



The Politics of Memory

By Leon Aron

We are saying: Why remember? Why remember the past? It is no longer here, is it? Why should we remember it? Why disturb the people? What do you mean: Why remember? If I have been gravely ill and have been cured, I will always remember [the deliverance] with joy. Only then will I not want to remember, if I am still ill, in the same way or even more seriously, and I wish to deceive myself. . . .

Why annoy people? Why remember that which has passed? Passed? What has passed? How could it have passed—that which we not only have not started to eradicate and heal but are even afraid to call by its name? How could a brutal illness be cured only by our saying that it is gone? And it is not going away and will not and cannot go away until we admit that we are ill. In order to cure an illness one must first admit that one has it. And it is precisely what we are not doing. And not only not doing, but aiming all our efforts at not seeing it, not calling it by its name. And, consequently, it is not going away but only mutating, only penetrating deeper into our flesh, our blood, our bones, our marrow.

—Leo Tolstoy

“Nikolai Palkin” [Nicholas the Stick], 1906^{1*}

On June 18–19, 2007, a national conference of high school historians and teachers of social sciences convened in Moscow. The agenda called for discussion of “the acute problems in the teaching of modern Russian history” and “the development of the state standards of education.”² It soon became clear, however, that the real purpose of the gathering was to present to (or, more precisely, to impress upon) the delegates two recently finished “manuals for teachers.” One of them—soon to be published in a pilot print run of ten thousand copies—was *The Modern History of Russia: 1945–2006; A Teacher’s Handbook* (referred to in this *Outlook* by its Russian short title, *Istoriya*), which will become a high school textbook for use in classrooms this coming September.³

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* All translations from Russian are by the author.

Unusually heavy artillery was deployed in the textbook’s support. Speaking at the conference were Minister of Education and Science Andrey Fursenko and Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s chief ideologist, first deputy chief of staff, and the inventor of the “sovereign democracy” concept, which became the centerpiece of the regime’s ideology. (As Russian wits say, “sovereign democracy” is to “democracy” what the “electric chair” is to a “chair.”)

The project’s origin and the authors’ provenance were soon disclosed by liberal websites, which look more and more like a cyber equivalent of the Soviet *samizdat*. The textbook’s editor, Alexandr Filippov, who is listed as the sole author on the cover, is the deputy director of the “National Laboratory of Foreign Policy,” which, in his own words, “assists the state organs, including the Presidential Administration, in the development and implementation of foreign policy decisions.”⁴ He confirmed the rumor that it was the Presidential Administration, along

with the Ministry of Education and Science, that had “invited” him to assemble the manuscript.⁵

The author of one of the chapters—Pavel Danilin—turned out to be the editor-in-chief of Kremlin.org and the deputy director at the Effective Politics Foundation, headed by top Kremlin propagandist Gleb Pavlovsky. Danilin (who is also affiliated with the “Young Guard of the United Russia,” the Komsomol-like helper of the United Russia “ruling” party⁶) was quoted as saying: “Our goal is to make the first textbook in which Russian history will look not as a depressing sequence of misfortunes and mistakes but as something to instill pride in one’s country. It is in precisely this way that teachers must teach history and not smear the Motherland with dirt.”⁷ Addressing, in his blog, teachers and scholars who might be less than enthusiastic about such an approach, Danilin—who is thirty years old and is not known to have taught anything—wrote:

You may ooze bile, but you will teach the children by those books that you’ll be given and in the way that is needed by Russia. And as to the noble nonsense, which you carry in your misshapen goateed heads, either it will be ventilated out of them or you yourself will be ventilated out of teaching. . . . It is impossible to let some Russophobe [expletive], or just any amoral type, teach Russian history. It is necessary to clear the filth, and [if] it does not work, then clear it by force.⁸

The textbook promotion resumed after the summer vacation, when the Ministry of Education and Science scheduled teachers’ conferences in seven Russian regions where the authors and the ministry’s functionaries were to be joined by “representatives of the Presidential Administration” and those local governments.⁹ A meeting took place in the third week of September at the Academic Educational Association of the Humanities to show how it should be done, with Moscow’s top education functionaries, university presidents, and directors of research institutes on hand, including the director of the Institute of General History and the rector (president) of Moscow State University.¹⁰ Representing the Kremlin was a Presidential Administration veteran, the secretary of the Presidential Council for Science, Technology, and Education, Dzhokhan Pollyeva, who called on historians and education administrators to wish the textbook authors success and assured the audience that there would be sufficient funding for all the seminars and courses for the teachers necessary to support the project.¹¹

The Historian-in-Chief

The Kremlin’s good will toward the textbook had crested two months earlier with the invitation to conference participants to come to then-president Vladimir Putin’s residence in Novo-Ogaryovo outside Moscow. In a long introduction to the discussion that ensued, Putin declared, among other things, that there was “mishmash” [*kasha*] in the heads of the teachers of history and social sciences and that this dire situation needed to be corrected by the introduction of “common standards” for teaching these disciplines. (Four days later, a new law—introduced in the Duma and passed with record speed in eleven days—authorized the Ministry of Education and Science to determine which textbooks would be “recommended” for school use and which publishers would print them.)

There followed some rather instructive exchanges:

A CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT: In 1990–91 we disarmed ideologically. [Instead, we adopted] a very uncertain, abstract ideology of all-human values. . . . It is as if we were back in school, or even kindergarten. We were told [by the West]: you have rejected Communism and are building democracy, and we will judge when and how you have done. . . . In exchange for our disarming ideologically, we have received this abstract recipe: you become democrats and capitalists and we will control you.

PUTIN: Your remark about someone who assumes the posture of teacher and begins to teach us is of course absolutely correct. But I would like to add that this, undoubtedly, is also an instrument of influencing our country. This is a tried-and-true trick. If someone from the outside is getting ready to grade us, this means that he arrogates the right to manage [us] and is most willing to continue to do so.

PARTICIPANT: In the past two decades our youth have been subjected to a torrent of most diverse information about [our] historical past. This information [contains] not only different conceptual approaches, interpretations, or value judgments but even chronologies. In such circumstances, the teacher is likely to . . .

PUTIN (INTERRUPTING): Oh, they will write, all right. You see, many textbooks are written by those who are paid in foreign grants. And naturally they are dancing a polka ordered by those who pay them. Do you understand? And unfortunately [such textbooks] find their way to schools and colleges. . . .

PUTIN (CONCLUDING THE SESSION): As to some problematic pages in our history—yes, we’ve had them. But what state hasn’t? And we’ve had fewer of such pages than some other [states]. And ours were not as horrible as those of some others. Yes, we have had some terrible pages: let’s remember the events beginning in 1937; let’s not forget about them. But other countries have had no less, even more. In any case, we did not pour chemicals over thousands of kilometers or drop on a small country seven times more bombs than during the entire World War II, as it was in Vietnam, for instance. Nor did we have other black pages, such as Nazism, for instance. All sorts of things happen in the history of every state. And we cannot allow ourselves to be saddled with guilt—they’d better think of themselves.¹²

Laying Down the Guidelines

Of course, scoring points in his obsessive, never-ending, one-sided imaginary debate with the United States was not the sole goal of Putin’s Novo-Ogaryovo dicta. They were to lay down the guidelines for the new Russian historiography embodied in the textbook. The first postulate appears to be this: although there were “mistakes” and “dark spots” here and there, what matters is the survival and strengthening of the state—by whatever means necessary. And, by that measure, the Soviet Union was a shining, unadulterated success, and the costs were justified—especially because, as we have already seen, the main victims of Stalinism allegedly were the relatively small elite rather than millions of Soviet citizens. (Hence, the mention of 1937, the year of the Great Purge, associated in the public mind with the arrests, tortures, show trials, and executions of party and government functionaries as well as the officer corps of the armed forces.) Second, the Soviet Union was a “besieged fortress,” forever under a relentless threat of attack by the West (most of all the United States), and the machinations of the West were responsible not only for Soviet foreign policy but for a great deal of painful policies inflicted by the regime on the country. Finally, and most important, the overarching agenda that is to shape this and future historical narratives is the “normalization” of the monstrosity of Soviet totalitarianism—the procurement of justifications and excuses for its crimes.

Accordingly, while pages and pages of *Istoriya* overflow with official statistics attesting to the dazzling achievements of the Soviet economy—production of mineral fer-

tilizers grew sixfold, of electricity fivefold, of steel over twofold in the 1950s alone¹³—and with the positively loving recitations of the quality and quantity of the military hardware,¹⁴ the Gulag is mentioned by name once, by way of cautioning against the “exaggeration” of its “contribution” to the economy. After all, there were only “2.6 million” prisoners (in 1950) compared to “40.4 million” in the country’s workforce outside the barbed wire.¹⁵

Among the scores of witnesses’ accounts—inserted in the narrative under the rubric “How It Was” [*Kak eto bylo*]¹⁶—there is not a single one from the flood of memoirs published in the late 1980s about the hell of the “investigative prisons,” where “testimony” was beaten out of the arrested; not one quote about the extermination camps from Varlaam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*; *The Faculty of the Unnecessary Things* by Yuri Dombrovsky, another splendid Russian writer who had miraculously survived three stints and a quarter century in the Gulag; or the brilliantly imagined prison and camp chapters in the greatest Russian novel of the twentieth century, Vassily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*. The so-called Doctors’ Plot of 1953 merited a paragraph, but not the next step, which only Stalin’s death thwarted: the public hangings of traitorous Jewish physicians on Red Square and a countrywide pogrom to be followed by the exile of more than 2 million Soviet Jews to the Far East.

The textbook has this to say about interethnic relations under Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party between 1964 and 1982: “The degree of consolidation of Soviet nationalities and their yearning for mutual closeness were especially pronounced in comparison with other multiethnic states. In the USA, for instance, Ku-Klux-Klan-like organizations were operating almost openly, [and] every now and then bloody mass confrontations occurred on racial or national grounds.”¹⁶ This, of a society in which one’s ethnicity was the first-noted (and often defining) factor in interpersonal relations; where the Azeris hated the Armenians; the Abkhaz, the Georgians; the Uzbeks, the Kirghiz (and would start killing one another as soon as the totalitarian controls were relaxed, while others, like Moldovans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and Georgians bolted out of the happy union even before it collapsed); and where ethnic Russian “masses” seemed to despise all other nationalities and used derogatory shibboleths such as *khokhly* for Ukrainians, *armyashki* for Armenians, or *chemozhopye* [black-assed] for all those from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

There is not a word, either, about the state-sponsored anti-Semitism under Brezhnev and the anti-Jewish discrimination in employment or travel abroad; the internal passports where “nationality” followed name and address; or college admissions policies such as those of Moscow State University in the second half of the 1970s, when the applicants had to list not only the last names of their parents but also those of their grandparents to help spot Jews. (Those with only one Jewish grandparent, it was widely believed, had a chance for admission.)

The Cold War

The sections on foreign policy in the new textbook could have come directly from Soviet textbooks. The origins of the Cold War are covered in three sentences: The United States was bent on “world domination.” The Soviet Union’s might was in America’s way. A “serious confrontation ensued.” Winston Churchill’s March 5, 1946, “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, was a declaration of war, and such a reliable witness as Stalin is cited at length from a *Pravda* “interview” to that effect. With no analysis, no alternative view, let alone refutation, Russian schoolchildren seem meant to take Stalin’s words at face value:

PRAVDA: May Mr. Churchill’s speech be considered as damaging the cause of peace and security?

STALIN: Undoubtedly so. In essence, Mr. Churchill has taken the position of a warmonger. . . . It must be noted that in this regard Mr. Churchill and his friends are remarkably like Hitler and his friends. . . . Undoubtedly Mr. Churchill’s viewpoint is a viewpoint of war, a call for a war with the USSR.¹⁷

Nor did the planning of war on the Soviet Union stop at “concepts.” High school students will learn that in May 1945, Churchill was already reviewing a war plan against the Soviet Union, and by November 1945, the targets for the nuclear attack on the Soviet Union had been selected.¹⁸ (Why, then—one very much hopes a bright Russian girl or boy may ask—was the Soviet Union not bombed by the bloodthirsty warmongers, given that it would not explode its own nuclear charge until four years later?)

Istoriya does not dwell on what might have made the “former allies” suspicious of Moscow’s intentions in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe and thus shaped what became known as the “Cold War mentality”: the arrest and trial (on charges of “sabotaging the Red Army”) of the sixteen leaders of the Polish anti-Nazi underground,

loyal to the London-based government-in-exile, after they had been promised immunity and presented themselves to the Soviet headquarters;¹⁹ the squeezing out of non-Communists from the governments of Eastern Europe; the rigged election in Poland, in direct contravention of the Soviet Union’s pledge at Yalta that there would be free Polish elections in which all “anti-Nazi and democratic forces could participate”;²⁰ the later installation of murderous totalitarian satrapies in Eastern Europe and the arrests of hundreds of thousands of “the bourgeoisie,” the intelligentsia, and local political notables (especially and firstly of the non-Communist left); or the show trials and executions, after horrible torture, of local Communist leaders like Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria, Laszlo Rajk in Hungary, and Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia. (The last two, Jews, were accused of Zionism in addition to other treasonous deeds.)

Instead, Russian students will read how the regimes of “people’s democracy” were established “with the assistance of the Soviet military administration” in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria; how, as a result, “the Communists came to power”; and how “overall, the population, which wanted social reforms, supported the Communists’ coming to power.”²¹ (After Professor Charles Gati, who taught a superb graduate course on “Eastern Europe and the Cold War” at Columbia in the 1980s, told us that in the first, and last, free postwar election in Czechoslovakia in May 1946, the Communists received close to 40 percent of the vote, he added emphatically: “In no other country of East-Central Europe at any time did the Communist receive an equally large share of the vote. Nowhere. Ever.”)

The Sovietization of Eastern Europe is explained by the need to defend vital national security interests:

It was impossible to sacrifice the security of the USSR. No Russian government could have afforded to do so. Stalin could not possibly agree to U.S.-British demands for the return of the prewar governments to Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia, for such a return would have restored the *cordon sanitaire* [that is, a stretch of pro-Western, “bourgeois” “buffer” states along Bolshevik Russia’s western borders] erected against the USSR in those lands. Stalin wanted to create a broad band of Communist-led states, which was to stretch between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. The “Polish gate” cost the USSR huge sacrifices, and the Soviet government simply could not hand over the key to it to Washington.²²

A One-Sided War

From the beginning, then, the textbook authors say, the Cold War was a one-sided affair, with the West attacking and the Soviet Union defending itself as best it could. “Having failed to dislodge the Soviet regime by force,” the United States “unleashed an ideological war” whose “main tool” was Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.²³ Oh, what an unprovoked, vicious stab in the back those radios must have been as they sought to break through the jamming and tell the deafened and muted nations what was happening in their own countries! What with Radio Moscow having been broadcast in every language under the sun for decades before and after; with thousands of pro-Soviet (and often Soviet-funded) newspapers and magazines around the world; and with the incessant peace “congresses,” “conferences,” “movements,” and “appeals” of the 1940s and early 1950s. (A few pages later, *Istoriya* acknowledges the ruling Soviet doctrine of the “impossibility of peaceful coexistence between the socialist and bourgeois ideologies”²⁴—that is, the permanent ideological war on the West until the bitter end, in the course of which, among many other victims, Boris Pasternak was hounded to death after publishing *Doctor Zhivago* and receiving the Nobel Prize in 1958.)

The Cold War and—by a very short extension—the United States were to blame even for the reversal of the very mild “liberalization” allowed by Stalin during the Great Patriotic War. As far as the textbook’s authors are concerned, it goes without saying that no “democratization of the domestic regime” was possible in the “conditions of hostile encirclement,” the urgency of reconstruction of the economy, and “the forging of military capability necessary to resist the United States and its allies” because these tasks required the “ideological consolidation of the population” and thus the “strengthening of the state’s ideological control over society.”²⁵

From Triumph to Triumph: Cuba, Vietnam, and the Middle East

But whatever problems the Cold War may have caused along the way, until Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union marched from victory to victory in world affairs. Even the withdrawal of nuclear-tipped missiles from Cuba in 1962, following the U.S. ultimatum, is said to have ended in “defeat” for the United States. Another victory was won in the Vietnam War, which was caused by “U.S. aggression against North Vietnam” aimed at the

“liquidation of the Communist regime.” In its capacity as “the guarantor of world stability,” the Soviet Union had no choice but to “state its readiness to render North Vietnam the assistance necessary to repulse the aggression.”²⁶

There is nothing in the textbook’s account about the Soviet Union’s massive shipments of armaments and materiel to Egypt and Syria in 1966–67;²⁷ not a word about the Egyptians’ massing of troops in Sinai and Syria on the Golan Heights in May 1967, or the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba by Egypt, or the Soviet representatives at the United Nations (UN) Security Council blocking any possibility that the council would address Israel’s grave concerns (and thus resolve the crisis by peaceful means).²⁸

Instead, the textbook repeats the canard of Israel’s imminent attack on Syria²⁹—the same lie that Moscow communicated at the time to Egypt and Syria, thus pushing Egypt still closer to war.³⁰ In a touching rendering of the Soviet Union’s peacemaking sentiment, a story is told about the Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser, who, having “moved Egyptian troops into Sinai in order to prevent Israel’s attack on Syria,” wished to “consult the Soviet friends and receive their assent to a preventive strike against Israel” and dispatched his minister of defense to Moscow. The Soviet interlocutors told the Egyptians that they could not condone “aggression,” even if a “preventive” one. On the second day of negotiations, Nasser again tried to secure Moscow’s support and again was rebuffed. Finally, on the third day, Minister Badran conveyed Nasser’s reply: “If the Soviet friends are steadfast in their viewpoint, there will be no attack [by Egypt on Israel].”³¹ Thus, in 1967, Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan with no provocation whatsoever.

The Six Days’ War segment concludes with Israel being condemned as the “aggressor” by “Resolution 247” of the UN Security Council³² and—peace-loving to the core and unwilling to keep company with warmongers of any kind—the Soviet Union breaking diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. (UN Security Council Resolution 247, adopted in March 1968, reauthorized the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus. The *Istoriya* authors must have meant Resolution 237 of June 14, 1967—except that there was nothing in the resolution about Israel being an “aggressor.”) The Yom Kippur War of 1973, when the Soviet-armed Egypt attacked Israel, is not mentioned at all.

The nuclear arms race was all America’s fault.³³ No reference is made to the Soviet Union’s yearly churning out of more tanks than the rest of the world combined to add to the tens of thousands that were already deployed in

Eastern Europe and for which the Western Europeans saw no rational explanation or purpose except to attack them. There is nothing about the deployment of SS-20s—mobile intermediate missiles armed with three nuclear warheads and targeted at Western Europe—and nothing about the Soviet Air Force shooting down Korean Airlines flight 007 on September 1, 1983.

“Normalizing” Soviet Totalitarianism

When all is said and done, the “rigorously centralized character of the political and economic system of government of the Soviet era”³⁴—the word “totalitarian,” which became virtually inseparable from the definition of the Soviet regime during the glasnost revolution of the late 1980s and made its way into Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s speeches (and into the critiques of the textbook),³⁵ is not used once—was not a product of the deadly ideology of a “utopia in power,” to recall the marvelous title of an “alternative” Soviet history by two expatriate Russian scholars in the 1980s.³⁶ Nor were the “psychological peculiarities of Stalin’s personality,” as the authors coyly phrase it, among the primary causes.³⁷

No, the responsibility for the bestial regime, according to *Istoriya*, rests with “objective conditions”: historical, social, and economic. The Russian national tradition is one of “centralization” in the service of “modernization,” and Stalinism was no different, except that the constant threat of invasion necessitated that the “modernization” be especially speedy, making the regime “tougher.”³⁸ Nothing unusual about that. Stalin was no more “tough and merciless” than Bismarck, who united the German lands by “iron and blood.”³⁹ Why, even such allegedly “soft” and “flexible” political systems as that of the United States—note the quotation marks from the original—tend to evolve toward “hard forms of political organization” under threat, as happened after 9/11.⁴⁰

As to the “measures of coercion”—the word “terror,” like “totalitarianism,” not being in the authors’ vocabulary—the “expedited modernization” called for a “corresponding system of power” and an apparatus capable of the “realization of the course.”⁴¹ Forging such an “apparatus” and making it “effective” were tasks that could be accomplished “by a variety of means that included political repressions.”⁴² The pursuit of the “maximal effectiveness of the governing apparatus” explained the fact that, “according to the Russian and foreign historians,” the “primary victim” of the “repressions” in 1930–50 was the ruling class.⁴³

In the “plus” column of the “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” assessment of Stalin, the textbook declares him “the most successful leader of the USSR,” responsible for industrialization, the “cultural revolution,” the “best education system in the world,” the “elimination of unemployment,”⁴⁴ and the ultraeffective “machinery of power.”⁴⁵ (Conversely, Brezhnev’s inability to produce an equally “effective” elite management—withstanding his achievement of nuclear parity with the United States, the feat that forever secures his place in the pantheon of greatest Russian leaders—“played a fatal role” in the Soviet Union’s demise.⁴⁶)

Arranging the Past

There is nothing new, of course, in the routine distortions of Russian history or the tsar acting as the historian-in-chief. “Like Providence in reverse, the Russian government seeks to arrange for the better not the future, but the past,” wrote Alexander Herzen, Russia’s first true and still rather lonely liberal.⁴⁷ The first head of the infamous Third Department of His Majesty’s Chancery (the secret political police, or the Gendarmes, set up by Nicholas I in 1826), Count Alexander von Benckendorff, had this order for Russian historians: “Russia’s past was wonderful, its present is more than superlative, and when it comes to her future, it is above anything that the most daring imagination could conjure. Here’s the point of view from which Russia’s history must be viewed and written.”⁴⁸ (Putin had a portrait of Nicholas I added to the busts and portraits of Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Alexander II in the antechamber of the president’s office in the Kremlin.)

Stalin began by writing question marks and exclamation points in the margin of a 1934 high school history textbook⁴⁹ and, four years later, proceeded to leave extensive editorial notes on, and insert passage after long passage into, the drafts of the *Short Course History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)*, which laid the guidelines for the writing of Soviet history in the next fifty years. (Stalin’s notes and interpolations, in a very neat hand, may soon be viewed at Yale University’s “Cold War Archives” project, led by the indefatigable Jonathan Brent.)

Indeed, one is tempted to describe Putin’s intervention into Russian historiography sixty years after Stalin’s by reaching for the cliché of Marx’s remake of Hegel’s dictum that historical facts and personages occur twice—the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.⁵⁰ But there is nothing

farcical about another round of truth-bending in the presentation of Russia's past. The stakes are too high.

The Centrality of Honest History

Glasnost (1987–1991) was a moral revolution of immense intellectual incandescence, spiritual wisdom, and intuition. It precipitated a fearless soul-searching, the outburst of decency, dignity, civic courage, and journalistic excellence, which almost redeemed the previous seven decades of cruelty, enforced mediocrity, lies, and moral turpitude—and it established truthful history as a key condition of Russia's revival. So “monstrously distorted,” in *Izvestia's* phrase, was the previously taught version of the country's history that the national high school examination in history, required for graduation and the diploma, was abolished in 1988.⁵¹ The exam was restored the next year, but the old textbooks remained banished and new ones were readied for the ninth and tenth grades—the junior and senior years.⁵²

First and foremost, it was deemed imperative to create the political and social mechanisms that “would firmly block any tilt toward [our] self-exterminating past,”⁵³ as the leading literary magazine *Znamya* put it in the fall of 1987. Such mechanisms would not work without a moral overhaul, and such an overhaul was impossible without unflinching self-discovery. Above all, perestroika needed a most sober, most merciless burning out [*vyzhiganie*] of any self-delusion.⁵⁴ What we conceal and what we fear—wrote a contributor to perhaps the finest collection of glasnost's essays, *There Is No Other Way* [*Inogo ne dano*], published in 1988—are one and the same.⁵⁵ If hiding the truth is the sign of fear, revealing it is inseparable from the disappearance of the dread.⁵⁶ The road to a Russia in which a free individual flourished lay “only through truth, through really honest self-learning [*samopoznanie*] and self-awareness [*samosoznanie*],” suggested a literary historian.⁵⁷ Could it be that all our misfortunes, especially the horrors of Stalinism, are “because we have not learned to respect the truth, the truth of our history?” asked a leading political philosopher.⁵⁸ If so, “we must stop deceiving ourselves. . . . We can no longer evade truth, engage in myth-creation. We must trust the truth.”⁵⁹

We are told, one of the finest essayists of glasnost, economic journalist Vasilii Selyunin, wrote sarcastically in 1988, that “our enemies are dragging us into a debate about the past, in order to distract. Oh, the enemy is cunning, no question about that. Only how are we going to

learn from history, if we again start covering its lines with fingers: this you can read, but this is prohibited? . . . [A] people that forgets its history is doomed to repeat it.”⁶⁰

Remembering Stalinism

The passionate quest for such a history began with the recovery of the true dimensions of the devastation wrought by Stalinism. This national act of acknowledgment was thought to be more than a tribute to the dead—no matter how noble and urgently needed such homage was to erase the “sacrilege” of the “millions of our compatriots” buried in mass graves, as a University of Moscow professor put it.⁶¹ The horrors of Stalinism had to be recognized in shame and remorse, shuddered and wailed over, forever and unequivocally condemned, and, most important, redeemed by the creation of a state and society that would never ever allow the country to be ruled by terror. One needed to be “horrified to become brave enough” to condemn and forever break with the past in which most of one's life was spent, read a 1988 letter to the flagship of glasnost, *Moskovskie novosti*, a weekly;⁶² one needed to look “into an abyss,” no matter how terrifying, in order not to fall into it again.⁶³

The urgency of this “honest labor of self-discovery”⁶⁴ stemmed from the same central conviction that informed so much in the glasnost *oeuvre*: a moral state was impossible without moral citizens—and only those unafraid to speak truth about the past could be trusted to say, and act on, the truth about the present and the future and thus guarantee the irreversibility of democratization.⁶⁵ “He who zealously hides the past / Is not likely to be comfortable with the future,” wrote one of the most popular Russian poets, Alexandr Tvardovsky, in his 1969 anti-Stalinist poem testament, *In the Name of Memory* [*Po pravu pamyati*], which would not be published until eighteen years later.⁶⁶

Unatoned for and unredeemed, Stalinism was an open, “bleeding wound,” or an “abscess” that needed to be lanced before it burst and poisoned the entire body.⁶⁷ The author of the immensely popular 1987 anti-Stalinist saga *The Children of Arbat* [*Deti Arbata*], Anatoly Rybakov, called “moral cleansing” the order of the day.⁶⁸ Confronting Stalinism was a matter of the “spiritual health of the country,” its “spiritual hygiene.”⁶⁹ Not to know, to ask in vain—How many people died in camps? How many of them were women and children? Where do their bodies lie today? Who buried them?—to ask and not have the answers was “immoral,” a young female educator wrote.⁷⁰

The troubadours of glasnost seemed confident that Russia would emerge from this merciless self-examination as if from a Russian sauna [*banya*]: bleary-eyed and with red marks left by the birch twigs but—at long last!—clean, light, sober, serious, and ready for hard and honest work. The time “of societal penitence and moral cleansing is come,” declared one of the Soviet Union’s most beloved film actors, Georgy Zhzhyonov, himself a former prisoner in Stalin’s camps.⁷¹ “What a wonderful, capacious word, repentance!” seconded Russia’s finest eye surgeon, Svyatoslav Fyodorov, whose innovative technique returned sight to thousands of Russians (and whose father, too, perished in Stalin’s purges). “How fitting it is for our times! To repent, to tell all without holding anything back in order to begin a better life!”⁷²

The full tale of the nightmare had to be recovered and retold not only as a credible and full history, but also as a searing parable to be read anew by every man, woman, boy, and girl for generations—the tale of “lies, the repugnant sophistication of operations, the cynicism of those who arrested and tortured,” and most of all, the “freezing, paralyzing fear,” continued Fyodorov.⁷³

The “Inoculation” against Immorality and Dictatorship

The memoirs of survivors, which school teachers would read to students, were thought by the literary critics of the other glasnost engine, *Ogonyok* magazine, to be the moral equivalent of “inoculations against cholera, smallpox, or plague”:

Let them tremble, let them dissolve in tears, let them be horrified—the shudder will be cleansing, the horror healing. They must know what Stalinism does to man, they must [learn to] be vigilant in order to see it under any masks, in order to battle it, not sparing themselves, because it brings death, physical and moral, to the country, its citizens, and their children and grandchildren.⁷⁴

Insofar as Stalinism justified—nay, glorified—violence in pursuit of an ideal society and offered absolution of guilt in exchange for blind faith and complicity in—or the silent condoning of—terror and lies, de-Stalinization heralded the end of Soviet history’s exclusion from ethical judgment, the end of the “extramoral” [*vnemoral’noe*] attitude toward history.⁷⁵ Having paid “an unimaginable price for this understanding,” they needed to realize that “the

end does not justify the means,” wrote one of glasnost’s finest essayists, Yuri Karyakin.⁷⁶ De-Stalinization meant both remoralization of Soviet history and the return to normal historiography, which, in turn, promised to return to the Soviet people their country’s true history.

The origins of the Cold War are covered in three sentences: The United States was bent on “world domination.” The Soviet Union’s might was in America’s way. A “serious confrontation ensued.”

Hence, the writing and publishing of the first honest history textbook, a veteran schoolteacher wrote in *Izvestia* in July 1987, was of national significance.⁷⁷ The absence of an honest history was not just a hiatus in abstract knowledge, he went on, but at once a result of and a powerful contribution to “our age-long tradition of blaming everyone and everything for our mistakes and setbacks—cold winters, draughts, the intrigues of world imperialism—except ourselves.”⁷⁸ In addition to engendering arrogance and negligence, such “historical irresponsibility” led to “moral irresponsibility.”⁷⁹ Bitter truth was hard, but a sugared one was “immoral.”⁸⁰ True patriotism, the teacher continued, was inseparable from knowing and speaking the truth, while “patriotism founded on semitruth is not patriotism but its lazy, complacent imitation.”⁸¹

Interrupting Russia’s Moral Renaissance

As usual in high-quality Russian debates, the classics were deployed to excellent effect. Among them was Tolstoy, whose essay about the sadistic punishment of soldiers in the reign of Nicholas I and the moral imperative of remembrance is excerpted in the epigraph. One of Russia’s finest poets, Fyodor Tyutchev, too, was brought to bear on the matter: “For society, as well as for an individual, self-knowledge is the first condition of any progress.”⁸²

Then there was the—somehow—all-knowing and all-understanding Anton Chekhov, by way of Trofimov’s soliloquy in Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*: “We don’t have a definite attitude toward the past. We only philosophize, complain of ennui, or drink vodka. But it is so abundantly clear that to begin living in the present we

must first redeem our past and be done with it, and we can redeem it only by pain and by an extraordinary and constant labor.”⁸³

But the most powerful testimony came from one of Russia’s first “dissidents,” the brilliant and fearless Petr Chaadaev, pronounced mad by Nicholas I in 1836 and confined to house arrest. He called on Russia to

understand fully the path we have traveled, [so that] almost despite ourselves, a confession of all our delusions, all the errors of our past escapes our lips [and] the cry of repentance and grief springs from our depth and its echo fills the world. Only then will we naturally take a place among the peoples who are fated to act in the world not only as battering rams and cudgels but as ideas.⁸⁴

Yet another dashing of this magnificent hope, yet another retardation of this glorious transformation, yet another interruption of Russia’s moral renaissance will be on the top of the long bill of charges with which Russian history sooner or later will indict Putinism.

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Notes

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3. Ibid.; Anna Kachurovskaya, “Istoricheskiy pripadok” [A Fit of History], *Kommestant-Vlast’*, June 16, 2007; and Peter Finn, “New Manuals Push a Putin’s-Eye View in Russian Schools,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2007.

4. Anna Kachurovskaya, “Istoricheskiy pripadok.”

5. Ibid.

6. Lyudmila Rybina, “Posledniy pisk gosudrarstva rossiyskogo.”

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.; Anna Kachurovskaya, “Istoricheskiy pripadok”; and Peter Finn, “New Manuals Push a Putin’s-Eye View in Russian Schools.”

9. Lyudmila Rybina, “Posledniy pisk gosudrarstva rossiyskogo.”

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Prezident Rossii, “Stenograficheskiy otchyot of vstreche s delegatami Vserossiyskoy konferentsii prepodavateley gumanitarnykh i obshchestvennykh nauk” [A Stenographic Account of the Meeting with the Delegates of the All-Russia Conference of Teachers of Humanitarian and Social Sciences] (meeting, Novo-Ogaryovo, June 21, 2007), available at <http://kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/06/135323.shtml> (accessed July 30, 2008).

13. See, for example, Alexander V. Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii: 1945–2006 gg; Kniga dlya uchitelya* [The Modern History of Russia: 1945–2006; A Teacher’s Handbook] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2008), 16–17, available at www.prosv.ru/umk/istoriya/index.html (accessed July 30, 2008).

14. Ibid., 2.

15. Ibid., 20.

16. Ibid., 31.

17. Ibid., 7.

18. Ibid., 5.

19. Ibid., 380.

20. Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 377.

21. Alexander V. Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii: 1945–2006 gg; Kniga dlya uchitelya*, 39.

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 26.

24. Ibid., 47.

25. Ibid., 24, 49.

26. Ibid., 38–39.

27. Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, 732.

28. Ibid.

29. Alexander V. Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii: 1945–2006 gg; Kniga dlya uchitelya*, 41–42.

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31. Alexander V. Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii: 1945–2006 gg; Kniga dlya uchitelya*, 41–42.

32. Ibid., 78.

33. Ibid., 48–49.

34. Ibid., 62.

35. See, for instance, Regnum News Agency, “Privivka ot istoricheskogo revisionisma’ ili opravdanie repressiy? Novyi uchebnik po istorii prodolzhaet vyzvat’ spory” [An “Inoculation against Historical Revisionism” or an Excuse for Repressions? A New History Textbook Continues to Cause Debates], available through www.regnum.ru/news/9040003.html (accessed November 3, 2007).

36. Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present* (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

37. Alexander V. Filippov, *Noveyshaya istoriya Rossii: 1945–2006 gg; Kniga dlya uchitel'ya*, 63.
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39. Ibid., 67.
40. Ibid., 62.
41. Ibid., 64.
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43. Ibid., 64–66.
44. Ibid., 69.
45. Ibid., 76.
46. Ibid.
47. Quoted in Vasilii Selyunin, "Istoki" [The Sources], *Novy mir* 5 (May 1988): 169.
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56. Ibid.
57. Vladimir Kantor, "Imya rokovoe" [The Fateful Name], *Voprosy literatury* 3 (March 1988): 85.
58. Alexandr Tsytko, "Istoki Stalinisma" [The Origins of Stalinism], *Nauka i zhizn'* 2 (February 1989): 61.
59. Ibid.
60. Vasilii Selyunin, "Istoki," 163, 178.
61. Leonid Gozman, participant in a roundtable exchange, "Bol'she sotsializma!" [More Socialism!] *Ogonyok* 14 (1988): 7–10.
62. Boleslav Vol'ter, "Prozrenie idyot slishkom medlenno" [The Recovery of Sight Is Proceeding Too Slowly], *Moskovskie novosti* 45 (November 6, 1988): 2.
63. Yuri Karyakin, "Chto budet, esli i eta perestroika pogibnet?"
64. Yuri Karyakin, "Stoit li nastupat' na grabli?" [Do We Really Want to Step on a Rake?] *Znamya* 9 (September 1987): 219.
65. V. Svirskiy, "Istoriya umalchivaet" [History Omits], *Izvestia*, July 21, 1987.
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75. Ludmila Savraskina, "Smotret' pravde v glaza."
76. Yuri Karyakin, participant in a roundtable exchange, "Bol'she sotsializma!"
77. V. Svirskiy, "Istoriya umalchivaet."
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80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Anton Chekhov, *Vishneyoviy sad* [The Cherry Orchard], in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy* [A. P. Chekhov: Collected Works] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1963), 10:636–37.
84. Vladimir Kantor, "Imya rokovoe," 83.