

Russian History – A Matter of National Security

Gudrun Persson

In July 2013, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced the creation of a unit in the Armed Forces with the task of combating the “falsifications of history”. The company is to specialize in the history of the Second World War, and to “work out irrefutable arguments against historical falsifications that are multiplying today both within Russia and abroad”, according to Vice-Minister of Defence Nikolai Pankov.

It might appear paradoxical to involve the Armed Forces in a battle usually fought by scholars – not by armies – but, at a closer look, it is not so strange. The involvement simply follows the logic of the development in recent years wherein Russian history is deemed an essential part of Russia’s national security policy.

The use of history has become an increasingly important strategy for nation-building in today’s Russia, and the victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) is being given an exceptional place. The National Security Strategy (2009) stipulates that “...attempts to revise the history of Russia, her role and place in world history...” have a negative influence on Russian national security. In the newly adopted Foreign Policy Concept (2013), one of Russia’s objectives is to “...strongly counteract ... attempts to rewrite history by using it to build confrontation and to provoke revanchism in global politics, and to revise the outcomes of World War II”.

Russia is trying to come to terms with its tsarist and Soviet past. The imperial Cadet Corps has been reintroduced, and the Suvorov schools for military training and the Cossack movement are being supported. The legacy of the Soviet military organization DOSAAF (*Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet*) is cherished. After briefly changing its name DOSAAF reinstated its Soviet name in 2003. A monument hon-

ouring the victims of the First World War is to be erected for the first time. For the past ten years former officers on the White side during the Civil War (1918–21) have been re-buried in Russia, commemorative plaques have been put up, and statues have been built.

Furthermore, the Russian Military-Historical Society was re-founded in March 2013 (it was originally founded in 1907 and was disbanded in 1917). The Russian Historical Society was re-founded in 2012 (1866-1917). In line with this policy, the historical names of the imperial Preobrazhenskii and Semenovskii regiments have been added to modern military units: the 154th Independent Commandant’s Regiment has added Preobrazhenskii to its name, and the 1st Infantry Separate Regiment has added Semenovskii.

One might wonder why the political leadership is paying so much attention to Russia’s historical past. After all, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 explicitly states that one of Russia’s objectives is to “[contribute] to the de-politicization of historical discussions to ensure their exclusively academic character”.

However, this objective is not stopping the political leadership from making statements on historical matters. For instance, President Vladimir Putin recently claimed in a controversial statement that the Soviet Union launched the Winter War with Finland in order to “correct mistakes” that had been made when Finland gained its independence in 1917.

The engagement in issues relating to the past is an effort of the current political leadership to try to create a national identity for the country and its Armed Forces. Without a clear objective, armies rarely win wars. This effort is a normative process that is politically controlled. The Chairman of the Russian Historical Society, Sergei

Naryshkin, is also the Speaker of the Duma. Naryshkin – then Head of the Presidential Administration – was appointed Chairman of the Presidential Commission on the falsification of history that existed briefly between 2009 and 2012. The Chairman of the Russian Military-Historical Society, Vladimir Medinskii, is the Minister of Culture.

Considering the importance being given to history it is not surprising that the official history now needs to be rewritten in school textbooks. For a long time, Putin has been unhappy with the different interpretations of Russian history. At a meeting with teachers in 2007, he expressed his dissatisfaction by saying that the lack of common standards led to “porridge in the head” (*kasha v golove*). This is now being rectified – or at least attempts at resolution are being made.

In February 2013, Putin ordered the Ministry of Education to create new history textbooks for schools that should contain a single interpretation of Russian history. He underlined that the new textbooks should not contain any “contradictions or double interpretations”.

The working group set up to do this – consisting of the Minister of Education, the Minister of Culture, the Russian Historical Society, the Military-Historical Society, and experts from the Russian Academy of Sciences – published the outlines for a “historical-cultural standard for Russian history” in July. The entire project is to present the final results by 1 November, and then a competition will be held. The new textbooks should be ready by 2015.

However, the content of the outlines merits attention. Nine points of recommendations are listed that form the basis for the concept of the new textbooks. First, the material in the textbook should be directed towards patriotic education, civic spirit (*grazhdanstvennost*), and inter-ethnic tolerance. Second, the aim is to instil a feeling of pride in their country among the younger generation. It is also stated that patriotic feelings should be linked to

the military victories, in particular the “mass heroism” in 1812 and 1941–45. The history books should be written from the perspective that Russia is “a great country with a great past”, which in turn should make it possible to write “logically and irrefutably on multi-ethnic relations”. Religious history should focus on the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the outlines say that revolutions and civil wars are not a result of foreign or internal conspiracies, but a consequence of “objective contradictions inside the country”. An explanatory note makes clear that the new textbooks must “exclude the possibility of internal contradictions and mutually exclusive interpretations of historical events”.

In other words, Russia needs a history of successes and military victories – which is not at all strange per se. But it echoes of the history writing of the 19th century, the kind of history usually associated with the German nationalist Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–96). It is a very different methodology from a more current approach to history writing that emphasizes a critical approach – to both sources and historical events.

Whether these textbooks will achieve the desired result – in a multi-ethnic state like Russia – may seem doubtful. Newer generations of teachers have become used to the post-1991 period. The Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, seems to be sceptical about the project’s success. Just in case, he has ordered that a special short course of the history of the Russian Army should be written – a mandatory book for all military servicemen.

It is sometimes said that Russia’s history is as unpredictable as its future. The current political leadership clearly puts Russia’s national security – and, hence, its future – in the past.

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