

## editorial

create the rules for approaching history while the game is already in full swing.

*Translated from the German  
by Christopher Gilley*

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WERE STALIN'S POLITICS 'EFFECTIVE'?  
SCANDALS AROUND NEW HISTORY BOOKS IN RUSSIA

*Tamara Eidelman*

## analysis

*The author analyses the current state of schoolbooks on twentieth-century Russian history by looking at three examples which recently attracted considerable public interest. The drama of the situation is fuelled by the facts that many of the negative developments in contemporary history teaching have been forced upon teachers from above and that scandalous teaching materials often enjoy substantial state support.*

History teaching in Russian schools is becoming an increasingly topical political issue. President Putin has accused the authors of schoolbooks of slandering Russia's past. He declared in a televised meeting with teachers in June 2007 that those who receive international grants to write textbooks are simply 'dancing to the music' of their paymasters. Before he became a member of the opposition, Mikhail Kasyanov voiced his indignation that the history books for senior pupils did not describe recent events – in particular his appointment as prime minister. Duma representatives, journalists and TV talk show hosts all discuss history teaching regularly. Everyone seems to think that they understand something of history, and the subject is often used as fodder in political debates.

The different views on history teaching, and particularly on textbooks covering the Soviet period, have become a distinctive litmus test. A hostile attitude to the Western world has, unfortunately, become widespread over the last few years. It is

no coincidence that one offshoot of this has been indignation at schoolbooks published with Western funding – regardless of their quality, the books have suddenly started to arouse suspicion.

A second idea characteristic of the present situation, the exculpation of the Soviet past, has also found its way into discussions about schooling. There can be no doubt that those deprived of any connection to their past can look into the future calmly. The fashion for old Soviet films, songs and customs may arouse feelings of nostalgia. However, as soon as this 'exculpation of the past' crosses a certain line, it ceases to be simply memories of the ordinary lives of normal people and veers dangerously close to a justification of the terrors of Stalinism. Calls to the authors of textbooks to infuse schoolchildren with pride for their country's past might provoke sympathy were it not for the reality that these beautiful words belie a thinly veiled attempt to conceal the real conditions of life under Communism from the younger generation.

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## IGOR DOLUTSKY: 'RUSSIAN HISTORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'

Over the last few years, the Russian education system was shaken by a number of scandals connected with history textbooks. In 2003, Igor Dolutsky's 'Russian History in the Twentieth Century', which had already been in publication for seven years, lost its ministerial stamp. Without this stamp, which represented a mark of approval from the Ministry of Education, the book could not be used in schools. Teachers could, of course, buy one copy for themselves and use it for the preparation of lessons, but it would be simply impossible to order for the school library thirty or sixty copies of a publication lacking ministerial approval. Indeed, a ministerial 'recommendation', advising schools not to use earlier issues of the book, was disseminated to the regions. It is well known that it is not recommended to argue with such a recommendation.

Formally, those in power were angered by two quotations included in the new edition: the words of Iurii Burtin, a well-known member of the '60s generation, calling Putin's accession to power a 'state coup' and the regime he created an 'authoritarian dictatorship'; and Grigory Yavlinsky's assertion that Russia was being turned into a 'police state'. Dolutsky's textbook was subjected to brutal, and at times boorish, criticism. He was accused of Russophobia and inciting hatred, and was called a lot of extremely unpleasant names. His defenders did not remain silent either and quite reasonably saw the attacks on Dolutsky's book as an assault on freedom of speech in Russia. At the same time, as is often the case, bad publicity simply became publicity, and the remaining copies of the schoolbook were snatched up from bookshops by interested readers.

The sad fact of this situation is that Dolutsky's book, which has practically become a symbol for pedagogical freedom, is far from being the best

of its kind. The author wrote a clearly journalistic work that unashamedly expressed his political views. In doing so, he aroused the displeasure of the state, which obviously did not share his understanding of Russia's historical development. One can agree or disagree with Dolutsky's views, but the question of whether the book is suited for use in schools, i.e. if its views are thrust upon its young readers too forcefully, was not even raised. The majority of journalists and public figures who made public statements on the book were basically concerned with its political composition. They either approved of it or condemned it vehemently. Pedagogical questions were simply ignored.

## THE COMPETITION FOR THE BEST SCHOOLBOOK ON RUSSIAN HISTORY

The second event to trigger furious emotions among journalists and teachers was the pseudo-competition to find the best textbook on Russian history, organised by the Ministry of Education in 2002. The official explanation for holding the competition was very simple: the market for textbooks has been so swamped by publications that teachers often find themselves unable to get an overview of the works on offer to them; there are some excellent books, but also trashy pulp. Moreover, the need to work out a single standard of history teaching is being felt more keenly with each passing year, especially for those schoolchildren studying for the standardised state exam. The goal is laudable in principle. However, there was no attempt to define how far standardisation should go or who would be ascertaining the quality of the books.

Twenty-nine texts emanating from different publishers were read by experts in record time. The books were intended for use in years nine and eleven. History teaching is presently structured into two stages or 'concentrated blocks' – the first is taught from year five to year nine and covers the whole period from ancient times to today in chron-

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ological order; the second block lasts between year ten and year eleven and revisits the same topics as the first but in greater depth. It was expected that each category would produce three victors. This led to the curious assumption, sometimes expressed in the press, that three textbooks would be approved for history teaching. The competition itself angered many teachers: had many people actually working in schools read these books? Of course not. One fine day a representative of the Ministry of Education happily announced that two (!) books, both written by the same group of authors, had won in three (!) of the categories. The main author was Nikita Zagladin, head of a department of the Institute of World Economics and International Relations. Both of Zagladin's books have many failings. He was criticised for historical errors and needlessly idealising the Soviet period. However, he really should be criticised for something else: the textbook is bland and boring. The author tries to please everyone at the same time: in order to avoid the criticism of those in power, he does not describe the terrors of Stalinism in too much detail; at the same time, he tries to give the impression that he is not glorifying the past. The result is a strange mix of different ideas that aspire to objectivity, but which is insufferable to read.

The experts identified the book's methodological approach as one of its strong points – a laughable assessment for any teacher. The book incorporates thoroughly traditional principles of teaching, with long texts which the pupils are expected to read and apparently memorise. There is nothing about developing analytical powers or promoting comprehension, without which it is impossible to imagine modern teaching. And it is difficult to escape the thought that the book by Zagladin and his co-authors won precisely for its blandness and dryness. It does not particularly offend anyone, except perhaps for common sense.

The charade of pseudo-democracy, of course, is

also annoying. We will choose a textbook in a competition, but it will be only conducted for 'those in the know', in secret, away from teachers and the public.

ALEKSANDR FILIPPOV, 'A HISTORY OF RUSSIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'

Several years later, and again teachers and the public in general find themselves facing a sad fact. The political scientist Aleksandr Filippov has written a book on twentieth-century Russian history with the modest sub-title 'a textbook for teachers'. On opening the book, one receives a great shock: as early as the first page, one finds the dumbfounding claim that 'over the course of seventy years, Western domestic policy was steered towards human rights under the not inconsiderable influence of the USSR, that enormous supra-state which realised the social revolution and emerged victorious from the cruellest of wars'. It is later explained that political imprisonment was not a significant feature of Stalinist Russia. However many convicts there may have been, Stalin's brutal decisions were nonetheless justifiable on balance, as they were dictated by the country's interests. The repressions were a product of 'the desire to ensure the greatest possible effectiveness of the governing apparatus', as exemplified by Brezhnev, an effective governor who received his political education during this period.

The narrative is cleverly constructed, again simulating a 'democratic' style: there are separate passages which are indicated as being the author's 'personal' opinion; there are appeals to the opinion of the majority, which seemingly believes that Stalin brought more good to Russia than bad; there are 'documents of the epoch'. In a nutshell, every attempt has been made to write an apparently modern book for teachers. The author, truth be told, does not understand what teachers need. At the very beginning, he expresses the now fashionable

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sentiment that ‘the study of history should provide not only a knowledge of historical facts, but also the ability to apply the skills acquired to the solution of professional tasks and social problems’. He does not, however, suggest any methods for achieving these complex pedagogical goals. It is apparently assumed that if a pupil knows the means that Stalin used to ensure the greatest possible effectiveness in the governing apparatus, he or she will be able to solve the above-mentioned tasks and problems. Somehow, one shudders at the thought of a generation of young people educated in such a way.

At the moment, a textbook for year eleven students is being prepared based on this work. It is true that there are rumours that the wave of general outrage welling up in the specialist and non-specialist press, internet and radio has ensured changes; however, only time will show how significant these are.

The second question – whose answer will soon become apparent – is how aggressively Filippov’s textbook will force out other, better schoolbooks. His work has already received strong support from official circles: it is printed by the large educational publishers *Prosveshchenie* (‘Enlightenment’), which will very likely also act as the book’s distributor. However, one should not despair. The list of textbooks on Russian history that are recommended by the Ministry remains diverse and contains more than just three options for each year. One can still find books written by excellent academics (such as Igor Danilevsky, Andrei Levandovsky and Sergei Mironenko), books with interesting methodological approaches and books with different political conceptions of the development of Russia.

## NEW APPROACHES TO HISTORY TEACHING

Unfortunately, there are practically no innovative books. Attempts to reform the approach to history teaching are becoming increasingly half-hearted,

yet reforms are essential if the political discord in this area is to be resolved. Modern methods enable one to foster pupils’ ability to compare different points of view, analyse sources, separate fact from opinion and identify distortion and propaganda. Teachers long ago understood that lessons should not only deal with political or socio-economic norms, but also with striking personalities and the daily lives of different sections of the population.

Sad to say, one can only name a few textbooks that pick up on these trends and allow one to work with up-to-date methods. There is one more interesting peculiarity: the most innovative textbooks are those written on Western history. Maybe it is not just a matter of the talents of individual authors, but of the fact that these books were less subject to the ideological pressure evident in the books on Russian history.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the current author received the opportunity to take part in two projects aimed at creating new textbooks. The close work between the inter-regional ‘Union of History Teachers’ and the European Standing Conference of History Teachers’ Associations *Euroclio* led to the publication of ‘The Lessons of Clio’ on Russian and world history in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as to the book *Cultural Mosaic*, intended for teaching in a multi-cultural society. The way of teaching embodied in these works not only transforms the very nature of teaching and working in the classroom; it also offers an opportunity to escape the politicisation of twentieth-century history. This approach, which is extremely innovative and unusual for Russian schools, cannot be implemented overnight. For this very reason, both projects sought not simply to develop new textbooks, but also to acquaint teachers with the new, active methods of history teaching. The numerous courses introduced for teachers in various Russian cities show that pedagogues and teach-

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ers approve of the active methods. Unfortunately, the large publishing houses, which in effect control the market for textbooks, are not very interested in these teaching materials; these books are too unusual. They are therefore printed by the smaller publishers in limited runs that cannot meet the needs of such a large country.

Nevertheless, the new ideas are slowly but surely carving out a way for themselves. Today, it is already difficult to imagine a good textbook that does not use extracts from sources or exercises and that does not aim to improve the cognitive powers of its readers. It is becoming increasingly common to find chapters dealing with the history of the everyday life of ordinary people. The further one moves away from twentieth-century history, one finds more authors who are prepared to do this and more books that have benefited as a result.

Moreover, it is possible to make a second argument. It has long been said in Russia that the defence against poor laws is poor enforcement. The book by Filippov is evidently going to be distributed throughout Russia and the textbooks based on it will be introduced into schools. However, much depends on the teachers. One cannot rule out the possibility that many will ignore it, not because of its political ideas, but simply because they are already used to using other textbooks and that there

are already other books in the school library. While the albeit more limited diversity amongst course books remains, all is not yet lost; one can place one's hopes on the teachers' common sense.

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## READING SUGGESTION:

- Ben Eklof, Larry E. Holmes, Vera Kaplan (eds.) (2005): *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia: Legacies and Prospects*. London: Frank Cass/Routledge, 2005.
- Helge Blakkisrud, 'Nation-building and values in Russian textbooks', in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (ed.), *Nation-building and common values in Russia*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

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