

Putin's Distorted History

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There is actually nothing fundamentally new about the Russian history textbooks recently unveiled by a working group headed by State Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin. Although the textbook ostensibly advocates freedom, constitutionalism and the paramount value of human life, the main value embraced by the authors — and the book's chief client, President Vladimir Putin — remains the supremacy of the state.

The intrinsic value of the state is the common thread running throughout the textbook. The result is that schoolchildren will be taught the same lessons that they learned in both tsarist and Soviet times — that the state's interests always take precedence over the interests of individual citizens. In practice, that means the state can arbitrarily sacrifice people and their freedom for its own interests. The new textbook aims to cultivate obedient "servants" of the state, not independent and free citizens of a democratic Russia.

In the new
history textbook
just released

for schoolchildren, Ivan the Terrible is a "reformer," Stalin is a "modernizer," the democratic achievements of Gorbachev and Yeltsin are ignored, and Putin is a hero who restored Russia's greatness.

The "new concept" of Russian history is a disturbing throwback to previous times. It cobbles together the old, official tsarist history prior to 1917 and elements of Soviet history. Simply put, it suggests that all tsars and Communist Party general secretaries were enlightened autocrats, no matter what they did to their own people. The text overlooks the fact that this pantheon of leaders did little or nothing to improve the lives of their citizens, develop the economy or introduce personal freedoms, and it lavishly praises them for the far more important accomplishment of strengthening and expanding the state.

Thus, the bloody reign of Ivan the Terrible is depicted as a period of "reforms," and his seizures of Kazan and Astrakhan are euphemistically described as "annexations." The authors refer to Peter the Great's reforms with the buzzword "modernization," even while failing to mention the cost of his wars or the fact that about one-fourth of the population of the Russian Empire died during his reign.

The new textbook also takes a positive view of Emperor Nicholas I, who began his reign by punishing and exiling the Decembrists, continued with a heavy-handed and oppressive autocracy, and led Russia straight into a shameful defeat in the Crimean War. It turns out that even he was a reformer who "tried to carry out economic modernization with authoritarian methods." As for Alexander III, the new textbook respectfully describes his counter-reforms and policy of unification for minorities as "politically conservative stabilization."

The Soviet period as a whole is praised. The Bolsheviks are credited with restoring a strong state, instituting broad social reforms and carrying out the successful industrialization of the country. Although the authors acknowledge the enormous sacrifices made by the people in the mass famine of the 1920s and 1930s, the mass repression, the gulags and the deportation of entire populations, they are all presented as unavoidable costs of what the authors call "Soviet modernization." Stalin's regime, which killed millions of innocent people, is called "Stalinist socialism."

The textbook concludes that the Soviet system had many strengths and achievements. Yet this "new concept" of Russian history does nothing to explain why the great superpower called

the Soviet Union imploded so quickly and easily in 1991 like a house of cards.

The problems of the late Soviet period are attributed to low productivity, the poor quality of manufactured goods and low worker motivation. The West's relative success is attributed to its vague "ability to evolve." Such crude, superficial explanations make it impossible for a school student to understand the inherent superiority of a free-market economy over a planned economy or why the Soviet Union completely lost its economic and political struggle with the West.

The authors expressed particular praise for Alexander II, who, we are told, multiplied Russia's power, glory and territory. At the same time, few good words are reserved for leaders who attempted to reform the gross inefficiencies of the Russian state. The authors found nothing positive about Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's bold and much-needed perestroika and glasnost programs and instead harped on about the mistakes he made during his rule. Similarly, school children will learn that there was nothing redeeming about the 1990s or President Boris Yeltsin. That entire period is presented as the "wild 1990s" that consisted of an unrelenting series of economic and political crises. No mention whatsoever was made of how Yeltsin introduced individual freedoms, free and fair elections, the parliamentary system, federalism, democratic institutions or the market economy.

Meanwhile, the book's main patron, Putin, is described with glowing superlatives. Putin, we are told, stabilized the country after the "disastrous '90s," built a much-needed autocratic system called the "vertical-power structure" and achieved strong economic growth, even amid the sharp global slowdown of 2008-09. Notably, readers will find no mention of the 2004 Beslan terrorist attack, the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000, the sharp rise in corruption under Putin's rule, the enrichment of Putin's close friends and associates, the monopolization of the economy or the jailing of the wealthiest man in Russia, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or the government's subsequent seizure of his company.

In addition to those glaring omissions, the textbook is conspicuously silent on Stalin's collusion with Adolf Hitler during the first two years of World War II and the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that divided Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union. The description of World War II differs little from Stalin- and Brezhnev-era textbooks. It even combines the February and October Revolutions into a single "Great Russian Revolution," despite the fact that the two events pursued opposite goals and programs.

Despite claiming to rely on historical scholarship, the new textbook, which the authorities have presented as a "new concept of presenting Russian history," is highly politicized and grossly distorts historical facts. Like the textbooks tailored to serve the interests of the tsar and Soviet leaders, the new textbook furthers the interests of Putin and his inner circle. The new history textbook could have been written by the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's classic "1984."

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