DAVID BRANDENBERGER


For much of the Soviet period, party authorities endorsed a single, mobilizational view of USSR history that was supported not only by academia and the censor, but by official mass culture, public educational institutions, and state textbook publishing. Indeed, it was not until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the society’s traditional reliance on an “official line” and a handful of prescribed textbooks gave way to a much looser system in which a variety of ideologically-diverse titles could vie with one another within a newly competitive public school textbook market. The curricular diversity of this new period was epitomized by the fact that at the turn of the twenty-first century, some 100 different history textbooks enjoyed official approval from the Ministry of Education and Science for classroom use.¹

But as the heterogeneity of the early post-Soviet period gave way after 2000 to consolidationist tendencies under V. V. Putin and D. A. Medvedev, talk again turned to the reestablishment of a single, official mobilizational account of the Russo-Soviet past in order to

¹ The author is grateful to A. V. Filippov, A. B. Zubov, A. R. Diukov, M. V. Zele
nov, N. A. Lomagin, and Jeffrey Hass for their contributions to this chapter. Aspects of this piece stem from David Brandenberger, “A New Short Course? A. V. Filippov and the Russian State’s Search for a ‘Usable Past,’” Kritika 10:4 (2009): 825–833. See the rest of the Kritika forum as well: Vladimir
Solonari, “Normalizing Russia, Legitimizing Putin,” 835–846; Boris N. Mir
foster a broadly-felt sense of patriotism. Notable in this regard were efforts that gave rise to A. V. Filippov’s controversial two-part teachers’ manual, The History of Russia (2007, 2008) and the infamous Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History at the Expense of Russian Interests (2009–2013). Even more important was V. V. Putin’s 2013 bid to produce a single official public school history narrative by administrative command. This chapter assesses the extent to which these projects succeeded in catalyzing a new official line on the past.

The Search for a Usable Textbook

One of the least appreciated official priorities in early twenty-first century Russia was the campaign to develop and popularize a “usable past” based on the country’s Soviet heritage. Putin first spoke about the need for a new sense of historical perspective shortly after coming to power, connecting the issue to the broader imperative of a “national idea” to unify the country’s fractious political system. In the wake of

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4 V. Putin, Gosudarstvo Rossii: put’ k effektivnomu gosudarstvu (o polozhenii v strane i osnovnykh napravleniakh vnutrennei i vneshnei politiki gosudarstva) (Moscow: Izvestia, 2000), 11–12.
this announcement, a hodgepodge of deferential gestures to Soviet history began to make headlines—the revival of the Red Army battle flag and a sanitized version of the Stalin-era national anthem; the return of a bust of F. E. Dzerzhinskii to the militia headquarters in downtown Moscow; extensive state support and airtime for mass culture’s “normalization” of the Soviet experience; and so on. Perhaps most notorious amid all this nostalgia was Putin’s own announcement in his April 2005 “State of the State” message to the Federation Council that “the collapse of the USSR was greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”

Subjected to scorn and ridicule by westernized Russian elites and foreign commentators alike, these attempts to promote a national idea appear to have been less haphazard than initially believed. The reason for such measures was quite clear: by the early 2000s, Russian-speaking society within the territory of the former RSFSR had been thoroughly disoriented by nearly fifteen years of lurid revelations about the most embarrassing aspects of the Soviet experience—something compounded by the demise of the USSR itself in 1991. And if elites in many of the USSR’s former republics and client states were able to successfully leverage bids for national self-determination and economic reform on popular distaste for the communist past, Russian elites found this form of mobilization to be hampered by the historic conflation of Russian and Soviet identities. Opinion polling spoke of a deeply demoralized society with little sense of collective identity or common cause.7

While these opinion polls revealed division and dejection, they also hinted at an enduring identification with certain accomplishments and

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5 “Poslanie Federal’nomu sobraniyu RF,” Rossiiskaia gazeta, April 26, 2005, 3.
values drawn from the Soviet past. None of these points of consensus were particularly consistent, coherent, or interconnected—indeed, at first glance, they were quite reminiscent of Putin’s chaotic pastiche of historical reputations and reliquary. But that did not preclude the possibility that this cacophony could be synthesized into something more systematic. And indeed, official efforts to fashion something from this flotsam and jetsam—particularly for the public schools—were launched shortly thereafter when in 2002 then-prime minister M. M. Kas’ianov instructed the Ministry of Education and Science to solicit bids for a new patriotic textbook. According to Putin, his government embarked upon this course out of a sense of frustration with the history textbooks in use in the public schools at that time. “There are virtually no educational materials,” he complained later on, “that depict the contemporary history of our Fatherland in a profound and objective way, nor is there a systematic treatment of the new themes, directions and schools [of thought] that can advance major doctrines and

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explain contemporary events.”11 When nothing came of the 2002 competition, the presidential administration held several further rounds, soliciting submissions from A. O. Chubar’ian and other leading historians. It was in the context of one of these state-sponsored sorties in search of a usable past that Filippov and his collaborators first attracted the attention of the administration.12

Released between 2007 and 2008, the Filippov teacher’s manuals and their auxiliary textual materials embraced many of the modern production values of the contemporary Russian textbook market. The shortcomings of these manuals received a lot of attention in the press, particularly in regard to their tendency to rehabilitate I. V. Stalin as a political visionary and empire builder.13 Close analysis reveals this

11 Although Putin blamed much of this ineffectiveness on the poorly conceptualized curriculum, he also spoke menacingly of the influence of historians who receive foreign grants and therefore “dance to the tune that’s required of them.” Sergei Minaev, “Da malo li chego bylo,” Vlast’ 24 (728) (June 25, 2007), 19.

12 Oleg Kashin, “V poiskakh ‘Kratkogo kursa’: Avtory ‘kremlevskogo’ uchebnika ne nashli obshchego iazyka s soobshchestvom istorikov,” NG—Politika (supplement to Nezavisimaiia gazeta), July 3, 2007, 1–2. The Filippov text was part of a larger project launched in 2006 by V. Iu. Surkov under the auspices of the Russian presidential administration. According to rumors in Moscow, Surkov aspired to release a statist textbook for the public schools but was concerned about being accused of rehabilitating the USSR. For that reason, he decided to sponsor two public school history textbooks—an accessible pro-Soviet narrative and a more bookish anti-Soviet one. Filippov was to supply the pro-Soviet text, while the anti-Soviet volume was to be edited by A. B. Zubov and A. I. Solzhenitsyn. When the latter editorial team couldn’t agree on its approach, Solzhenitsyn quit the project and Zubov published his text privately as Istoriia Rossii. XX vek. V 2-kh tomakh, ed. A. B. Zubov, 2 vols. (Moscow: AST, 2010).

REMEMBRANCE, HISTORY, AND JUSTICE

14 According to Filippov’s manual on the postwar period, Stalin’s leadership followed a 500-year Russian political tradition which demanded that power be concentrated in the hands of a single, autocratic ruler and his centralized administrative system (81). Stalin apparently not only embraced this governing principle, but essentially dedicated his reign to the restoration of the Russian empire (88). Prioritizing the perennial imperative of national defense, Stalin also focused on economic modernization and reform of the country’s administrative command structure (86–90). Stalin was demanding, harsh and unsentimental, embracing a style of leadership that Filippov connected to Peter the Great (88). Ultimately, even Stalin’s most cruel means were held to be justified by their ends, inasmuch as “their goal was the mobilization of the administrative apparatus in order to ensure its effectiveness both in the process of industrialization and, after the war, in the restoration of the economy” (87–88). According to Filippov, Stalin and the system he created deserved credit not only for reuniting the lands of the former empire, but for transforming the country into an industrial superpower capable of vanquishing the “invincible” Nazi war machine and holding its own against the US and its NATO allies during the Cold War (93). According to Filippov’s critics, this approach to Stalin’s various accomplishments teleologically justified even the worst excesses of the period, See Anatolii Bershtein, “Vspomnit’ vse!” Istoriia (supplement to Pervoe sentiabria) 23 (839) (December 1, 2007): 24–26, 24.

15 Postwar events as important as the civil war in western Ukraine (37), the retrenching of collective agriculture (32–33) and the anti-cosmopolitan campaign (43) were treated carelessly. Major international developments were given highly idiosyncratic readings, whether concerning the United States’ “loss” of the Korean War (66), the Warsaw Pact’s suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising (133–134), or the USSR’s “victory” during the Cuban Missile Crisis (145). For a thorough accounting, see Mikhail Borisov, “My vas nauchim Rodinu liubit’,” Otechestvennye zapiski 4 (2007): 292–298.

16 Broader themes in postwar domestic history were also narrated in highly partisan terms, such as the role of the Russian people in the development of the former republics (218–227). Similar bias marred the discussion of international dynamics surrounding the Cold War (9-19, 56-66, 241–242), the standoff with China (136–138, 229–230) and relations with the non-aligned world (138-142). The USSR’s relations with the countries of the former Warsaw Pact were treated as almost an afterthought, with agency emanating almost exclusively from Moscow (56–60, 131–138, 234–235).
Professional historians, pedagogues and critics alike found much to critique in these new publications.

Officially, Filippov’s manuals—particularly the postwar volume and its auxiliary materials—were billed as a means of cultivating a mass sense of historically-informed patriotism. Content analysis, however, reveals the narrative’s ideological objectives to have differed rather markedly from this agenda. Instead of emphasizing conventional, grassroots patriotism based on either an ethnic or civic conception of the nation, the manual focused on state power, self-determination and the construction of an administrative-command system. This was most visible in the volume’s final chapter, which hailed Putin’s formation of a successful executive team and his defeat of opposing forces—details which suggested an etatist ideological vision emplotted around the exercise of centralized, hierarchically-organized political power (the so-called vertikal vlasti).

This impression was confirmed by the structure and periodization of the rest of the book. Ignoring Soviet historiographic traditions that mapped the history of the USSR into stages of economic development (“The USSR During the Fifth Five-Year Plan,” “The New Stage in the Struggle for Communism”), Filippov also broke with post-Soviet paradigms that divide the postwar years into cultural periods (the “Thaw,” “Stagnation,” “Glasnost” and “Perestroika”). Instead, he endorsed a heroic “great men of history” periodization that organized the narrative around a highly personalized sense of political power. Although this focus on personality seemed at first glance to be a rather primitive choice of emplotment for professional historians to make, this paradox was later resolved by the revelation that the manuals’ basic schema had originated within the presidential administration itself. Journalist Anna Kachurovskaia, for instance, quoted unnamed sources as saying that not only had the manuals been sponsored by the administration, but its authors had received explicit instructions from above on how to

structure their narrative. “It should go approximately like this,” Filip-pov and his collaborators were apparently told: “Stalin was good (he established the power hierarchy, although not private property); [N. S.] Khrushchev was bad (he weakened the hierarchy); Brezhnev was good for the same reasons as Stalin; [M. S.] Gorbachev and [B. N.] Yeltsin were bad (they collapsed the country, although Yeltsin did allow the development of private property); Putin is the best state manager (he strengthened the power hierarchy and private property).”18 At first glance a childishly simplistic approach to historical analysis, this advice was actually quite reminiscent of the binary “good-bad” oppositions that Stalin demanded of a previous generation of textbook brigades working in the 1930s.19 It also displayed the same sort of unvarnished, folksy wisdom that Putin is known for when speaking off the cuff.20

Ultimately then, the usable past promoted by the Filippov manuals was designed to promote the interests of the political command structure. This conservative vision of the historical process held that nothing was more important than the establishment and maintenance of state power and political hierarchy, inasmuch as only these factors could guarantee national security and domestic stability. Political leaders were evaluated according to their record of defending state interests from foreign and domestic forces that challenged Russian sovereignty, its executive power and its political centralization. More liberal

18 Kachuarovskaia, “Istoricheskii pripadok.”
20 See, for example, Putin’s speech to teachers at Novo-Ogarevo in June 2007 in which he called for an end to a peculiarly Soviet sense of historical guilt: “Yes, we have had our own frightful pages of history—1937, let us not forget about that. But other countries have had even more frightful times. In any case, we never used nuclear weapons against civilians, we never poured chemicals over thousands of kilometers of territory and never bombed a small country with seven times more explosive than was used in the Great Patriotic War, as was the case with Vietnam. We also never had other dark pages, such as the Nazi experience, for instance. There’s always something in the history of every state, every people. But we cannot allow others to make us feel guilty. . . . If some outsider tries to pass out grades and play teacher, this is [really] an attempt to seize administrative power.” See Minaev, “Da malo li chego bylo.”
governing paradigms were held to result only in hardship, frustration and tragedy, as illustrated by the historical experiences of the Khrushchev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods. Patriotism too was slaved to this sense of loyalty to a strong, centralized state and the etatist belief that the state was better equipped to safeguard national interests than grassroots socio-political movements, civic organizations or democracy itself.21

Curiously, despite predictions in the press to the contrary, the Filippov manuals and their associated textbooks and curricular materials were never awarded anything close to a monopoly over the public school history curriculum. Perhaps this was due to public outcry and criticism over their tendentiousness. Perhaps it was due to rival publishing houses’ behind-the-scenes defense of their share of the lucrative textbook market. Perhaps official priorities changed within the presidential administration after Medvedev became chief executive in 2008. But even without the promised monopoly, the Filippov manuals enjoyed significant sway over the evolving public school history curriculum. Not only were they continuously republished, but they gave rise to a series of textbooks and auxiliary materials that were widely used in public schools for a number of years. And perhaps most importantly, the texts’ semi-official status indirectly shaped the content and approach of competing textbooks—a process aided by the Ministry of Education and Science’s simultaneous narrowing of its list of formal curricular endorsements.22 If a general convergence of history textbook narratives had been observable in the Russian Federation since the


22 This conclusion is based on an unsystematic survey of textbooks available in Moscow and St. Petersburg between 2010–2013. See also Maria Biletskaya, “Analiz pravovogo regulirovaniia i sushchestvuiushchego poriadka obespechenia Ministerstvom obrazovaniia i nauki Rossiiskoi Federatsii povysheniia kachestva uchebnoi literatury,” Uroki istorii XX, May 9, 2009 (http://www.urokiistorii.ru/sites/all/files/analiz.pdf, last accessed October 31, 2013).
start of Putin’s presidency, the role of the Filippov materials in accelerating this process was quite palpable.23

The Campaign Against the “Falsification of History”

If Medvedev did not grant Filippov a formal textbook monopoly in the years following 2008, this did not deter him from making a major contribution of his own to post-Soviet Russia’s search for a usable past: the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History at the Expense of Russian Interests. Founded by presidential decree in 2009 in order to identify and investigate damaging distortions of the Russian historical record, the commission’s launch was the source of considerable debate in the press. Some saw the commission as an organ of state censorship designed either to enforce Filippov’s new semi-official historical line in the public schools or to curtail embarrassing archival research and historical publications. Others connected the initiative to the defense of the Soviet Union’s World War II reputation, as the commission was unveiled in the run-up to the sixty-fifth anniversary of the allied victory. Still others linked its formation to the geopolitical need for steps to be taken to refute historical revisionism that threatened to compromise the country’s interests abroad.24 Curiously, Russian authorities demurred in the face of questions about the exact nature of the commission’s mandate, stimulating further public attention and debate.

As chartered, the commission was comprised of a blue-ribbon panel of twenty-seven prominent members of the Russian political


establishment and was chaired by S. E. Naryshkin, the then head of the presidential administration. Among its members were seventeen high-ranking state officials, four deputies from the State Duma, Federation Council and other representative bodies, three professional historians, two officials from the secret services, and one ministry of defense official. A consultative body, it depended on the Ministry of Education and Science for research, technical and publishing assistance and generally confined its activities to biannual hearings and public relations. Such institutional weakness heightened questions about the commission’s purpose and mandate from the start.

In retrospect, it seems that foreign policy concerns—particularly those arising from a series of bitter clashes between the Russian Federation and its neighbors over the history of the Soviet period—prompted the commission’s creation. One such conflict emerged from the Soviet secret police’s massacre of nearly 22,000 Polish prisoners of war in Katyn Forest and several other locales in May 1940. Long a source of tension with Poland despite Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s historic admissions of Soviet responsibility, Katyn stood at the center of


26 That foreign policy concerns informed the mandate of the commission was obliquely confirmed by commission members S. A. Markov and A. N. Sakharov, the latter the then director of the Russian Academy of Science’s Institute of Russian History. See M. Moshkin, “Kto staroe pomianet,” Vremia novostei online, May 20, 2009 (http://www.vremya.ru/print/229467.html, last accessed October 31, 2013); O. Bychkova, “Narod protiv Komissii po protivodeistviu fal’sifikatsii istorii,” Ekho Moskvy, May 26, 2009 (http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/opponent/593895-echo/, last accessed October 31, 2013). Many of these foreign policy concerns can be viewed as an unintended consequence of glasnost and the openness of the 1990s, when the Russian Federation assumed a surprisingly liberal attitude toward many of the embarrassments of the Soviet era. Since 2000, Russian officials have assumed a steadily more guarded posture in regard to subjects that might threaten national security or diplomatic priorities abroad.
a major investigation launched in 1990 by the Soviet Chief Military
Prosecutor. After 1991, Russian authorities took up the investigation
and slowly built a case against the Stalin-era leadership for abuse of
power. Accusations of genocide were also investigated at the request of
Polish authorities. In 2004, however, the Chief Military Prosecutor of
the Russian Federation precipitated a full-scale diplomatic row when
he executed an about-face and announced the closure of the Katyn
case on the eve of the 65th commemoration of the massacre—ostensi-
bly because all potential defendants had died and because the massacre
did not conform to the international legal definition of genocide. This
decision, compounded by the Russian secret services’ refusal to declass-
sify the bulk of the archival record, prompted the Polish parliament
to lodge a formal protest. Descendants of the Polish victims of Katyn
then appealed the decision in Russian court, petitioning for their slain
relatives’ posthumous political rehabilitation. The failure of this case in
Russian Appeals Court in 2008 and Russian Supreme Court in 2009
led the plaintiffs to appeal their case to the European Court of Human
Rights later that year, restarting the whole process and creating a host
of new complications concerning jurisdiction and the declassification
of state secrets.

A similar scenario emerged at about the same between Russia and
Ukraine over the 1932–1933 terror famine, or Holodomor. A humani-
tarian catastrophe with its origins in a natural wave of crop failures, the
terror famine was exacerbated by bad agricultural planning and puni-
tive state policies designed to suppress peasant resistance to collectiv-
ization. Ultimately, it claimed the lives of at least 3–4 million Ukrai-
nian, Russian, Cossack, and Kazakh peasants throughout the best
grain-growing regions of the USSR. Relevant to this discussion is the
fact that Ukrainian communities both at home and abroad have histor-
ically viewed the terror famine as having been directed mainly against
their co-nationals, and that these charges have repeatedly led to inter-
national controversy for Moscow, both during and after the Cold War.
After the election of V. A. Yushchenko in 2005, tensions over the terror
famine mounted into a full-scale diplomatic clash between Russia and
Ukraine as the Ukrainian president launched an official campaign to
recognize the terror famine as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian
nation. Legislation to this effect was passed in Ukraine in 2006, precip-
itating the trial and conviction of the Stalin-era leadership in absentia
in 2009–2010. The issue of genocide was also debated in the United Nations (2003), the European Parliament (2008), and the Council of Europe (2010), although none of these bodies ultimately sided with Ukraine on the issue.

Two aspects of the Katyn and Holodomor cases appear to have threatened Russian authorities in 2009 in ways that other revelations about the Soviet past had not since 1991. First, accusations of genocide risked implicating the Soviet Union in a category of criminal activity traditionally associated with Nazi Germany—an almost unpardonable insult in the post-Soviet space. Second, a judicial finding of genocide either at home or abroad would have permanently exposed the Russian Federation to reparations lawsuits, inasmuch as this crime is not bound by any statute of limitations. Yushchenko publically denied pursuing such objectives at the time, but his stance on the issue was contradicted by other Ukrainian politicians.27

High stakes, then, likely provided the premise for the formation of the commission on historical falsification as an official coordinating body for the refutation of criminal charges of such historic proportions. This rationale was obliquely confirmed at the commission’s third meeting in September 2010, when Naryshkin and the head of the Russian Archival Agency (Rosarkhiv), A. N. Artizov, initiated calls for the declassification and release of archival documents as a means of reclaiming the initiative in certain diplomatic and legal contexts.28 The prototype for this sort of publication was held to be The Famine in the USSR, 1930–1934, a glossy, full-color anthology of archival documents on the terror famine that was released by Rosarkhiv in 2009 along with a CD-ROM containing many of the same documents in English translation. This collection explicitly refuted Ukrainian claims of exceptionalism and genocide in 1932–1933, stressing the breadth of the famine’s impact on Russian, Cossack, and Kazakh populations, the coercive but nonmurderous intent of the period’s punitive policies, and the com-


plicity of Ukrainian and Kazakh Communist Party officials in the famine’s development in the non-Russian republics.29

Release of this collection was followed in early 2010 by Rosarkhiv’s website publication of a more limited group of documents on the Katyn massacre.30 These documents confirmed the complicity of high Soviet officials in the crime, but also supported the official Russian position that the tragedy was the result of the officials’ abuse of power rather than any officially sanctioned action. The collection also revealed attempts by party apparatchiks years later under Khrushchev to distort the historical record surrounding the Katyn massacre—revelations that provided a convenient explanation for the Soviet Union’s half-century cover-up of the crime while reinforcing the notion that culpability within Soviet officialdom rested with renegades rather than with the state itself. An explanation developed by the Chief Military Prosecutor during the early 1990s, it was endorsed by then Prime Minister Putin in 2009 and ratified by the Russian State Duma in November 2010.

A deft use of the past to serve contemporary national interests, Rosarkhiv’s publications allowed the Russian Federation to seize the upper hand in these two bitter international disputes and preclude international recognition of the genocide charges.31 What’s more, this


31 Markov asserted that the commission played a role in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s refusal to recognize the Holodomor as a Ukrainian genocide. See T. Krasil’nikova, “Chto udalos’ sdelat’ Komissii po fal’sifikatsii istorii,” Trud, May 14, 2010 (http://www.trud.ru/article/14-05-2010/242097_chto_udalos_sdelat_komissii_po_falsifikatsii_istorii.html, last accessed October 31, 2013). For mention of other such projects focusing on Ukraine and the Baltics, see Artizov, “Ob itogakh raboty Federal’nogo arkhivnogo agenstva i podvodomstvennykh emu uchrezhde-
official trumping of Russia’s critics abroad was accomplished with surprising media savvy, amid discussions of archival openness and the defense of the historical record against revisionism and falsification. But at least as interesting as the nature of this diplomatic coup is the fact that Rosarkhiv, a formally neutral government agency, had suddenly become quite activist in advancing the “anti-falsification” agenda nominally assigned to the commission. At first glance, this makes perfect sense, as the commission lacked the institutional resources to wage such a campaign on its own. That said, Rosarkhiv’s accomplishments were clearly far more valuable to the country’s image at home and abroad than the grandstanding and photo opportunities that characterized most of the commission’s early public sessions. It is perhaps for this reason that the commission was quietly disbanded in early 2013, having fulfilled its purpose of drafting the historical record into the service of the state.32

The Search for a Usable Textbook, Renewed

The year 2012—officially dubbed the “year of Russian history”—set the stage for the resumption of discussions on the role that the past was to play in contemporary Russian society. Unsatisfied with Medvedev’s campaign against historical falsification, Putin noted while campaigning for a third presidential term that public school history instruction remained inadequate. “In history textbooks,” he told a forum in Kurgan, “things are described in such a way that it makes your hair stand on end.” Following his reelection several months later, Putin revived a nineteenth-century civic body called the Russian Historical Society in order to provide leadership and guidance for the field under Naryshkin’s watchful eye.

Putin returned to the subject of deficient public school instruction in February 2013 after weathering months of popular protest triggered first by his own return to the presidency and then by contested elections to the Duma. It was time, he now argued, for a single textbook to replace the existing array of competing curricular materials and thereby promote a standardized narrative on the past. This new textbook, according to Putin, “should be created in the context of a single, unified conception, within the context of the singular logic of Russian history, the interconnectedness of its stages, and respect for all of the pages of our collective past. And, of course, it is necessary to demonstrate on the basis of concrete examples that Russia’s fate was created by a combination of different peoples, traditions and cultures.” Aside from that, the textbook “should avoid internal contradictions and double meanings.” Such a model text would finally provide the coun-

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33 It is unclear precisely what Putin was referring to, inasmuch as there was little variety in the 2012 textbook market. See Andrei Sidorchuk, “Proshloe v tumane: kakim budet edinyi uchebnik istorii,” Argumenty i fakty, June 18, 2013 (http://www.aif.ru/society_education/trend/44364, last accessed October 31, 2013).
34 Aside from Naryshkin, the Russian Historical Society included other officials formerly associated with the Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History including V. A. Sadovnichii, I. I. Sirosh, Markov and Artizov. See the undated press release from the Russian Academy of Sciences: http://hist-phil.ru/saity/rio/, last accessed October 31, 2013.
try with a galvanizing “national idea” to calm societal restiveness and interethnic tension and promote an all-Russian sense of patriotism and loyalty. According to Putin, responsibility for the creation of this text ought to rest with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Academy of Sciences and the new Russian Historical and Military-Historical Societies.35

Although Putin’s populist demand for a unified patriotic curriculum found immediate support in public opinion polling,36 it was in many other senses rather surprising. Not only did the proposal smack of an authoritarian approach to public school instruction, but many professionals questioned the merits of such a policy decision and doubted whether the construction of a single, monolithic history textbook was even possible. Putin’s own experience with this issue in the past would seem to have confirmed these misgivings, as his administration had repeatedly failed to produce such a unified curriculum. Nevertheless, he pressed onward.

Shortly after Putin’s statement about the need for a single history textbook, a working group was formed under the auspices of the Russian Historical Society to develop a set of standards for the new historical narrative.37 A highly centralized project despite its nominal nongovernmental sponsorship, it produced the first draft schema of the needed two-thousand year narrative in June 2013. This outline was designed to identify key events, dates and personalities that would structure the eventual curriculum, which was now referred to as a set of texts rather than a single, monolithic one.38 At the same time,


thirty-one controversial moments in history were identified that would require particularly careful attention during the construction and eventual instruction of the official line.39

At first glance, the draft schema was a surprisingly inclusive, liberal document advancing a narrative that embraced a sense of patriotism, citizenship and interethnic tolerance without presenting a purely apologetic reading of the past. The evocation of patriotic emotions was clearly a top priority, of course, but even that was apparently to be accomplished as much by attention to the tragedy of Russian history as its triumphs. What’s more, while the schema prioritized the relationship between state and society, it also sought to cultivate in its readers a sense of civic engagement and the ability to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of social activism (the latter being defined as nationalism, chauvinism and other forms of extremism).40

Critics quickly identified a series of problems with this schema, however. Billed as a narrative for the entire breadth of Russian society, it favored centralizing tendencies at the expense of regional and non-Russian interests. And while it generally balanced a positive reading of each historical period with information on shortcomings and errors, the narrative clearly downplayed the abuse of power. This was nowhere more noteworthy than in its treatment of contemporary history, which presented a sanitized account of Putin’s consolidation of political and economic power after 2000 that failed to mention issues ranging from the Second Chechen War to the roles played by opposition figures from V. A. Gusinskii and M. B. Khodorkovskii to A. A. Naval’nyi.41 Perhaps even more worrisome was another liability of the schema that went uncritiqued in the press: like the Filippov manuals, this document’s sense of patriotism was based on state-based etatism rather than a more broadly based appreciation of popular sovereignty or civil society.

Late September 2013 saw the release of a second draft of this schema that was considerably more sophisticated than its predecessor

40 “Istoriko-kul’turnyi standart,” 2-3.
and that attempted to resolve many of the issues that critics had raised in the intervening months. The official list of controversial moments had been winnowed from thirty-one to twenty. Polarizing language that reflected a centralizing bias within the first draft was toned down. A greater emphasis on the negative dimensions of Russo-Soviet political history was also a bit more palpable, even in regard to Putin’s presidency. But if some of the first draft’s problems were corrected, others were not. Some controversial terms remained unchanged (e.g., references to the 1930s as “Stalinist Socialism”), while other tendentious choices materialized unexpectedly (e.g., the conflation of the “bourgeois” February 1917 revolution and Great October socialist revolution into the “Great Russian Revolution of 1917”). To many, the schema’s simplistic, negative emplotment of the 1990s seemed instrumental, setting up an exaggerated sense of contrast with the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev in the early 2000s. And if the latter period was no longer cast in a purely positive light, its shortcomings and political restiveness were given little more than perfunctory attention. Unnoticed in the press at the time was the draft’s deletion of its predecessor’s endorsement of civic activism.42

More worrying were two other problems that likewise went unmentioned by the critics. First, like the initial draft of the schema, its second incarnation presented a patriotic vision of the past that was clearly designed to rally emotions around the state rather than society. Successful governance was characterized by the centralization of power and the maintenance of stability and order, rather than the promotion of social equality or civil rights. Second, the schema’s heroes tended to be evaluated on the basis of their accomplishments rather than their methods. This meant that even if the schema included mention of various periods’ false starts, mistakes and failures, it teleologically framed these details in such a way that the ends justified the excessive means used in their attainment. Indeed, the whole schema appeared to be emplotted according to a theme of tragic but ultimately justifiable sacrifice in the service of the state.

Aside from its teleology, the schema’s emplotment hinted of other malignancies as well. Putin’s demand for the official line to be developed around a single, interconnected narrative without internal contradictions resulted in the construction of a storyline that subordinated every major historical event and personage to the celebration of centralization, order and stability. Digressions, false starts, dead ends, and lost causes were included in the narrative only to set up more dramatic course corrections later in the story. This overdetermined linearity ultimately reduced the past to a self-fulfilling prophecy, stripping it of internal tension, suspense and drama that can be heuristically valuable not only within the classroom, but throughout society as a whole. None of these issues were resolved when the final version of the schema was released on Halloween 2013.43

Conclusion

According to official plans, the schema was designed to provide the framework for a textbook competition that in 2014 would identify a central text (or set of texts) for future use in the public school history curriculum. This program stalled, however, amid continuing controversy over the schema’s final form and the political drama surrounding the fall of pro-Russian Ukrainian president V. F. Yanukovych, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the emergence of a Russian-Ukrainian proxy war in the Donbass. By the fall of 2014, Russian minister of education and science D. V. Livanov was suggesting that the idea of a competition to identify a single new text had been replaced by plans to officially endorse a variety of textbooks loyal to the new schema.44 Livanov’s disclosure, however, was then called into question by


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comments made by both Putin and Chubar’ian, which hinted that the
government nevertheless remained interested in a single canonical set
of texts. Insofar as this chapter goes to press before the resolution of
this confusing situation, it is not clear what the eventual outcome will
be. Given the priority that the presidential administration has afforded
to the creation of a single, official “usable past,” it seems likely that the
end result of this process will be further consolidation of the textbook
market, either around a single text or an handful of nominally different
texts based on an official narrative promoting patriotic etatism.

Even if such a formal consolidation of the textbook market does
not come to pass, post-Soviet Russia’s search for a usable past between
2000 and 2014 remains instructive on a number of levels. Most glaring
is Putin’s and Medvedev’s gradual return to Soviet-style administra-
tive methods and diktat. In some senses a coup d’etat displacing ear-
erlier, less centralized efforts to produce a new narrative, their initiatives
prioritized command and control over professionalism and disciplinary
standards. Worse, the arbitrariness of this approach—particularly its
demand for a single narrative devoid of internal contradiction—threat-
ens to blunt the whole mobilizational premise of the project and pro-
duce a plodding narrative bereft of the tension, drama, and suspense
that animate superior classroom pedagogy and effective storytelling
within society itself.

This recourse to diktat is all the more unfortunate in light of the
fact that it was never really necessary in the first place. On the eve of
Putin’s 2013 decision to overthrow the existing order and impose a
single narrative from above, many of his fundamental objectives for
history instruction in the public schools had already been realized. The
semi-official Filippov texts had given a clear, articulate signal to edu-
cators and mass-market authors about what was to be considered the
correct version of the usable past. They also signaled that state support
would be awarded to those who followed their template and denied

45 “Putin shitaet pravil’nym pojavlenie edinogo uchebnika istorii,” RLA Novo-
sti, August 27, 2014 (http://itar-tass.com/obschestvo/1408798, last accessed
December 12, 2014); Elena Novoselova, “Edinyi ne na shutku’: pervogo
aprelia budut predstavleny novye uchebniki istorii,” Rossiiskaia gazeta, No-
vember 18, 2014 (http://www.rg.ru/2014/11/17/istoriya-site.html, last ac-
cessed December 12, 2014).
to those who didn’t. And such interventions had a major effect on the textbook market, where the vast majority of competing textbooks was brought into rough conformity with the new official line between 2008–2012 through a combination of oblique signaling, selective endorsement, and self-censorship.\textsuperscript{46} Put another way, de facto hegemonic control over the public school history curriculum was accomplished years before Putin’s 2013 initiative without recourse to the administrative-command practices of the past.

\textsuperscript{46} On the administrative resources, particularly those related to local school endorsements and the massive publishing house “Prosveshchenie,” see Biiletskaia, “Analiz pravovogo regulirovaniia i sushchestvuiushchego poriadka obespechenia Ministerstvom obrazovaniia i nauki Rossiiskoi Federatsii povyshenia kachestva uchebnoi literatury;” Beyrle, “Is Stalin’s Ghost a Threat to Academic Freedom?”