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# Coming to Terms with the Past – Challenges for History Teaching in Russian Schools

Russia is currently reforming its history teaching in basic schools. An original idea of producing one single textbook was abolished. Instead, three different textbook series for 6th to 10th graders, as well as teacher's manuals and map books, have been written. They are all based on the same conceptual framework (kontsepsiia) and differ merely in pedagogical approaches. To facilitate teaching on topics in Russia's millennium-long history where the professionals disagree on interpretations, a series of survey brochures are written on over twenty "difficult questions". Contrary to the views by some observers in the West of a state-ordered streamlining of historical narratives, the new history textbooks offer the pupils an overview of how and why historians diverge in their interpretations and assessments of many events, personalities and transitions in the millennium-long Russian history.



How to educate the next generations on Russia's past has been in the focus for more than a decade, and not only among the professional historians, history teachers and pedagogues. New textbook proposals have spurred debates in society at large.

After the breakdown of the Soviet educational system in history, one whole year passed when the subject of history even disappeared from the curriculum; the old textbooks on the 20th century in particular were recognized as full of myths; taboo subjects were omitted and propaganda clichés abundant. In lack of new textbooks, teachers were free to use materials from the vital press and journals of the glasnost period. Only a few years later, however, there was a plethora of newly written history textbooks, including translations such as the French historian Nicolas Werth's on Russia in the 20th century (Werth 1992). These new textbooks were checked at the Ministry of Education and either authorized or recommended, depending on their pedagogical qualities. Among the pioneers of history schoolbooks should be mentioned Aleksandr Danilov and Liudmila Kosulina, whose works are printed in many new editions (see e.g. Danilov 2007).

In the 2010s, there were already a huge number of recommended and authorized textbooks on Russian history. Every schoolteacher in the Russian Federation had a plethora of handbooks with their accompanying pedagogical matters ('blind history maps', questionnaires, teacher's manual, CD-ROMs, etc.) to choose from. Interpretations differed in these books. Children from two parallel schools in the same town could have read two contradictory presentations of a number of events, depending on the textbook author's ideological framework.

In 2013, the president and the government approved the oft-repeated demand for 'a unified, single history textbook for schools' (edinyi uchebnik istorii). While president Putin had just hinted on what was wishful, the burdensome task to accomplish a sound standardization of history teaching fell on commissions in the academic community. The historians responsible for the new conceptual framework emphasize their striving towards de-politization of history (Chubarian 2013). The evolution of 'history policy' in neighboring states set a bad example, as parliaments, governments or even presidents legitimate the one and only correct historical facts or interpretations. The Council of Europe and OSSE use a similar 'history policy' adopting resolutions described as scientific accomplishments, not merely political attitudes. Institutes for the national memory, sometimes jointly with laws of the parliaments, dictate how historical personalities, events and political movements are to be characterized, and divergent presentations may be subject to judicial prosecution. Contrary to a widespread opinion in the West, Russian historians and politicians who are interested in history questions actually strive to avoid 'history policy' (Chubarian 2016).

Nonetheless, Russian parliamentarians have sometimes tried the same approach to counter the political use of past events. Examples can be quoted of how specific events during and after the First World War, as well as the Second World War 1939-1945 have been used to criticize the present-day Russian regime, its leaders or even its people (Miller & Lipman 2012).

The process to achieve a new uniform history textbook was multifaceted. First, a 'concept framework' (kontseptsii) was set up in a concise form. This included the main historical facts to be treated. It further enumerated tens of historical events, processes and changes that have been hotly debated. This framework was thereafter widened to become a 'historical-cultural standard' with detailed description of how each epoch in Russia's millennium-long history would be presented in the new textbooks.



Russia decided to use a 'linear system' of history education' (lineika), i.e., to teach chronologically from 5th to 10th class and use the 11th, final year for special courses. Six author groups and publishing houses participated in the contest for a set of new schoolbooks. Merely three of them were approved. Today, the first textbooks have appeared from the publishing companies Prosveshchenie (Enlightenment), Russkoe Slovo (Russian Word) and DROFA. The reformation will however be gradual as the older, authorized books can still be used. It will take at least until 2020 before these new history textbooks are the only standard ones.

Professional historians do not create history manuals for teachers, textbooks as well as auxiliary pedagogical matters in splendid isolation. Numerous seminars and colloquiums have been organized all over the country, where history teachers met with authors, discussed projects or shared their experiences from using pilot copies of the new books. Likewise, now that the first new textbook is used in schools, several hundred tutors will organize courses for teachers' advancement and acquaintance with recent research.

The 'conceptual framework' was widely discussed in 2013–14 at teachers' seminars all over Russia and at the First All-Russian congress of history teachers. The first new teacher's manuals and textbooks have been presented by the authors at the Third history teachers' congress held in Moscow in the first week of April 2016. Most sections at this congress concerned strict pedagogical and examination matters. For your humble servant, the most fascinating section at this congress was devoted to what has been termed as "difficult questions".

Contrary to the views by some observers in the West of a state-ordered streamlining of historical narratives, with emphasis on the state and high politics level, these new textbooks give the teenage pupils a basic understanding on how and why historians diverge in their interpretations and assessments of many events, personalities and transitions in the millennium-long Russian history. Already at the first meetings with history teachers, over thirty such thorny historical riddles were mentioned. To give history teachers a better position, the publishing companies have engaged leading specialists to write up-to-date surveys of recent research and the present state of debates.

These surveys start with the century-long debates on the origins and character of the early medieval Russian state formation. How the rule of Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible, Ivan Grozny) has been evaluated is described in another survey. Similar debate surveys are due to appear on Peter the Great and other tsars.

Western observers of the Russian historical scene concentrate on how the country's 20th century history is analyzed. These are also the matters that tend to divide the scholarly community as well as the general public in Russia. Consequently, teacher's guidebooks on these topics are much in demand. They treat such complex questions as how the autocracy had progressed by the 1900s, what long-term processes and which events caused the downfall of the monarchy in 1917. Other surveys analyze Soviet nationality policies. The international situation in the 1930s and in the early phase of World War Two is carefully described. The Soviet Union during the Cold war is analyzed with references to the most recent findings in Russian and Western archives. Furthermore, the causes of the failure of Gorbachev's perestroika and its effects are discussed in another survey.



In Russia, as elsewhere, anniversaries and centenaries tend to heighten an already eager public interest in history. For the approaching 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution, we likewise expect to find numerous collective monographs, encyclopedias, as well as re-printed memoirs and scores of unearthed archival documents in exhibitions. No doubt, however much professional historians complain of “the tyranny of jubilees” that divert from their chosen fields, the scholarly community in Russia will certainly take this opportunity to widen its research field to new aspects of the historical scenes during 1917.

## Literature

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Lennart Samuelson is an affiliated researcher at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) since 2008. He earned his Ph.D. at the Institute for Research in Economic History at the Stockholm School of Economics, in 1996. He was a guest researcher at the National Defence College in 1996-2001 and Waern visiting professor at the Institute for Studies in History at the University of Gothenburg, in 2011-2012.

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.

On 4 November 2014, for organizing Swedish-Russian economic-historical workshops and conferences at Stockholm School of Economics and Gothenburg university, for arranging study visits for Russian archivists in Stockholm and for Swedish scholars in Moscow, as well as for his spreading knowledge on Russian history to the Swedish public, he was awarded Orden Druzhby (the Friendship Order) by President Vladimir Putin at the National Day ceremony in the Kremlin.

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