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# Russian politics and the Soviet past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Evidence drawn from the intersection of historical memory and politics in Russia underline not only on-going framing battles over the Soviet past. The evidence suggests that the Kremlin is unwilling to develop and impose on society historical narratives which promote chauvinism, hypernationalism, and re-Stalinization. Although such an agenda has some support among incumbent elites and in society, it remains subordinate in terms of political influence as of early 2016. Instead, the regime is now extending support to groups in society and the political establishment which favor a critical assessment of the Soviet era, including Stalinism. This emerging criticism of the Soviet past serves a number of important goals of the leadership, including re-engagement with the West.

To this end, the Kremlin recently approved new history textbooks critical of the Soviet past as well as a significant program that memorializes the victims of Soviet repressions. Yet the regime is unlikely to usher in thorough de-Stalinization which would threaten its power. Instead, the Kremlin is attempting to assemble a grand narrative that approves, as well as criticizes – in different measures – each of the regimes that existed in the 20th century (tsarist, communist, and post-communist). This incipient narrative constitutes a form of *bricolage*, which involves the retrieval and reassembly of diverse, often conflicting, elements to solve a problem. Here the problem is the long-standing, divisive issue of how to evaluate the history of 20th century Russia and its different regimes. The Kremlin now seeks to knit together the diverse identities of these regimes through the unifying historical thread of the Russian state. This act of *bricolage* also seeks to reconcile the contradictions *within* each regime: elements of the new narrative can be expected to condemn the inhumanity of Stalin and Stalinism while other facets will extol industrialization and the Great Patriotic War as the achievements of Russian-led Soviet society. From this perspective, neither re-Stalinization nor de-Stalinization is likely to occur in Putin's Russia. Nevertheless, if recent initiatives remain in place, critical assessments of Soviet foreign and domestic policies will become increasingly commonplace.

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## 1. Introduction

Is the Russian regime under Vladimir Putin now undergoing re-Stalinization, as some experts argue? (Kuzio, 2016) Other scholars suggest that Russia today meets the “fascist minimum” (Eatwell, 1996; Paxton, 2004, pp. 14, 20) – the presence of sufficient traits that justify the use of fascism as a concept to evaluate politics in Russia (Motyl, 2007, 2010). In both instances,

<sup>☆</sup> The article does not represent the views of the United States Government, the United States Army, or the United States Military Academy.

the assumption is that the Russian regime, with the support of much of Russian society, is increasingly despotic, aggressively nationalistic, and neo-imperialist. Official praise for Stalin and his domestic and foreign policies is said to provide vital ideological support for this turn toward greater authoritarianism and chauvinism.

A close examination of competing historical narratives among elites and within Russian society provides an alternative assessment of the Russian regime. Two related propositions are offered: 1) guided by instrumental considerations and political pressures, the Russian regime has increasingly shifted to historical representations that are more critical of the Soviet era, including the rule of Josef Stalin. Although the Kremlin's positive assessments of Stalin, as the personification of Russia as an authoritarian great power, are increasingly muted, it still rejects a full condemnation of the dictator or the Soviet era; 2) The regime's search for equilibrium on the Soviet era is due in large part to the requirements of the regime's legitimacy, particularly through the sacralized memory of the Great Patriotic War, and to the persistence of deep divisions among political elites and Russian society over how to evaluate the Soviet period, particularly Stalinism. As a form of political compromise, the regime now favors a grand narrative for the controversial 20th century that elevates the patriotic unity of the Russian state and people above the more discrete (and divisive) political traits of the tsarist, communist, and post-communist regimes.

The future of this incipient grand narrative, which is a form of *bricolage* offering political and ideological conciliation, is uncertain. The regime may not provide sufficient commitment or resources to the project, or the preferences of Vladimir Putin might abruptly change, as has happened in the past on the issue of historical politics. Influential groups will also continue to press for the hegemony of their preferred narratives, which support either re-Stalinization or de-Stalinization.

If the current, more critical official interpretation of the Soviet era survives, it will blend censure, neutral detachment, and approval, in amounts that vary according to the Soviet period and issue under review. As such, the new narrative will provide uncertain support for authentic democratization. At the same time, it will not motivate Russians to embrace aggressive nationalism or a more repressive regime. Official and societal attempts to mythologize the Soviet past, particularly the Stalin era, will persist. But with the exception of the Great Patriotic War, these efforts are likely to remain selective and episodic, lacking purpose, persistence, and coherence. This evaluation contrasts with those of Western scholars who argue that Vladimir Putin has created a hegemonic cultural system whose manipulation of Soviet history legitimates his rule and regime (Liñán, 2010). In sum, efforts to understand the future course of Russia's domestic and foreign policy are assisted by an examination of the nature and strength of the symbolic resources of the regime rooted in narratives about the Soviet system.

## 2. Roadmap

The article first examines the current ambivalence and division within the Russian regime over how to evaluate the Soviet era. It then turns to an assessment of the divergent narratives of successive regime-supported history textbooks over the past decade, with a focus on the appearance and rapid decline of the regime's anti-Western texts of 2007–2008. In its examination of the protracted conflict over how to depict and evaluate the Soviet era, particularly Stalinism, the article describes the political forces within the regime and society that advocate an organized public rejection of the Soviet experience, often from different perspectives. Several developments which recently advanced critical representations of the Soviet period are examined: the new high school history textbooks issued in the summer of 2015; the opening of the new Gulag Museum; plans to build a monument to the political victims of the Soviet system; and the revival of a comprehensive project (of which the proposed monument is an integral component) to memorialize the victims of Soviet repressions.

The most significant evidence that the regime is not engaged in re-Stalinization in ideological or symbolic terms is the protracted struggle within the political elite and society over how to evaluate the Soviet past, particularly Stalinism, and the regime's recent support for measures that commemorate the victims of the Stalinist repression. The divisions among incumbent elites demonstrate that the regime cannot be treated as a unified institution on the issue of how to evaluate the Soviet past.

After describing recent anti-Stalinist initiatives, the article provides an explanation for the counterintuitive emergence of such efforts. Given current strained relations with the West and a fraying social contract at home due to Western sanctions, the long-term drop in the price of oil, and the costs of an archaic strategy of national development, one might have expected the Kremlin to use a mythologized past, with a strongly nationalist narrative, to distract society and generate legitimacy for itself. Yet, in important ways, the Kremlin under Vladimir Putin has moved away from – not toward – a depiction of the Russian past that is imbued with intolerant, revanchist, and imperialist myths.

## 3. The Russian regime and the Soviet past: conservative voices

Western observers often assume that widespread nostalgia for the Soviet past in Russia reflects elite and popular attitudes that are rooted in an authoritarian ethos shaped by aggressive nationalism and political intolerance. Such assessments often recall that Vladimir Putin characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as a “major geopolitical disaster of the [20th] century.” (President of Russia website, 2005) As a respected journal noted in 2009 in its introduction to a special issue on Russian history and politics: “turning a blind eye to the crimes of the communist regime, Russia's political leadership is restoring, if only in part, the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism...” (Miller et al., 2009) Western scholars also maintain that expressions of support in Russian society for Stalin reflect the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to foster anti-Westernism as well as nostalgia for

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