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The Rules of the Game in the Argument on History in Russia

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Homogenisation and Differentiation: the Rules of the Game in the Argument on History

editorial

Conceptions of the past in today's Russia are characterised by two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand there is the open attempt, mostly driven by the political centre and resisted by the opposition forces in academia and journalism, to adopt a single interpretation of history. History is understood as 'the fatherland's history' in both meanings of the phrase – it is *the* history both *of* and *for* the 'fatherland'. On the other hand, a counter-movement of histor*ies* is evident – this view stresses multiplicity and must therefore be described in the plural. On the whole, these are the histories of individual social, ethno-linguistic or religious groups, which are coming into conflict with the attempts by the centre to establish a homogenous understanding of the past.

Russia is not alone in experiencing these dual currents. Throughout the world, the homogenisation and differentiation of the social discourses on history have been interacting in a reciprocal process since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. Because it is becoming increasingly clear that the use of a single, normally national, interpretative framework for an entire society is just one of many possibilities, criticism of the national schema has increased, as has the number of alternative histories: regional and local history instead of national history, *her*-story instead of *his*-story, the histories of victims instead of the history of victors or perpetrators. In this respect, Russia does not represent an exception.

The impact of these contradictory tendencies has not only been felt in the academic subject of history, but also in the mass media, school lessons and public depictions of the past. The contributions to the present issue of *kultura* look at these different (debating) forums of memory. They underline that the interaction of the homogenisation and differentiation of conceptions of the past does not constitute a simple confrontation; the two tendencies comment upon and penetrate each other. Thus, one finds the beginnings of a local historical differentiation in schools, despite the fact that their job has traditionally been to convey the 'grand narrative'. This is dealt with in the piece by Irina Shcherbakova and the extract from a school essay on the purges of 1937 in a Russian village. Conversely, peripheral and minority acts of remembering often lay claim to new, and this time correct, 'grand narratives', as Rebekka Blume shows in the example of the non-state staging of the battle of Stalingrad in modern-day Volgograd.

The interaction of homogenisation and differentiation has shaped the entire post-Soviet period. The radical criticism of the Soviet system under Perestroika, which in the end led to the disintegration of the USSR, started in 1987 with the criticism of the Soviet understanding of history. Since then, all attempts by the centre to unify the collective view of the past were accompanied by more or less vocal protests. Consequently, it is necessary, on the one hand, to continue to defend our understanding of history from dogmatic standardisation, excess political baggage and attempts at homogenisation, which are as amateurish as they are ineffectual. Tamara Eidelman and Ilya Smirnov issue warnings to this effect in their contributions on the newest trends in history textbooks. At the same time, one must recognise that such criticism also belongs to the game of homogenisation and differentiation taking place in all modern societies. The conflict around one's 'own' history or histories cannot be disposed of once and for all; instead, it can only be civilised and channelled. The question is whether this conflict can be contained in a game governed by rules. These rules, as Vera Zvereva shows in her piece on the depiction of history in Russian television, are closely connected to media formats. Russia, where ever new waves of radical challenges to understandings of history have emerged since the collapse of the Soviet Union, remains an interesting example of an attempt to

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create the rules for approaching history while the game is already in full swing.

Translated from the German
by Christopher Gilley

About the Guest Editor:
Andreas Langenohl is a sociologist and Slavicist. He has worked on collective memory in post-Soviet Russia. He is currently running the interdisciplinary research group 'Idioms of Social Analysis' in the Center of Excellence 'Cultural Foundations of Integration' at the University of Konstanz.

analysis

Were Stalin's Politics 'Effective'? Scandals around New History Books in Russia

Tamara Eidelman

The author analyses the current state of schoolbooks on twentieth-century Russian history by looking at three examples which recently attracted considerable public interest. The drama of the situation is fuelled by the facts that many of the negative developments in contemporary history teaching have been forced upon teachers from above and that scandalous teaching materials often enjoy substantial state support.

History teaching in Russian schools is becoming an increasingly topical political issue. President Putin has accused the authors of schoolbooks of slandering Russia's past. He declared in a televised meeting with teachers in June 2007 that those who receive international grants to write textbooks are simply 'dancing to the music' of their paymasters. Before he became a member of the opposition, Mikhail Kasyanov voiced his indignation that the history books for senior pupils did not describe recent events – in particular his appointment as prime minister. Duma representatives, journalists and TV talk show hosts all discuss history teaching regularly. Everyone seems to think that they understand something of history, and the subject is often used as fodder in political debates.

The different views on history teaching, and particularly on textbooks covering the Soviet period, have become a distinctive litmus test. A hostile attitude to the Western world has, unfortunately, become widespread over the last few years. It is no coincidence that one offshoot of this has been indignation at schoolbooks published with Western funding – regardless of their quality, the books have suddenly started to arouse suspicion.

A second idea characteristic of the present situation, the exculpation of the Soviet past, has also found its way into discussions about schooling. There can be no doubt that those deprived of any connection to their past can look into the future calmly. The fashion for old Soviet films, songs and customs may arouse feelings of nostalgia. However, as soon as this 'exculpation of the past' crosses a certain line, it ceases to be simply memories of the ordinary lives of normal people and veers dangerously close to a justification of the terrors of Stalinism. Calls to the authors of textbooks to infuse schoolchildren with pride for their country's past might provoke sympathy were it not for the reality that these beautiful words belie a thinly veiled attempt to conceal the real conditions of life under Communism from the younger generation.

analysis

Igor Dolutsky: 'Russian History in the Twentieth Century'

Over the last few years, the Russian education system was shaken by a number of scandals connected with history textbooks. In 2003, Igor Dolutsky's 'Russian History in the Twentieth Century', which had already been in publication for seven years, lost its ministerial stamp. Without this stamp, which represented a mark of approval from the Ministry of Education, the book could not be used in schools. Teachers could, of course, buy one copy for themselves and use it for the preparation of lessons, but it would be simply impossible to order for the school library thirty or sixty copies of a publication lacking ministerial approval. Indeed, a ministerial 'recommendation', advising schools not to use earlier issues of the book, was disseminated to the regions. It is well know that it is not recommended to argue with such a recommendation.

Formally, those in power were angered by two quotations included in the new edition: the words of Iurii Burtin, a well-known member of the '60s generation, calling Putin's accession to power a 'state coup' and the regime he created an 'authoritarian dictatorship'; and Grigory Yavlinsky's assertion that Russia was being turned into a 'police state'. Dolutsky's textbook was subjected to brutal, and at times boorish, criticism. He was accused of Russophobia and inciting hatred, and was called a lot of extremely unpleasant names. His defenders did not remain silent either and quite reasonably saw the attacks on Dolutsky's book as an assault on freedom of speech in Russia. At the same time, as is often the case, bad publicity simply became publicity, and the remaining copies of the schoolbook were snatched up from bookshops by interested readers.

The sad fact of this situation is that Dolutsky's book, which has practically become a symbol for pedagogical freedom, is far from being the best of its kind. The author wrote a clearly journalistic work that unashamedly expressed his political views. In doing so, he aroused the displeasure of the state, which obviously did not share his understanding of Russia's historical development. One can agree or disagree with Dolutsky's views, but the question of whether the book is suited for use in schools, i.e. if its views are thrust upon its young readers too forcefully, was not even raised. The majority of journalists and public figures who made public statements on the book were basically concerned with its political composition. They either approved of it or condemned it vehemently. Pedagogical questions were simply ignored.

The Competition for the Best Schoolbook on Russian History

The second event to trigger furious emotions among journalists and teachers was the pseudo-competition to find the best textbook on Russian history, organised by the Ministry of Education in 2002. The official explanation for holding the competition was very simple: the market for textbooks has been so swamped by publications that teachers often find themselves unable to get an overview of the works on offer to them; there are some excellent books, but also trashy pulp. Moreover, the need to work out a single standard of history teaching is being felt more keenly with each passing year, especially for those schoolchildren studying for the standardised state exam. The goal is laudable in principle. However, there was no attempt to define how far standardisation should go or who would be ascertaining the quality of the books.

Twenty-nine texts emanating from different publishers were read by experts in record time. The books were intended for use in years nine and eleven. History teaching is presently structured into two stages or 'concentrated blocks' – the first is taught from year five to year nine and covers the whole period from ancient times to today in chron-

ological order; the second block lasts between year ten and year eleven and revisits the same topics as the first but in greater depth. It was expected that each category would produce three victors. This led to the curious assumption, sometimes expressed in the press, that three textbooks would be approved for history teaching. The competition itself angered many teachers: had many people actually working in schools read these books? Of course not. One fine day a representative of the Ministry of Education happily announced that two (!) books, both written by the same group of authors, had won in three (!) of the categories. The main author was Nikita Zagladin, head of a department of the Institute of World Economics and International Relations. Both of Zagladin's books have many failings. He was criticised for historical errors and needlessly idealising the Soviet period. However, he really should be criticised for something else: the textbook is bland and boring. The author tries to please everyone at the same time: in order to avoid the criticism of those in power, he does not describe the terrors of Stalinism in too much detail; at the same time, he tries to give the impression that he is not glorifying the past. The result is a strange mix of different ideas that aspire to objectivity, but which is insufferable to read.

The experts identified the book's methodological approach as one of its strong points – a laughable assessment for any teacher. The book incorporates thoroughly traditional principles of teaching, with long texts which the pupils are expected to read and apparently memorise. There is nothing about developing analytical powers or promoting comprehension, without which it is impossible to imagine modern teaching. And it is difficult to escape the thought that the book by Zagladin and his co-authors won precisely for its blandness and dryness. It does not particularly offend anyone, except perhaps for common sense.

The charade of pseudo-democracy, of course, is also annoying. We will choose a textbook in a competition, but it will be only conducted for 'those in the know', in secret, away from teachers and the public.

Aleksandr Filippov, 'A History of Russia in the Twentieth Century'

Several years later, and again teachers and the public in general find themselves facing a sad fact. The political scientist Aleksandr Filippov has written a book on twentieth-century Russian history with the modest sub-title 'a textbook for teachers'. On opening the book, one receives a great shock: as early as the first page, one finds the dumbfounding claim that 'over the course of seventy years, Western domestic policy was steered towards human rights under the not inconsiderable influence of the USSR, that enormous supra-state which realised the social revolution and emerged victorious from the cruellest of wars'. It is later explained that political imprisonment was not a significant feature of Stalinist Russia. However many convicts there may have been, Stalin's brutal decisions were nonetheless justifiable on balance, as they were dictated by the country's interests. The repressions were a product of 'the desire to ensure the greatest possible effectiveness of the governing apparat', as exemplified by Brezhnev, an effective governor who received his political education during this period.

The narrative is cleverly constructed, again simulating a 'democratic' style: there are separate passages which are indicated as being the author's 'personal' opinion; there are appeals to the opinion of the majority, which seemingly believes that Stalin brought more good to Russia than bad; there are 'documents of the epoch'. In a nutshell, every attempt has been made to write an apparently modern book for teachers. The author, truth be told, does not understand what teachers need. At the very beginning, he expresses the now fashionable

sentiment that 'the study of history should provide not only a knowledge of historical facts, but also the ability to apply the skills acquired to the solution of professional tasks and social problems'. He does not, however, suggest any methods for achieving these complex pedagogical goals. It is apparently assumed that if a pupil knows the means that Stalin used to ensure the greatest possible effectiveness in the governing apparat, he or she will be able to solve the above-mentioned tasks and problems. Somehow, one shudders at the thought of a generation of young people educated in such a way.

At the moment, a textbook for year eleven students is being prepared based on this work. It is true that there are rumours that the wave of general outrage welling up in the specialist and non-specialist press, internet and radio has ensured changes; however, only time will show how significant these are.

The second question – whose answer will soon become apparent – is how aggressively Filippov's textbook will force out other, better schoolbooks. His work has already received strong support from official circles: it is printed by the large educational publishers *Prosveshchenie* ('Enlightenment'), which will very likely also act as the book's distributor. However, one should not despair. The list of textbooks on Russian history that are recommended by the Ministry remains diverse and contains more than just three options for each year. One can still find books written by excellent academics (such as Igor Danilevsky, Andrei Levandovsky and Sergei Mironenko), books with interesting methodological approaches and books with different political conceptions of the development of Russia.

New Approaches to History Teaching

Unfortunately, there are practically no innovative books. Attempts to reform the approach to history teaching are becoming increasingly half-hearted, yet reforms are essential if the political discord in this area is to be resolved. Modern methods enable one to foster pupils' ability to compare different points of view, analyse sources, separate fact from opinion and identify distortion and propaganda. Teachers long ago understood that lessons should not only deal with political or socio-economic norms, but also with striking personalities and the daily lives of different sections of the population.

Sad to say, one can only name a few textbooks that pick up on these trends and allow one to work with up-to-date methods. There is one more interesting peculiarity: the most innovative textbooks are those written on Western history. Maybe it is not just a matter of the talents of individual authors, but of the fact that these books were less subject to the ideological pressure evident in the books on Russian history.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the current author received the opportunity to take part in two projects aimed at creating new textbooks. The close work between the inter-regional 'Union of History Teachers' and the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Associations *Euroclio* led to the publication of 'The Lessons of Clio' on Russian and world history in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as to the book *Cultural Mosaic*, intended for teaching in a multi-cultural society. The way of teaching embodied in these works not only transforms the very nature of teaching and working in the classroom; it also offers an opportunity to escape the politicisation of twentieth-century history. This approach, which is extremely innovative and unusual for Russian schools, cannot be implemented overnight. For this very reason, both projects sought not simply to develop new textbooks, but also to acquaint teachers with the new, active methods of history teaching. The numerous courses introduced for teachers in various Russian cities show that pedagogues and teach-

ers approve of the active methods. Unfortunately, the large publishing houses, which in effect control the market for textbooks, are not very interested in these teaching materials; these books are too unusual. They are therefore printed by the smaller publishers in limited runs that cannot meet the needs of such a large country.

Nevertheless, the new ideas are slowly but surely carving out a way for themselves. Today, it is already difficult to imagine a good textbook that does not use extracts from sources or exercises and that does not aim to improve the cognitive powers of its readers. It is becoming increasingly common to find chapters dealing with the history of the everyday life of ordinary people. The further one moves away from twentieth-century history, one finds more authors who are prepared to do this and more books that have benefited as a result.

Moreover, it is possible to make a second argument. It has long been said in Russia that the defence against poor laws is poor enforcement. The book by Filippov is evidently going to be distributed throughout Russia and the textbooks based on it will be introduced into schools. However, much depends on the teachers. One cannot rule out the possibility that many will ignore it, not because of its political ideas, but simply because they are already used to using other textbooks and that there are already other books in the school library. While the albeit more limited diversity amongst course books remains, all is not yet lost; one can place one's hopes on the teachers' common sense.

Translated from the Russian
by Christopher Gilley

About the Author:
Tamara Eidelman is a history teacher at the Moscow Grammar School No.1567, a member of the inter-regional Union of History Teachers, and a project co-ordinator at the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Associations *Euroclio*. She regularly writes and hosts radio programmes on the issue of history teaching.

Reading Suggestion:

- Ben Eklof, Larry E. Holmes, Vera Kaplan (eds.) (2005): *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia: Legacies and Prospects*. London: Frank Cass/Routledge, 2005.
- Helge Blakkisrud, 'Nation-building and values in Russian textbooks', in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (ed.), *Nation-building and common values in Russia*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

opinion

New Fools

Ilya Smirnov

Many believe that in the 1990s humanistic education flourished in Russia. It is true that schoolchildren were initially given access to a number of good textbooks whose authors had not found favour with the old Soviet bureaucracy. However, this did not last, and that which took place afterwards cannot be described as either 'reforms' or 'modernisation'.

In the mid-1990s, the newspaper *Pervoye Sentyabrya* ('The First of September') asked me to review the newly published textbooks in the humanistic disciplines. I learned many interesting things:

…that the city of Staraya Russa was founded at the time of the pharaohs, that Muslims were heathens and the Socialist Revolutionaries pacifists; that Ancient Greece was a unified state with its capital in Athens; that the *Varangians* (Vikings) did not come from Scandinavia but from Tripolye[1]; that the Taoist monks ate nothing but air, and the inhabitants of the Russian north spoke Sanskrit. On consecutive pages the same event might be ascribed not simply to different centuries but to different millennia. In one section, the schoolbooks offered schoolchildren commercial advertisements as learning material; another displayed the correspondence of Alexander the Great with 'Slavic-Russian Princes' who never existed, and yet one more presented the Ten Commandments as edited by the textbook's authors.

Even books overflowing not only with mistakes but also simple nonsense received official approval. In 1999, the winner of the 'Competition of the New Generation of Schoolbooks for Secondary Schools' organised by the Ministry of Education was a book which seriously suggested that pupils should look for coded information about the structure of proteins and nucleic acid in ancient ceramic ornaments.

This is not a problem of ignorance. Under President B.N. Yeltsin, a conscious struggle was declared against 'scientism' and 'positivism' (that is, truly reliable knowledge) in favour of the liberation of the growing generation from 'superfluous' disciplines. Lessons on 'totalitarian' history were cut back in order to make space on the school timetable for new 'modular' and 'integral' subjects, which were mishmashes made up of scraps of different disciplines, medieval mysticism and political propaganda thrown together by state bureaucrats and their friends. In the methodological works for teachers there appear passages instructing one to 'synthesise' the existing disciplines with 'other fundamental approaches'. Particularly devastating was the so-called method of 'concentrated blocks': teachers were instructed to teach the same thing twice. For example, history from the Neanderthals to Putin is taught up to the end of year nine (the 'first concentrated block'), and in year ten one begins again with the Neanderthals (the 'second concentrated block'). Under this 'modernisation', the wretched textbooks are copied out once again.

V.V. Putin acquired enormous popularity in Russia for the very reason that he sought to overcome the destructive tendencies of the 1990s. In some areas he has been more successful, in others less. Education belongs to the latter group. Not only does the pathological process remain unchecked; it has not even been recognised as a problem. As before, specialists in lowering the country's standard of education present themselves as academic experts. Textbooks are still published (and still receive official approval) that one cannot review seriously, but only with one's tongue firmly in cheek.

Translated from the Russian
by Christopher Gilley

1 i.e. stemming from a culture active ca. 3200–2650 BC in south-eastern and eastern Europe; finds have been made in Tripolye near Kiev (Translator's note).

About the Author:
Ilya Smirov is a historian and writes as a freelance journalist for, amongst others, the online journal *www.scepsis.ru*.

report

'Archival Pedagogy' vs. Mythologisation: The Demands on History Teaching

Irina Shcherbakova

The Russian system of school education is again in a state of crisis, which has above all hit the humanities and the teaching of history in particular.

Those who taught history under the Soviet regime were in a difficult position. They were barely given the chance to separate themselves from their ideological roots. There were no sources available to them other than a single textbook to use with pupils. For this reason, it is no coincidence that Perestroika began with society's demands to bring to light the historical truth about the Soviet past.

However, the schools were not able to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in society; the old textbooks contradicted that which was being published in millions of issues of newspapers and magazines and broadcast on the radio and television. It was particularly essential to re-educate the teachers, as there were no new recruits; the severe economic crisis that erupted at the end of the 1980s, inflation and the low wages which sometimes were not even paid all took their toll on teachers, many of whom abandoned the classroom.

Gradually, however, in the mid-1990s, schools experienced a change for the better. Most importantly, alternatives emerged. For example, new history textbooks were published and teachers were themselves able to choose which to use. The new textbooks advocated new methods of working with pupils, including discussions, competitions and presentations. From the mid-1990s, social organisations aiming to fill the lacunae in the school system appeared and took on an increasingly important role – for example, associations of local historians, environmentalists, history buffs, human rights activists and the federations for education via the internet.

The All-Russian Historical Competition for Senior Pupils 'The Individual and History. Russia in the Twentieth Century' is helping to fill the lacunae in history teaching. Organised by the international historical-enlightenment society Memorial in cooperation with the Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow) in 1999, it is now part of the network for European history competitions, EUSTORY. Its main objective is to stimulate young people to study the history of their immediate area and the fate of the individual against the background of the events of twentieth-century Russian history. Every year, 2,000–3,000 works are submitted to the competition from all over Russia, creating a unique archive of roughly 30,000 works, the best of which have been published in ten books.

The experience provided by this competition demonstrates that in Russia there are hundreds of teachers who despite continued difficult conditions have the methodological skill to adopt different ways of conducting extra-curricular work with their pupils. This work takes place within the framework of 'archival pedagogy', whereby teachers instruct pupils in the use of family and state archives, the practice of genealogy and oral history techniques. In this way, unique documents that had been gathering dust in local archives or miraculously preserved by families have been collected as part of the historical competition. The materials collected record the memories of hundreds of witnesses to and participants in historical events. The pupils learn how to work with the documents correctly and to make proper use of oral sources.

Such work is central to an understanding of a number of questions: in what way does historical memory between different generations of Russians function and how are the bonds between those generations preserved? How does memory take root and does a collective memory exist? What has become a fact of cultural memory and what has not? What fundamental myths are there and what do they say about the future, patriotism and the distinction between 'us' and 'them'? The thousands of testimonies collected demonstrate how the political

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repressions shaped the fates of ordinary people, in effect reconstructing the memory of people who did not leave behind written accounts.

However, the most important thing this decade has shown is that despite the existing impression that contemporary Russia has lost interest in history, there are hundreds of teachers who understand how important the contemporaneousness of our past is for our future.

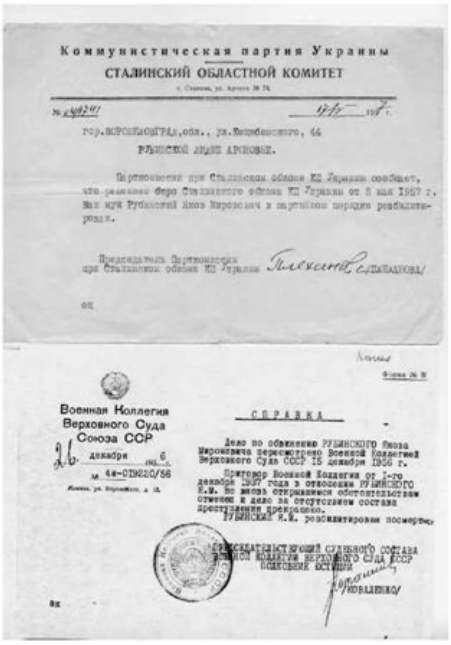
The work of these teachers is all the more important for over the last few years dangerous tendencies have emerged which also threaten the method of teaching Russian history in schools. In accordance with recent changes in the political and social climate, the attempts to expel the tragic side of Soviet history from public consciousness are becoming more and more obvious. Under the pretext of a 'liberation from guilt complexes', an attempt to 'liberate' society from historical responsibility is underway.

The openly stated goal is to create an 'affirmative' form of the past for the construction of a 'positive identity', which is, however, based on an erroneous understanding of patriotism. A history which is 'difficult to live with' does not concord with ideological indoctrination; a 'balanced' history must be communicated to young Russians. An interesting process is taking place whereby myths are constructed about the Soviet past, above all the Stalinist period, and exploited for modern-day ends. These processes are bearing their fruits: all the evidence from recent sociological surveys shows a steady rise in Stalin's 'popularity' – and among those who judge Stalin's actions favourably, there are unfortunately more and more young people; sadly, the trend is also evident in the school works submitted to the competition.

Translated from the Russian
by Christopher Gilley

About the Author:

The historian Irina Shcherbakova is the founder and project manager of the national history competition 'The Individual and History. Russia in the Twentieth Century', organised by the international historical-enlightenment society Memorial (Moscow). She also edits the publications arising out of the competition.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СПРАВКА

Archival pedagogy is based on the principle that pupils work with primary sources and conduct independent research. Our picture shows two documents.
The lower one from 08.05.1957 declares the posthumous rehabilitation of Ya. M. Rubinsky, who in 1937 was sentenced to death by a summary court for 'treason' as part of the 'Great Purge'.
The upper one from 17.05.1957 is a letter to his widow L.A. Rubinskaya, who between 1937 and 1945 was imprisoned in a camp in the Karaganda region as a 'relative of a traitor', announcing the 'political rehabilitation' of her murdered husband.
Source: Research Centre for East European Studies, Bremen, HA f. 30.208

documentation

The Secrets of File No. P-19389

Irina Batrakova, Sergei Lyukov and Nikolai Urazov

Pupils from the village school of Novy Kurlak in the Voronezh region have been conducting research on the history of their area for many years; this work has been recognised with a number of prizes (see the piece by Irina Shcherbakova in this issue). In 2006, the Moscow International society for historical enlightenment 'Memorial' devoted a collection of articles to them. We print here the introduction to an essay on an investigation into the repressions of the 1930s in their village in order to portray the pupils' approach and efforts.

The years of the Stalinist repressions constitute one of the most secretive periods of the twentieth century. That is why it has become so fascinating for those who want to penetrate its secrets. Doing this is, however, not so simple even today.

It is true that the files on innocent victims of the repressions stored in the archives are perfectly accessible. But how is it possible to find among the staggering mountain of files those which are relevant to the people of Novy Kurlak?

All the same, we, local historians of Novy Kurlak, have had a number of successes. We have discovered information on sixteen inhabitants of Novy Kurlak who fell into the hands of the OGPU-NKVD.

This was the reason behind our painstaking work in the archives of the Centre for the Documentation of Recent History, Voronezh.

We pored over horrific files containing the minutes of interrogations, juridical confrontations, witnesses' accounts and accurately catalogued documents on the carrying out of sentences…

One day, in May 1999, we went to see Vasilii Ivanovich Gorynin, an old resident of the village Novy Kurlak. We knew that he could say a lot about the fate of the church in Novy Kurlak, which was precisely the issue we were researching at that time.

Vasilii Ivanovich was born in 1927 in Novy Kurlak in the area which is today still called the Village. It is extremely interesting to talk to him, and he possesses an excellent memory for details.

During the conversation we heard the names of seventeen inhabitants of Novy Kurlak who were victims of the political repressions. Vasilii, who was ten at the time, remembered well that one of his neighbours, Kirill Ivanovich Sysovsky, was taken away in 1937. He never returned home.

[…]

We quickly submitted a request to the FSB in Voronezh province and soon received a reply. We were told that 'Kirill Ivanovich Sysovsky was sentenced on 25th September 1937 by a *troika*[1] of the UNKVD according to articles 58-10, paragraph 1 and 58-11 of the criminal code of the RSFSR (counter-revolutionary activity and participation in an organisation) to the maximum penalty, or, in other words, execution by firing squad. On 24th November 1960, the presidium of the Voronezh provincial court revoked the punishment administered by the *troika* and the case was closed on the basis that the evidence presented was unfounded. K.I. Sysovsky was considered to have been rehabilitated. The records of the case are preserved in the Centre for the Documentation of Recent History in file P-19389'.

In November 1999, during the autumn holidays, we travelled to Voronezh. We expected that file no. P-19389 would be a thin one. We had already come across such files a number of times. They normally

1 A special committee for extrajudicial punishments in the Soviet Union of the 1930s and 1940s; it was made up of a representative from the secret police, the public prosecutor's office and the local party organisation.

contain the order for the search and arrest (where the words 'nothing found' were normally written), decisions about the measures taken on the presentation and suspension of charges, the minutes of the initial interrogation (at which, as a rule, everything was denied), the testimonies of two or three witnesses, the records of several juridical confrontations, the decision about the referral of the case for consideration by a *troika* of the UNKVD, the minutes of the *troika*'s decision and extracts from the document reporting the administration of the punishment.

We were therefore very surprised when a heavy tome was brought to us. At first we thought that the archival staff had made a mistake. However, there was no error. Case no. P-19389 really did deal with Kirill Ivanovich Sysovsky. However, apart from this, we also saw four other people against whom charges were brought. K.I. Sysovsky was convicted alongside them for 'participation in an organisation'.

Who belonged to this 'hornet's nest'? Three priests from neighbouring villages: Brodovy (Kapiton Ivanovich Stankov), Novy Kurlak (Andrei Afinogenovich Yumensky), and Stary Kurlak (Aleksandr Andreevich Potapov); Mikhail Ivanovich Korchagin, an inhabitant of Orlovka, a settlement in the steppe; and Kirill Ivanovich Sysovsky, who is already known to us.

File no. P-19389 contains – or, to be more accurate, contained – many secrets. We have uncovered them. And now we will try to give an account to the world.

Translated from the Russian by Christopher Gilley
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SOURCE:
My vse s odnoi derevni…, A.N. Makarov, B.A. Roginskii (eds.), Moskva: Society 'Memorial' – Zvenya Publishers, 2006, pp. 153–155.

Do it yourself:
In Volgograd there are groups of young men with a great enthusiasm for history re-enacting and video-taping the battle of Stalingrad in authentically reproduced costumes. Photo: Rebekka Blume

Stalingrad Reloaded. Military Re-enactment in Volgograd

Rebekka Blume

case study

Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, is one of the most important memorial sites of the Second World War. In the city, commemoration and memory intertwine with topographical reality, turning history into something tangible. At the same time, ever since the battle of Stalingrad itself ended, this contemporaneousness of history has been subsumed by the ideological task of commemorating the Soviet heroes and martyrs.

Two young inhabitants of the city have taken this task literally. Through their public re-enactments of selected episodes of the battle for Stalingrad, the two founders of the military-historical society 'Pekhotinets' ('Infantryman') are bringing the war back into the present. On 2nd February 2007, we gathered in the State Panoramic Museum for the anniversary of the capitulation of the German army in Stalingrad. Beneath the panoramic depiction of the battle around the Mamayev Kurgan ('Mamai Hill', or more literally, 'the Tumulus of Mamai'), a group of veterans have come together. Young people in naval and military uniforms march in. Choir music reverberates. A distant voice reminds the youths standing to attention: 'Do not forget that you are not simply a boy, but rather a boy from Volgograd, the son of a soldier, a son of Stalingrad'.

'Field Marshal Paulus' learns his lines: preparation for the re-enactment of the battle of Stalingrad. Photo: Rebekka Blume

Another afternoon in a living room in Volgograd. An old man in a Red Army veteran's uniform describes his wartime experiences on television. My hosts turn to me. The story cannot be true, they say; the veteran is too young to have fought in the war. The two young men are in their mid-twenties. They grew up in Volgograd and have been familiar with the city's ossified rituals of commemoration since their childhood.

In the adjoining room, steel helmets, mess kits, boots and uniforms of the Soviet and German armies are piled on the shelves. We are in the quartermaster's store of the 'Pekhotinets' society. The originals were given to the two brothers from friends who belong to the 'kopateli' ('excavators') scene – young people who visit the former battlefields to dig up the remains of soldiers in order to salvage and restore their uniforms. Parts of the uniforms have been sewn by the young men themselves. They demonstrate extremely accurate handiwork: the historical hobby uncovers unexpected skills.

The finds are reincorporated into contemporary activity through the 'Pekhotinets' society's military re-enactments and war films. The task of commemoration has inspired young people to find out or even experience how it 'really' was. The younger of the two brothers comments: 'We collect these objects because we have to preserve history. We should be proud that we live in this city which through the glory of its heroic deeds provides inspiration for our achievements to this day'.

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23rd November 2007, the anniversary of the encirclement of the German army in Stalingrad. Tanks trundle through the dried-out river bed in the centre of the city; in the small depression over there, soldiers in the moss-green uniforms of the Soviet army are moving and slightly farther on, up the slope, the grey-green of Wehrmacht uniforms can be seen. Watching the soldiers, one gets the impression that war is an exciting adventure game. One veteran comments laconically: 'Well, for us it was a little bit worse'. However, his stories do not interest anyone today. Small boys in Red Army caps point excitedly to the restored tanks, artillery and military vehicles. Their adult role models hardly differ in their fascination with the military and their appetite for play. One of the organisers explains: 'Our re-enactment should, on the one hand, be seen as a game. This gives us the chance to take part in war as in a game. In this way, other wars are averted in that people get their own portion of war through the game'. However, the enthusiasm of the young men for uniforms and weapons quickly undermines this pacifist rationale.

The fascination which all things military inspire in them probably has its roots still in the military socialisation provided by the educational institutions of the Soviet period; today youth clubs and organisations are reviving this spirit. The re-enactments continue the Soviet tradition of military games, 'Sarnitsa' ('sheet lightning'), one goal of which was to help mobilise society for the event of war. Nevertheless, they constitute a movement 'from below' – that is, they are not directed by the state. They are an alternative model for the ritualised forms of official commemoration and the hackneyed stories of the veterans. They bring to life the ossified accounts of heroism which make up the official portrayal of history.

However, these activities rarely include a critical discussion of the ideologies of the time. These are

Group photograph with historical props: in the flat of the war re-enactors, who portray the battle of Stalingrad, there are pictures of both the battle and the re-enactment. Photo: Rebekka Blume

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above all adventure games. They therefore take up the official culture of commemoration by staging the heroic deeds of the Soviet soldiers. The enthusiasm for the military is not so much a subversive gesture against the official culture of commemoration as a reflection of the militaristic climate which has received new impetus since the onset of Putin's presidency.

On the crest of the Mamayev Kurgan, the enormous statue of the Motherland holds the enemy and forgetfulness at bay with her sword. This appeal does not go unheard. Youth remembers, albeit with the befitting proportion of action and adventure. That is, in their own way.

Translated from the German by Christopher Gilley

About the Author:
Rebekka Blume studied East European Cultural History and History in Bremen. Since 2006, she has been working in the German-Russian Historical Workshop for Research on Remembering the Battle of Stalingrad in Germany and Russia, which is funded by the foundation 'Memory, Past, Future'. As part of this, she filmed a documentary on military historical re-enactments in Volgograd.

analysis

The Past on TV: 'Objectivity' and 'Entertainment'

Vera Zvereva

In Russia, television has recently become an increasingly important medium for depicting history. Within the televised version of the past, the demands of the screen have pushed aspirations to historical truth into the background. In historical documentaries, programmes and films, the past is not only aestheticised and dramatised, but also banalised in order to conform to 'common sense' or viewing figures.

The perception and representation of 'one's own past' have been highly topical problems in Russia during the present decade. Television has developed its own techniques for creating the past, its own special styles of dealing with eyewitnesses, events and dates. Television enables one to create a desired past, or an inventory of collective memories. TV programmes make use of socio-cultural myths and invent traditions; history is interpreted from a point of view concerned with solving practical questions. Although the televised version of the past abounds in errors, it is lapped up happily by the viewers.

Since 2000, the Stalinist period has been hotly debated in the mass media. The TV channels have expressed 'the people's weariness of negativity' and the necessity of creating 'positive' images. Generally speaking, the interpretation of the recent past revolves around attempts to enable Russians to evade any culpability for Stalinism and the Soviet period as a whole. Depictions of the 'positive' side of the Soviet Union are increasingly in demand on the TV screen. Viewers are invited to withdraw into a rose-coloured yesterday, to remember the happy, albeit difficult, life in the USSR, and to turn their attention to the 'best' parts of their past, reluctantly recognising 'isolated defects'. Condemnation of totalitarianism has been placed on the back burner. In its place, a new mythology is being created on the TV screens. Soviet culture is often portrayed as something homogeneous and unproblematic; it is seen as a source of symbols able to unify people on the basis of a common memory. In this way, many television programmes present

contemporary Russia as the symbolic heir to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. The conflict between Tsarist Russia and the USSR is pushed into the background, it would seem, because the programmes' authors depict the country as, above all, an empire and powerful state. The 1990s are dispatched to oblivion or interpreted exclusively in a bleak light as a period of 'national catastrophe'. Russian history is shown in different genres of programmes, each aimed at different audiences. Some of these seek to portray history 'objectively' – in documentary films, fly-on-the-wall documentaries and historical reconstructions. At the same time, images of the past appear in serials, films and other formats intended to entertain.

One might reasonably assume that statements on history claiming to be reliable should come from professional historians. However, their voices are markedly weak. Few popular programmes on television have been created by historians or deal with cultural and social phenomena and past events and processes in all their diversity. In many cases, this is connected to the wariness of those in power towards independent attempts to interpret state history. In this context, one of the most comprehensive documentary projects about the past has been the series 'Historical Chronicles' by the historian and TV-journalist Nikolai Svanidze.

Nikolai Svanidze's 'Historical Chronicles'

The series describes the events of Russian history in the twentieth century. Each episode is a 'portrait of a year' or a 'portrait of a person of a year'. This version of Russian history is liberal in outlook and emphasises the tragedy of the Soviet experience. The restraint of the analysis and the project's unwillingness to touch upon the present raise the question of to what extent journalists can remove themselves from the 'present' and enter the 'past': given the inability to talk about contemporary politics, 'historical research' is the only admissible form of discussing power.

The programme gives the impression of serious and reliable history with the aid of elements which convey to the viewer the nature of academic study. History is visualised using traditional means – showing, for example, documents, photographs and extracts from news reels. It asserts that 'correct' history is based on facts and sources, and the professional historian plays the role of mediator between the events of the past and the public.

This project displays characteristics typical of the majority of Russian programmes about history. Political history is considered most important; accordingly, it takes centre stage. The emphasis is placed on the lives of political leaders, wars, political processes and the 'macro-decisions' by those in power that govern the lives of 'ordinary people'.

The 'Historical Chronicles' preserve the tone of the historical arguments of the 1980s and 1990s, maintaining that much has been distorted and hidden, and that the time has come to tell 'the whole truth' about history, making it the property of a broad circle of viewers. This approach to the past, however, is not finding discernible resonance among the audience: the viewers' interest in 'learning the truth' has waned under the influence of today's information policy.

Journalistic Versions of the Past on TV

When the authority of professional experts in discussions about the past is not supported by the media, journalistic discourse comes to the fore. On Russian television, journalistic assessments of the past also lay claim to historical objectivity. None the less, journalistic programmes reconstruct the past in a different way. The script is simpler and easier to understand. It includes lurid captions, scandalous revelations and spicy details. The language is a mixture of pseudo-academic rhetoric and common speech. This allows one to judge

the events of the past via 'common sense' and truisms. The past is viewed through sensations and secrets; for example, a programme might be introduced as a narrative of 'Kremlin intrigues' and 'bloody drama'.

The linguistic simplicity of the script means that its content is loaded with ideological subtexts. TV journalism standardises the Soviet past. It is depicted as a collection of dramatic clashes between 'heroes' and 'villains', and the story is related according to the conventions of fiction. The following commonplaces have become widespread: the Stalinist period was harsh, and much depended on the person of the leader. However, it was an epoch of titans. Those who took the reins of power did everything to strengthen the state, unify the nation and win the war. Their cruelty was balanced out by their courage and suffering. For this reason, Russians today are duty-bound to pay tribute to their patriotism and service.

The short-term objectives of TV journalism are connected with political campaigns. Television deals with that living history which unfolds before the eyes of the viewer. In order to 'correctly' interpret current events, TV journalists repeatedly turn to the past. Thus, during the coverage of the 2004 presidential elections in the Ukraine, news items and documentaries devoted to the history of that country were broadcast. Using historical evidence, the argument was made that the Ukraine had never possessed statehood or experienced independence and that it was therefore impossible to view the country as a serious political agent. Such judgements were presented as axioms – as if they simply suggested themselves from a glance at the historical facts, which revealed the truth of the matter. For proof, the programmes made use of comments by famous historians.

History as Entertainment

The past also represents a common resource for the creation of entertainment programmes. It is thereby assumed that the viewers take pleasure in learning interesting facts and new things and in following dramatic stories in historical settings. On TV there are educational and popular programmes which try to present 'serious' history in a non-banal format which is, though, adapted to the medium (for example, 'The Power of Fact'); televisations of literary works ('The Children of Arbat Street', 'Moscow Saga'); serials in historical settings ('Poor Nastia', 'One Night of Love', 'Sonka – the Golden Hand'); and other similar genres. These programmes, as a rule, do not ask questions about new interpretations of the past; they are more concerned with how to *show* it. The historical content has to be simplified for the medium – i.e. through the desired dramatisation, fragmentation of communication, clarity of forms and the use of new technological means of depiction. Thus, for example, the series 'The History of the Russian State', whose 500 episodes were based on the historical classic by N.M. Karamzin, was dramatised using 3-D modelling. The past was recreated in a form which visually resembled a computer game: this was an attempt to interest teenagers and young people in history.

The projects by the well-known TV journalist Leonid Parfyonov 'Recently, 1961–2000' and 'The Russian Empire' stand out among these programmes. The programmes are saturated with visual images – with fragments made up of documentary footage, animations and films. The video recording includes, amongst other effects, multi-media logos, computer 'windows' containing information, cursors, 'loaded files' from the 'root' and text appearing on the screen as though it were being typed by keyboard. One of the most important methods of depicting the past is to use feature films to illustrate events 'as they really happened'. The historical content is subordinated to its form: the description of events alternates with historical anecdotes,

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details from the personal lives of governments and politicians. Although this version of history does not express any ideas or ideology, its interpretations frequently rely on common stereotypes and clichés. Thus, in the piece on the sale of Alaska, it is stressed that the improvident Russians sold their territory to America for a song, for a sum which today would not even buy a good car.

Recently, Russian TV serials based on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have found great popularity with viewers. Such serials, in the majority of cases, are seen as 'beautiful' productions, meeting the demand to learn new things about Russian society – what did representatives of this or that social or ethnic group look like? What were their daily lives like? What values did they have? Many viewers consider these details to be accurate portrayals of the past that have not been altered to meet the demands of television. The popularity of these shows hints obliquely at the deficit in popular educational programmes that deal not only with the political and narrative history of Russia, but also the history of everyday life and social and cultural history, in which all walks of society are depicted.

Translated from the Russian
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Reading Suggestion:
Sarah Oates: Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia. London/New York: Routledge, 2008.

Preview:
The next issue of *kultura* will appear in the first part of May and deal with contemporary 'queer' culture in Russia. The guest editor will be Dan Healey of the University of Wales Swansea.