

Whither Russia's History Thought? Trends in Historical Research, Teaching and Policy-Making

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The next Russian generation's understanding of their country's past may turn out to be more refined and complex than at present whether or not the current project of a single history-textbook and accompanying pedagogical materials are successful. Rather than imposing a new version of Stalin's infamous 'Short course', as certain Western mass media predicts, the new history books will probably reflect even the most debated parts of Russia's history from the 800s to the present, and in particular the turbulent 20th century.

Western mass media have a tendency to focus on Russian historical debates only when 'spectacular' and/or 'scandalous' events appear. For example, few news agencies paid any attention as to how the school textbooks on Russia's contemporary history had changed through the 1990s. A whole year history classes were cancelled in the late glasnost period! This was because the Soviet-era teaching was recognized as totally outmoded in light of all the revelations on Stalinism. Starting in the mid-1990s, several groups of renowned historians produced new textbooks, history maps, and CD-ROM-materials for Russian general schools. In these pedagogical devices for children up to the final 11th class, few if any of the formerly 'taboo questions' remained unmentioned. By the early 2000s, a new historical landscape of Russia's past – especially from the 1860s to the present – had appeared. Every history teacher had a number of handbooks to choose among. However, with time, it was obvious that not only did the basic ideological and political attitudes of the textbook writers influence how they presented a historical narrative. There was also a wide

divergence in how even the basic facts on historical events were described.

History teaching in Russian schools has thus been highlighted in Western mass media only when a certain author has been criticized or a specific textbook lost its recommendation from the Russian Ministry of Education. Therefore, the understanding in the West, even in academic circles, of how the Russians in general have changed their perception of their country's past is likely superficial. The obvious language barrier is only a first hindrance that explains this ignorance. The lack of knowledge of, and even an interest in, i) Russian professional historians, ii) popularizes and publicists in mass media, and iii) the general public as shown in social media describing epochs and events in the past, may also be related to a certain degree of Russophobia, traditionally present in the West.

Instead, the Western average reader tends to get his views on Russia's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that is its 'coming to terms with the past', from highly

restricted analyses like Sherlock's book (Sherlock 2007) or polemical surveys like Satter's (Satter 2011). Sherlock investigates the glasnost debates, but ignores the changes in the 1990s and draws farfetched conclusions on the present Putin-period, based on statements by politicians. Satter concentrates on how certain leftist, pro-Stalinist opinions remain in the public sphere concerning history writing or history-memorialization with respect to the victims of state terror and repression. These two authors emphasize how politicians, rather than professional historians, have made statements, or sometimes suppressed commemorative actions on Russian history, thus creating a skewed image of how the past is analyzed in the historians' community. In reality, there are few subjects, especially concerning the Stalinist period, that have not been investigated because of lack of sources and of non-access to archives. The remaining 'white spots' on the historical map concern matters that are likewise often state secrets in other states, such as military intelligence. Given how much was until 1991 classified in the archives, it is worthwhile pondering how much historians and archivists in Russia have already achieved.

The Russian professional historians' achievements in the post-Soviet period can now be grasped easily in the solid 1,500 pages long volume, edited by one of Russia's foremost historiographers Gennadii Bordiugov (Bordiugov 2013). Bordiugov and his colleagues have held numerous conferences since the mid-1990s where practically every new research project on all aspects of Russia's 20th century history has been analyzed. These have been updated and collected into a massive volume. Another conference was devoted to the changing character of the historical community in general, to the research and teaching conditions in Russian universities, as well as to the interaction between historians and politicians (Bordiugov 2012). To a large extent, the economic history of Russia was until the late 1980s hampered by its rigid attachment to the Marxist and Leninist schemes of 'historical materialism'. Thus,

starting during the glasnost era, Russian economic historians have made serious revisions, widespread re-interpretations and new research on practically all important stages of the evolution of the Tsarist economy, in particular concerning the early industrialization, the banking system and the entrepreneurial efforts in the 19th century. These achievements are well reflected in the two-volume encyclopedia on Russia's economic history from oldest times till 1917, under the scientific guidance of academician and head of the Institute of Russian History of the Academy of Sciences, Iurii Petrov (Petrov 2008).

A new trend in the field is the outright proclaimed and implemented 'history policy' (in line with a state's economic, social and foreign policy). Politicians strive to use their country's past, its military feats or civilian achievements for their present purposes. This has been apparent in Russia as well as in Eastern and Western Europe, first in the wake of the collapse of the communist regimes, and then as a matter of geopolitical and socio-economic confrontation. The resolutions on 20th century history by the PACE, OSCE and other forums are examples of such history policy. Without doubt Russian publicists have also been involved in dreadful 'wars of memory' in particular vis-à-vis the Baltic states and Ukraine (see Borgiugov 2011b). However, among both Russian historians and certain politicians there exists a better grasp of the risks involved in history policy campaigns than seems to be the case in some East European countries. This is easily explicable, given the Russian state's complicated thousand-year legacy of multi-cultural encounters, complex forms of conquest and expansion, social conflicts and revolutions, as well as religious and ideological controversies.

Thus, a striving towards a unified version of Russian history was reflected in the proposals by a commission set up in 2013 to formulate the 'concept for a new, single textbook for schools on Russian history'. The initiative to substitute a multitude of textbook by a single

one was set out in early 2013 in a directive from president Vladimir Putin. The original idea in Putin's directive was to eliminate internal contradictions concerning historical events, and create a solid handbook in history with presumably straightforward, undisputable 'facts', just like the natural sciences can be said to have 'a single knowledge framework'. Academicians Aleksandr Chubarian, Iurii Petrov, other historians as well as scholars from other disciplines plus politicians, led the commission. This initiative from Putin has been widely interpreted as a new stage in 'history policy' of the Russian government with the purpose of enforcing a new kind of patriotism or even legitimizing the allegedly ever more authoritarian present regime. However, when the concept for a single textbook was published in late autumn 2013, it became apparent that the commission had formulated a new academic, rather than a politicized framework for presenting Russia's whole history, from the 800s to the present, with merely sketched outlines for each epoch, century of crucial decade. In over thirty appendices to the concept, leading experts describe major historical controversial questions, such as Ivan IV ('The Terrible'), Vladimir Lenin and the 1917 Revolutions. Suffice it to mention that the appendix on the Great Terror 1937-1938 is written by Russia's leading expert on Stalinism, professor Oleg Khlevniuk (see e.g. Khlevniuk 2008).

In early summer 2014, we can expect that the official announcement on the conditions for participation in the writing of the new textbook on Russia's history will be announced. Just as for architectural contests, the mere presentation of a master-copy of the 'pedagogical package', i.e. not only the textbook but also guidelines for teachers, historical atlases, working notebooks with tasks for pupils, as well as audio and video materials will demand substantial investments from the participants' side. Although the remuneration, in case of winning the contest, may be great, it is not expected that more than a few institutions or groups of historians will find the financial resources at hand. These

proposed new textbooks will then be circulated and judged in a manner that remains to be determined.

The initial reactions in 2013 by Russian politicians and Western journalists at the appearance of the concept were skeptical. Concerns, however, were often somewhat biased. For example, in an article in 'The Moscow Times' the opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov had no objections on the first one thousand years of Russia's history outlined in the concept. Instead, Ryzhkov lamented that the last paragraphs in the concept on Putin's presidency had not mentioned certain oligarchs and recent dissenters. (Ryzhkov 2013). The American historian and specialist on Ukrainian history Mark van Hagen expressed his fears that Putin's textbook would try to indoctrinate the Russian masses in a manner similar to how Stalin's infamous 'Short Course of the Bolshevik Party's history', but, of course, with a presumably new authoritarian, Orthodox Christian and multicultural Russian idea (quoted in *Reuters*. 2013).

It remains to be seen how much of such fears turn out to be prescient, or on the contrary, wide of the mark. Already at the official presentation in January 2014 of the commission's result to president Putin, a number of changes in the original proposal for a single textbook were apparent. A careful reading of Putin's speeches as well as those of Sergei Naryshkin, chairman of the Russian Historical Society and speaker of the Duma, and Academician Chubarian, scientific leader of the commission, indicate that the pedagogical package (i.e. the teacher's handbook, textbook, map and task booklets, as well as CD-ROM and video) are likely to be much more pluralistic, as to *interpreting history*, than what either the initiators intended originally or what their critics presumed eventually.

Although the original idea formulated by the president himself included a phrase on giving the school children just 'one single textbook' (*Russian: edinyi uchebnik*) with new narrative,

free of contradictions and contested interpretations, we can already see that even the announced concept for such a ‘single history textbook’ may well turn out to be as dynamic and thought-provoking as the real historical events were. Another alternative outcome that cannot be excluded, will be that not one single, but a few new textbooks – with different pedagogical and other highlights – will be declared as winners, provided that they reflect the new, more nuanced version of Russia’s history from oldest times to the present. In either case, these new pedagogical instruments are bound to reflect, given dozens of special surveys by experts on the debates among historians added to the concept, the achievements of archivists, professional historians and teachers in the past quarter-century. Thus, in conclusion, while substantial arguments may be raised against the political request of a single textbook on Russia’s history, the presentation of this new concept and the forthcoming contest may turn out to produce a number of excellent history teaching materials that in a wider sense will reflect both the professional historians’ achievements in recent decades, the publicists’ opinions and the expectations of the broad public.

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Samuelson's research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex from the 1930s onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden's relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. His research results have been rewarded by several institutions. The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials.