play an important role in encouraging Russia to stay the course.

### Historical Narratives in Putin's Russia

Official narratives of political history are, to an important extent, the product of negotiation and contestation between state and society as well as among political elites. New political leaders must assess the cultural legacy of their predecessors and decide whether that inheritance supports their agenda, and if not, whether they should devote the political capital required to alter or discard it.

When Putin was elected president of Russia in March 2000, Russian society remained divided over how to evaluate the Soviet era, particularly Stalinism. Preoccupied in much of his first term with placing his own stamp on Russian foreign policy and reducing the economic and political disorder inherited from Boris Yeltsin, Putin recognized that a contentious debate over the past might complicate Russia's external affairs and also sharpen domestic political tensions. Many Russians alive today are from families with members who had been persecuted during the Stalin period.<sup>3</sup> Although Putin and the *siloviki*, the powerful elites drawn from the uniformed and security services, wanted to craft an uplifting historical narrative that would bind the nation with a sense of common purpose and legitimate their increasingly authoritarian rule, they understood that any attempt to openly celebrate the Stalin era to serve this end would further open unhealed wounds in Russian society.

Russian civil society, including the Orthodox Church, also helped block the rehabilitation of Stalin. The Church, which began to free itself from state control in the post-Soviet era and develop an autonomous if still fragile identity, had emerged as an influential force in Russia. While the Church itself harbored some neo-Stalinists and extreme nationalists, its leadership was committed to preserving the memory of Soviet depredations against Orthodox congregants and clergy, particularly under Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev. Yeltsin had returned the Church to symbolic prominence in the 1990s, and his anti-communist sentiments were largely congruent with the position of the Church. An avowed believer, Putin continued the Yeltsin-era veneration of the Orthodox Church, which remained an important source of support for the Kremlin.

The Kremlin's cautious approach to the Soviet past was also due to empirical constraints. A decade of revelations and professional research on the Soviet era under Yeltsin (and earlier under Mikhail Gorbachev) as well as exposure to foreign scholarship had significantly broadened the factual basis for assessing Soviet history. Among the significant initiatives of Russian civil society, the Moscow-based Memorial Human Rights Centre, founded during *perestroika*, has played a vital role in collecting and preserving historical information, particularly about the Stalinist purges, while the independent publisher ROSSPEN has developed a booklist entitled "The History of Stalinism."

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Although these factors did not necessarily determine the Kremlin's selection of a national narrative, they did reduce the plausibility and attractiveness of certain choices, including those which idealized the Soviet era.<sup>4</sup> The Russian leadership understood that any meta-narrative must be credible to be politically effective, and that any attempt to portray Stalin in a positive light would mobilize domestic and foreign critics armed with strong evidence of the criminal nature of his regime.

Temporizing, the Kremlin under Putin made it known that unrestrained attacks on the Soviet past were no longer acceptable, and worked to restrict the influence of the Yeltsin-era anti-Soviet and anti-communist discourse that was prevalent in parts of the educational establishment and in the shrinking liberal media. Yet the regime failed to develop a coherent, positive assessment of the Soviet period beyond adopting the Soviet national anthem and emphasizing in broad terms the historical continuity of the Russian state through the tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. Instead, in a remarkable example of cultural bricolage, the Kremlin drew on elements of Yeltsin's ideological legacy, seeking legitimacy by publicly honoring the memory of such disparate opponents of Soviet rule as Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Alexander Yakovlev. Melding contradictory symbols and narratives, this composite representation of the past lacked thematic focus and internal cohesion. It did, however, raise still other barriers to a successful rehabilitation of Stalin.

Despite the obstacles to portraying Stalin and Stalinism in a more positive light, the Kremlin launched an extraordinary effort to that end in 2007, almost seven years after Putin assumed office. International and domestic factors influenced this decision. According to Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Moscow Center, Russia had aspirations to join the West throughout the 1990s and then during Putin's first years as president: "These efforts failed, both because the West lacked the will to adopt

Russia as one of its own and because Russian elites chose to embrace a corporatist and conservative policy agenda at home and abroad.” Russia then returned to its “default option of behaving as an independent great power.”<sup>5</sup> Emboldened by high oil prices but also confronted by a new round of NATO expansion, the unilateralism of the Bush administration, and the “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia became increasingly intolerant of Western influence and democratic contagion in former Soviet space, which the Kremlin now openly portrayed as a threat. In the Kremlin’s official discourse, the West was transformed from an object of desire into an aggressive “Other.”

### **The Battle over the Stalinist Past: The Filippov Affair**

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Using the past to legitimate its anti-Western 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*.<sup>6</sup> Filippov, who also served as one of the editors and authors of a textbook for students entitled *History of Russia: 1945–2008*,<sup>7</sup> is the deputy director of the National Center for Foreign Policy, a think tank with close ties to the Kremlin. A second, multi-author textbook for students edited by Filippov and Alexander Danilov, the respected author of numerous textbooks on Russian and Soviet history, is entitled *History of Russia: 1900–1945*<sup>8</sup> and addresses the great controversies of Soviet foreign and domestic affairs in the 1930s.

The new books were authoritative, having been prepared under the direction of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin ideologist. Surkov had previously developed the concept of “sovereign democracy,” a variant of strident if defensive nationalism which informs the concluding chapter of Filippov’s manual, warning against the encroachment of Western democratization. Putin himself held a meeting with teachers and officials to further emphasize the need to revise prevailing representations of Russia’s past.

The new history texts view the West and particularly the United States with deep mistrust, describing Western behavior before, during, and after the Soviet period as hypocritical and hostile to Russia’s national interests. Western policies of democracy promotion are portrayed as a cynical cover for expansionism; the West’s attack on Yugoslavia in 1999 in defense of Kosovar “human rights” is described as a “rehearsal for future NATO actions against Russia or its allies. . . .” Characterizing the West’s treatment of Russia during the Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin periods as one of frequent betrayal, the books strengthen the primary strand of the new official perspective: Russia faces a hostile international environment which requires the concentration of political and economic power in the Russian state.

The most controversial section of Filippov's manual for teachers portrays the mass terror of the Stalin years as essential to the country's rapid modernization in the face of growing German and Japanese military threats, and amid the inaction or duplicity of the Western democracies. In their examination of the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, in which millions of innocent Soviet citizens were either executed or sent to the forced labor camps of the Gulag, the new books avoid any moral assessment of Stalinism, strongly suggesting that the end—preparing for war with Nazi Germany—justified the means—the use of mass coercion against Soviet elites and society.

In comparing the emergence of the militarized, repressive Stalinist system to other countries, Filippov argues that “in similar conditions of serious threat . . . an evolution occurs . . . in the direction of restricting individual rights in favor of strengthening the state, as happened in the United States after the events of September 11, 2001.” Filippov also compares Stalin to Otto von Bismarck, observing that just as the German leader forged a unitary state with “blood and iron” in the 19th century, “so too did Stalin ruthlessly strengthen the Soviet state.”<sup>9</sup> Such equivalency arguments are exceedingly strained but politically useful because they justify the institutionalized violence of the Stalinist regime and avoid the central question: what variables explain the presence in the Soviet case, and the absence in the U.S. and German cases noted above, of sustained mass repression? The failure of the textbook to pose this question distorts the moral capacity of Russian society to properly evaluate moral capacity of Russian society to properly evaluate the Soviet past.

The textbooks maintain that Stalinism was primarily a consequence of the hard international environment, and that no viable alternatives were available to Soviet Russia. The books develop the theme of tragic inevitability and foregone developmental opportunities with the assertion, especially in *History of Russia: 1945–2008*, that Soviet democratization had been possible in the post-World War II period, but was thwarted by new threats from the West in the form of the Cold War. In this argument, the Soviet state and Stalin himself are acquitted of primary responsibility for the human toll of Stalinism.

### **Explaining Discursive Shifts**

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Despite its extensive political investment in Filippov's controversial narrative, the Kremlin began to change course in 2009. Domestic factors help to explain this shift away from the nationalist ideology of “sovereign democracy” with its fortress mentality. Filippov's manual was subjected to withering criticism in public and academic meetings and in liberal media outlets, demonstrating that Russian civil society, although severely weakened under Putin, was still active. Senior clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church, although usually cautious in

their public statements about the Soviet past, also voiced their opinion. Archbishop Hilarion, the 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."<sup>10</sup>

These domestic pressures bolstered the effect of powerful external forces. Foreign criticism of the new history books joined and amplified existing condemnations of Stalinism, particularly from countries in the post-Soviet region. Hilarion's uncompromising assessment of Stalin, invoking genocide, coincided with the July 2009 resolution of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that equated Stalinism and Nazism. The resolution marked August 23, the date in 1939 of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, as a "Day for the Remembrance of the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism."

Most important, the 2008 global economic crisis influenced the Kremlin to alter its use of history as an instrument of national policy. Russia was among the

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hardest hit of industrialized countries by the economic downturn, which called into question the long-term viability of Putin's model of state-led modernization dependent on oil and gas exports. The Kremlin also concluded that Russia would be marginalized in economic competition with other powers if it did not secure substantial, long-term increases in Western investment, trade, and technical expertise. Demanding a "paradigm

shift," Medvedev in July 2010 informed 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.<sup>11</sup>

Determined to defuse contentious historical issues which impede better relations with the West, the Kremlin has turned to a more honest treatment of Stalin-era crimes and misdeeds to emphasize the credibility of its commitment to reform. For example, after years of foot-dragging, Moscow officially commemorated the tragedy of the Katyn forest, where thousands of Polish civil and military elites were executed in 1940 by Stalin's secret police. In a solemn Polish–Russian ceremony at Katyn in April 2010, Putin stated that "for both Russians and Poles, the truth about the past is of the utmost importance, no

matter how hard or uncomfortable that truth may be.” Putin also frankly referred to the contemporary importance of historical issues when he stated that “I am confident that Russia–Poland reconciliation, settling all the complicated issues dating back to the past, has not only a bilateral but also a European dimension.”<sup>12</sup>

The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 strengthened the Kremlin’s incentives to pursue historical rectification. Obama’s efforts to mend fences with Moscow, particularly on the issues of NATO expansion and missile defense, has softened the siege mentality of the Russian political elite, as has the retreat of the “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia. The election of Medvedev in March 2008 also produced a leader who differs from Putin in terms of generation, temperament, as well as occupational biography, and who could more plausibly champion a politically hazardous discursive shift.

In September 2009, Medvedev fired his first salvo against Stalinism in his article “Go Russia!”<sup>13</sup> Harshly criticizing Russian corruption and backwardness, Medvedev rejected the tone and perspective of Filippov’s textbooks by providing a moral assessment 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.”

Putin has also condemned Stalin’s “mass crimes,” arguing that it is both “unacceptable” and “impossible” to achieve economic development through repressions.<sup>14</sup> Both Medvedev and Putin now describe 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” is significant, since it aligns 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 countries formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Other signals are important, including Medvedev’s periodization of state terror; he has acknowledged that “for 20 years before World War II entire strata and classes of our society were eliminated.”<sup>15</sup> This temporal framework undermines the strategy of Stalinist apologists who attempt to confine the discussion of Stalin’s crimes to the Great Purge of 1937—a method employed by Putin himself while he was president. Extending the condemnation of Stalinism to most, if not all, of the early Bolshevik era, Medvedev has invoked Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s description of the “endless stream of the repressed” during these years. In 2009, the Russian government made Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* required reading in Russia’s high schools.<sup>16</sup>

Developing what may emerge as an important thread of a new meta-narrative, Medvedev in late 2009 praised Gorbachev for his political courage during *perestroika* and for making public “documents that cast a shadow on . . . the Communist Party.”<sup>17</sup> When Filippov’s book was first published in 2007, Gorbachev had warned of a rebirth of Stalinism, arguing that “We must squeeze Stalinism out of ourselves, not in single drops but by the glass or bucket.”<sup>18</sup> Since the memory of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* remains unpopular in Russia, Medvedev’s portrayal of him as a moral leader is noteworthy. Reflecting this theme, and with the Kremlin’s support, a group of scholars recently assembled at the Moscow Institute of Open Education to develop a new history curriculum with a focus on the problems of Russian democratization.<sup>19</sup>

### **Will Russian Society Support Anti-Stalinism?**

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To what extent will the Kremlin’s initiatives resonate in Russian society? Assessing the results of their important surveys on Russian political attitudes in early 2006, scholars Sarah Mendelson and Theodore Gerber found significant support overall in Russia for a positive image of Stalin, a phenomenon which they trace in large part to the propaganda machine of the Putin presidency.<sup>20</sup> More recently, in early 2008, Mendelson and Gerber wrote that under Putin, the Kremlin had launched a campaign to cultivate anti-Westernism as well as nostalgia for the Soviet era, and that these efforts were particularly successful in targeting Russia’s youth.<sup>21</sup> Despite these findings, it is possible to draw different conclusions from Russian polls which underline the complexity of Russian attitudes about the Soviet past.

How strong is nostalgia for the Soviet Union and do Russia’s youth prefer Soviet times to contemporary life? For the overwhelming majority, the answer seems to be “no.” A poll in 2010 by VCIOM, the Russian public-opinion firm, revealed that only 7 percent of the 18–24 age group (a core component of the “Putin Generation”) fully agreed with the statement that “it would be better if everything was as before *perestroika*” (i.e., during the Brezhnev years).<sup>22</sup> When asked directly which era they would prefer to live in, only four percent of total respondents chose the Stalinist period (only three percent of the 18–24 group).<sup>23</sup> Compared to other segments, the 18–24 group was the least interested in the Soviet era.

Russian attitudes toward Stalin the dictator remain complex. In December 2009, VCIOM released data on how Russians assess Stalin and Stalinism. Reflecting the findings of Mendelson and Gerber, VCIOM reports that Russians have positive feelings toward Stalin more often than negative ones (37 percent versus 24 percent).<sup>24</sup> Yet Valery Fyodorov, the director of VCIOM, points out that “the overbalance” is due to the “elder generations,”<sup>25</sup> with older Russians

much more likely to feel respect for Stalin than young Russians (35 percent versus 22 percent). According to other recent polls, 30 percent of older Russians believe that when Stalin died the country lost a “great leader and teacher,” while only nine percent of younger Russians share this opinion.<sup>26</sup> Equally important, the 2009 VCIOM poll found that 38 percent of the young generation registered “indifference” to the image of Stalin. Lev Gudkov, the director of the Levada Center, a well-regarded polling organization, found that the number of Russians overall who are indifferent to Stalin has risen over the past eight years from 17 percent to 47 percent.<sup>27</sup> According to the Center’s data, the figure for young Russians was approximately 50 percent.<sup>28</sup>

This increasing lack of interest in Stalin seems to challenge the position that pro-Stalinist and pro-Soviet propaganda has significantly shaped Russian public consciousness. Instead, it seems that Putin’s efforts to avoid painful historical issues during most of his presidency, coupled with the growth of diverse sources of historical information, has helped produce ambivalence and indifference toward Stalin, not support. While not as dangerous as a long-term pro-Stalin campaign, the Kremlin’s approach has left the current generation largely uneducated about Russia’s difficult past and potentially adrift morally. For this reason, Medvedev recently deplored the lack of knowledge and interest of Russia’s youth in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

Although disinterest in Stalin and Stalinism is widespread among Russia’s youth, polls administered over the last 10 years show that other age groups have strongly negative opinions about the leader and his system. In VCIOM surveys, Russians were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “Stalin was a cruel and inhuman tyrant who was responsible for the death of millions of people.” In 1998, 28 percent of total respondents replied in the affirmative. By 2009, this number had risen to 35 percent.<sup>30</sup> Looking at the issue somewhat differently, another survey asked whether the “repressions of those years were a correct and necessary step of the Soviet regime.” The Kremlin-sponsored Filippov handbook of 2007 essentially makes this argument. But in the survey, only two percent of the respondents agreed with the statement.<sup>31</sup> Answering a question about who was responsible for the repressions spanning the 1930s to the early 1950s, 79 percent of the respondents blamed Stalin, the state system, or the state system and Stalin together. Only six percent of the respondents chose to absolve Stalin by answering “neither/ someone else/enemies of our country.”<sup>32</sup>

It is often suggested that the regret felt by a majority of Russians for the collapse of the Soviet Union is convincing evidence of an effective pro-Soviet propaganda campaign. Indeed, Putin in 2005 had famously called the Soviet demise “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” Yet, it should be recalled that popular regret for the Soviet collapse was already

## Russian popular regret for the Soviet collapse declined from 2000 to 2009.

commonplace when Putin took office. And although polls in 2000, the year Putin assumed the presidency, showed that 75 percent of the respondents lamented the disintegration of the Soviet Union, surveys conducted by the Levada Center from 1992–2009 demonstrate that feelings of regret among the Russian population (as a whole) had declined to 60 percent by 2009.<sup>33</sup>

An important part of the explanation for this lingering sentiment is the experience of most Russians in the first post-Soviet decade. Rejecting the Soviet past at first seemed acceptable to many Russians in 1990 and 1991, in part because of the widespread—almost euphoric—expectation that the collapse of the Soviet Union would enable Russia to quickly join the ranks of the prosperous and democratic powers. Indeed, the Soviet Union collapsed in large part because foreign models of socioeconomic and political development had become increasingly legitimate, while the Soviet model was rapidly desanctified in the eyes of multiple Soviet audiences. Western models of democracy and economic development served as a functional substitute for national historical myths, providing a vision of a stable, just, and affluent society. In this sense, many Russians rejected the Soviet past because they felt it was no longer relevant to their present or future.

The harsh reality of life in the new Russian Republic overturned this assumption. The severe political disorder and economic decline of the 1990s gradually stripped Russians of their belief that a prosperous and democratic Russia would emerge in the near future. In this context, the Soviet past was increasingly reassessed in positive terms, either as a re-legitimated model for social and political development or as an historical frame with the capacity to stimulate pride and reinforce individual and group identity, particularly in memories of the extraordinary Soviet sacrifice and victory in World War II.

Yet, it is likely that many Russians who feel this way also share Putin's view that "those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart," but those who want it to be restored "have no brain."<sup>34</sup> Even Filippov's controversial 2007 handbook portrayed the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era as dysfunctional and corrupt, and the Soviet collapse in 1991 as largely the result of the system's inability to address burgeoning domestic and foreign problems.

Such attitudes and assessments reflect the general belief that the Soviet system was ultimately a failure even though the era is still valued because it provided the institutional frame for the personal lives of generations. Russia's elites also understand that a project to restore the institutions and ideology of

the Soviet Union is beyond their capacity and would in any case be anathema because it would challenge their personal freedom and privileged position in Russia's system of state capitalism. And with its current efforts to forge better relations with the West, Russia's leadership increasingly sees the Stalinist period not as a symbolic resource but as a political liability.

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### **Historical Reconciliation or Renewed Forgetfulness?**

Despite significant recent efforts on the part of the regime to come to terms with the Soviet past, important obstacles remain to a sustained historical debate. Sensitive to political risk, the leadership of the Kremlin remains wary of a wide-ranging examination of Stalinism, not least because it could provide a powerful justification for contemporary democratization. Although a number of their statements and actions are suggestive, neither Medvedev nor Putin has yet to demonstrate a level of commitment to anti-Stalinism approaching that of Gorbachev, Alexander Yakovlev, or Yeltsin. Also unlike the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin periods, when the liberal intelligentsia played a crucial role in shaping elite and public discourse about the Soviet past often in alliance with the Kremlin, today the political influence and numerical size of this group is greatly reduced.

Another potential stumbling block to historical rectification is located in the external environment: the often highly politicized criticism of the Soviet past, particularly the period of World War II, in many of the post-communist states in Europe. The failure of the Russian government to condemn the Soviet repression of these nations in a forthright way is the fundamental reason for their harsh criticism of the Kremlin's heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, the question of how to frame the origins of World War II and the subsequent Soviet victory remains the most divisive historical issue in the region. Despite the Nazi–Soviet Pact of 1939, Medvedev has refused to accept that the Soviet Union was complicit in starting the war, or to see the Soviet victory as anything but an unalloyed triumph—even while recognizing that the Stalinist regime was “totalitarian.” Nor has he yet addressed other contentious issues such as the forced incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union in 1940.

Medvedev's position is not surprising since World War II is the most important event in Russian history for most Russians, who often find it difficult to disentangle the memory of Stalin from that of the existential struggle of the war. Hence, the seeming anomaly of Russians expressing respect for Stalin

**Important obstacles remain to a sustained historical debate.**

while recognizing the brutality of his regime. By preserving the integrity of a cherished narrative, Russians inevitably alienate their neighbors: only nine percent of Russians believe that the Soviet victory led to the Stalinist occupation of Eastern Europe.<sup>35</sup>

Given these popular beliefs and the fact that positive representations of the Great Patriotic War generate normative support for the current regime, which is the legal successor of the Soviet Union, Medvedev recently took strong measures to protect the dominant Russian memory of the war. Facing gathering international criticism in the run-up to the 70th anniversary of the Nazi–Soviet Pact in August 2009, Medvedev formed the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests, which was directed against domestic and foreign “falsifiers” of the Soviet victory in World War II. This decision was widely criticized by Russian liberals and by Western governments and scholars as reminiscent of Soviet problem-solving, and the commission seems to have lapsed into relative obscurity. Nevertheless, the incident is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of independent historical investigation in Russia.

The Kremlin’s attempts to heal specific historical wounds associated with the war, such as Katyn, have been more helpful. Significantly, Putin recently offered a guarded acknowledgment that all attempts to appease Hitler, both by the West and by Stalin, deserved harsh criticism, although he still apportioned more blame to Britain and France for concluding the Munich Pact of 1938. In another sign of progress, in December 2010 Valdis Zatlers made the first official visit of a Latvian president to post-Soviet Russia. Agreeing that it was “better to talk than not to talk,” he and Medvedev established a bilateral commission that will study the disputed nature of the Soviet incorporation of the Baltic states in 1940.

In this fluid political environment, the fate of the Kremlin’s fledgling anti-Stalinism will depend to a significant extent on whether the political leadership can claim—and political elites perceive—tangible, valued benefits, particularly better economic and political relations with the West. It is also possible that the Kremlin may turn away from de-Stalinization if the economic pressures that motivated the leadership to criticize Stalinism appear to recede, making the need for modernization based on the greater empowerment of Russian society and Western investment seem less compelling.

Fear of political instability may also shape the Kremlin’s behavior. In December 2010, thousands of extreme right-wing football fans and skinheads engulfed Manezh Square, in the shadow of the Kremlin walls, in an anti-immigrant demonstration. Some of the groups involved in the disturbances

had been cultivated by Kremlin-sponsored nationalist youth organizations. Maintaining that inter-ethnic clashes did not occur in the Soviet system because of the unifying concept of the “Soviet people,” Putin suggested that Russia should develop a similar principle, that of “all-Russian patriotism.”<sup>36</sup> Following the Soviet example would likely have a chilling effect on de-Stalinization, since a purified narrative of national unity provided the ideological foundation for Soviet nationalities policy.

In his own response to the Manezh riot, Medvedev chose to problematize Putin’s orthodox Soviet narrative, questioning whether the Soviet model holds any answers to current difficulties. Recent acts of terrorism in Russia are also likely to sharpen elite disagreement over the utility of criticizing the Soviet past.

The Kremlin is now encouraging not only further openness about Stalinism, but also the reconceptualization of its meaning and significance. During his trip to Katyn with his Polish counterpart in April 2010, Putin emphasized that both Polish and Soviet citizens lay in the mass graves of the forest, suggesting that all nations—including Russia—had suffered under the Stalinist regime. This emerging narrative of shared suffering seeks to recast the political identity of Russia, particularly for foreign audiences, from that of perpetrator to that of victim.

The theme of common suffering—and its potential to defuse historical controversies—was further developed in a July 2010 article published in Russia’s government newspaper by Sergei Karaganov, an influential commentator, who called for monuments to Stalin’s victims—similar to those at Katyn—to be erected throughout Russia. In an apparent snub of *Nashi*, the Kremlin-supported nationalist youth group, Karaganov advocated the formation of a “truly patriotic youth movement” which would identify the victims of Stalinism, inscribing their names on memorial obelisks and renaming towns and cities after them.<sup>37</sup>

Seeming to respond to Karaganov’s call for Russians to “overcome the cursed legacy of the 20th century,” Medvedev in late 2010 appointed Mikhail Fedotov, a well-known liberal, to head the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights. Fedotov soon announced that he would propose a comprehensive government program that would provide an official assessment of Stalinism and also propose measures to eliminate its vestiges, particularly through the commemoration of its victims. If initiated, this important program would inject contemporary relevance into the current debates over the past by placing the Stalinist political and socio-economic system at the center of analysis, not the dictator himself.

**M**ost Russians find it difficult to disentangle Stalin from the existential struggle of WWII.

**The West can play an important role supporting Russia's efforts to confront the Stalinist legacy.**

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### **The Past as a Bridge to the Future?**

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The West can play an important role in supporting Russia's efforts to confront the legacy of Stalinism. Although the Kremlin values U.S. cooperation on security issues as well as greater U.S. investment, the gradual economic and cultural integration of Russia into Europe represents the greatest source of potential Western influence. With U.S. support, the EU should demonstrate in

concrete and symbolic ways that de-Stalinization will narrow the existing "values gap" between Russia and Europe, leading to greater investment and trade, a key objective of the Kremlin. Although distracted by mounting internal problems, the EU—as well as the United States—must work to engage Russia not only on the basis of pragmatism (economic and security issues) but also political principle.

The EU and the United States also should work toward the formation of international conferences and research projects of Russian and western scholars devoted to discussing politically sensitive historical issues. Funding should be significantly increased for transnational and national organizations that provide teacher training and textbook analysis, including EUROCLIO (The Netherlands) and the Georg Eckert Institute (Germany). Strong relationships should be established with the academic and pedagogical communities in Russia. As part of their agenda, such projects should examine how the West has grappled with its own painful history, recognizing that even stable democracies often require decades to face and hopefully resolve difficult historical issues. Despite supportive international and domestic conditions, West Germany did not come to grips with the crimes of the Nazi era until the mid-1960s, while the United States did not apologize to Japanese-Americans for U.S. internment policy during World War II until the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Yet, one of the underlying lessons for Russia should be that attempts at historical reconciliation are much less likely to succeed if they are directed primarily by the state, leaving civil society without a significant, independent role to play. In both the German and U.S. cases, civil society was eventually instrumental in effecting meaningful repentance, memorialization, and reconciliation.

The United States and the EU should also encourage Russia's neighbors to moderate their use of history as a political weapon. An emotional condemnation of the Soviet past, particularly the period of World War II, was understandable as the new and newly-liberated states of the region engaged in state- and nation-building in the shadow of a resurgent Russia and with strong memories of repressive Soviet rule. Yet the continuation of such condemnation as well as

incipient demands for financial restitution—and the political motives that often drive this behavior—reinforce the tendency of Russian elites and society to ignore or downplay wrongdoing in Stalinist foreign policy.<sup>39</sup> In the worst case, a conservative backlash may occur in Russia, similar to the one which supported the Filippov narrative in 2007 and driven by the belief that anti-Stalinism is a reckless act of national self-humiliation before a hostile world. Aggrieved states in the region should use academic, official, and diplomatic forums to carefully press the Russian government to continue its examination of the tragic cost of Stalinism and the lessons it still holds for the present.

The agenda of Latvia's president in his recent trip to Russia suggests that the mutual, professional study of sensitive historical issues should be just one of several methods—including enhanced trade and investment—to improve bilateral relations. By embedding the examination of historical problems within a larger political, economic, and cultural context, both sides have incentives to view history as an asset, not for political combat but for the normalization of relations. Given its fragile and politicized nature, the survival of de-Stalinization in Russia will depend to a significant extent on whether Russian and Western leaders possess the skill and commitment to use the investigation and assessment of the Stalinist past as a bridge between their countries.

## Notes

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