

# Russian New Historical Discourse

Author: LTC Arto Hirvela, FIN Army, CCJ5 CSAG

*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

## Key Points

- The Kremlin's new historical narrative aims to legitimize their authoritarian practices by sacralizing the power of the state
- Kremlin is once again capitalizing on sentiments ever present among the Russian populous to rally around the flag and repel ancient enemies' encroachment
- Putin utilizes narrative of Russia being the center of sacred European and religious traditions
- Actions against new historical narrative in Europe have escalated his historical revisionism
- Russian people's perceptions of their own history are changing

## Introduction

The Russian regime (Putin especially) has made victory over Nazism a cornerstone of their national ideology and legitimacy. President Putin deems the collapse of the Soviet Union as the major geopolitical disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Putin has taken a strong personal interest in rewriting or 'modernizing' Russian history for the purpose of restoring the country's pride as a great power. The primacy of this messaging is evident during Russia's reform vote. President Putin provided the Russian public no vision for the future of the country under his continued leadership; his focus was firmly on the idealized past.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

*"Historical revisionism, the manifestations of which we now observe in the West, and primarily with regard to the subject of the Second World War and its outcome, is dangerous because it grossly and cynically distorts the understanding of the principles*

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, President of Russia, Web page, April 25, 2005 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (Accessed July 8, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Natalia Popovych, Danylo Lubkivsky, Czar Putin wants a new age of empires, *Atlantic Council*, July 6, 2020 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (Accessed July 19, 2020)

*of peaceful development, laid down at the Yalta and San Francisco conferences in 1945.”- Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin<sup>3</sup>*

In 2013, schoolchildren in Russia received a modernized history textbook. Although the textbook seemingly promotes freedom, constitutionalism and the paramount value of human life, the main value embraced by the authors and the book's main client, President Putin, remains the supremacy of the state. The schoolchildren are 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. The schoolchildren are learning that 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. While not declaring that the state can subjectively sacrifice people and their freedom for state's own interests, the textbook aims to foster obedient "servants" of the state, not independent and free citizens of a democratic Russia.<sup>4</sup>

As the Russian national working group drafts new constitutional amendments, it has proposed inclusion of the following clause: “The Russian Federation honors the memory of defenders of the Fatherland and protects historical truth. Diminishing the significance of the people’s heroism in defending the Fatherland is not permitted.”<sup>5</sup> With this addition, criticism of historical heroes would not be allowed and would be punishable under the law. Putin considers himself to be one such hero.

On September 1, 2019, Poland hosted a commemorative event dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. The leaders of the United States and a number of European countries were invited to attend these commemorative events. President Putin, conversely, was not among the invitees, partly because of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>6</sup> A second and more important reason to the Polish was the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and Soviet invasion to Poland in September 1939. This international snub annoyed the Russian political class, especially those supporting Putin’s narratives. Even though his non-invitation could be considered a political blunder, it robbed Putin of a chance to rewrite history publicly.<sup>7</sup> What annoyed Putin even more than the missed opportunity in Poland, and accelerated his historical revisionism, was the European Parliament’s September 19, 2019, resolution, “On the Importance of European Remembrance of the Future of Europe.”<sup>8</sup> That resolution,

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Putin, The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II, *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982?page=0%2C3> (Accessed June 25, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Ryzhkov, Putin's Distorted History, *The Moscow Times*, November 18, 2013 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/18/putins-distorted-history-a29683> (Accessed December 1, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> The State Duma, *What changes will be in the Constitution of the Russian Federation?*, March 12, 2020 <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/48039/> (Accessed June 8, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Interfax, Валенса осудил Польшу за отказ пригласить Путина на годовщину начала Второй мировой [Walesa condemned Poland for refusing to invite Putin to the anniversary of the start of World War II], August 29, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/674386> (Accessed June 20, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Interfax, Володин назвал действия властей Польши оскорбляющими память советских солдат [Volodin called the actions of the Polish authorities insulting the memory of Soviet soldiers], September 1, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/674718> (Accessed June 9, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin, The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II, *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982?page=0%2C3> (Accessed June 25, 2020)

among other things, condemned Russia for downplaying crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime, blamed the Soviets for their part for starting World War II, and called for the removal of Soviet World War II memorials across Europe.<sup>9</sup>

This resolution was much needed, as many European countries have challenges even with former Soviet era monuments. In 2018 the Czech Republic was planning to correct texts on a plaque in a memorial to Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague, and the Russian embassy pushed to block the changes. In 1945 Konev had led the Soviet forces that liberated Czechoslovakia from the East. Currently this is considered a symbol of the Communist occupation, and Putin's current foreign policy. For most Czech people, the memorial was not significant, but this event caused dismay in the Czech Republic as Russia was telling another sovereign country what they should or shouldn't do with their own cultural patrimony. This shows a history of the Kremlin taking the narrative about Great Patriotic War seriously.<sup>10</sup> In April 2020, a controversial memorial in Prague, dedicated to a Soviet-era military commander was removed, drawing rebuke from Moscow and from Czech President Milos Zeman.<sup>11</sup> The Russia's Investigative Committee, which handles investigations into major crimes, was quick to open a criminal case over the suspected public desecration of symbols of Russia's military glory.<sup>12</sup>

### **Historical Discourse renewed**

President Putin himself wrote a long personal assessment of the legacy of World War II, published by *Rossijskaja Gazeta* and *National Interest*.<sup>13</sup>

*"We must do everything so that today's children and in general all our citizens are proud that they are heirs, grandchildren, great-grandchildren of the winners. They knew the heroes of their country and their family so that everyone understood that this was part of our life."* - Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin<sup>14</sup>

The Kremlin is not just offering a new narrative by promoting his works. It is actively pushing it domestically and to other countries. For example, the Russian Embassy in Berlin sent out a message to

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<sup>9</sup> European Parliament, Legislative Observatory, *Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe*, September 19, 2019, [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2019/2819\(RSP\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2019/2819(RSP)) (Accessed June 20, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Robert Tait, Statue must tell true story of Soviet 'hero', say Czechs, *The Guardian*, August 5, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/05/soviet-hero-konev-statue-prague-spring> (Accessed June 22, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, *Prague Removes Statue of Soviet-Era Commander, Angering Russia*, April 3, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/prague-removes-statue-of-soviet-era-commander-angering-russia/30528880.html> (Accessed July 23, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Statue must tell true story of Soviet 'hero', say Czechs, *The Guardian*, April 10, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue> (Accessed July 23, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin, The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II, *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982?page=0%2C3> (Accessed June 25, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> Russian Military Historical Society, Web site, <https://rvio.histrf.ru/> (Accessed June 25, 2020)

German historians featuring this article by Putin, promoting it as an academic source material to be recognized and used as such.<sup>15</sup>

In the new Russian historical discourse, the state controls all narratives which once again underscores the regime's totalitarian nature. This control began long ago in the czar's Russia, and continued with events such as the Bolshevik revolution, or the notorious secret protocol of the Ribbentrop-Molotov-Pact of August 1939. Under this Pact Germany and the Soviet Union divided Central and Eastern Europe. During Soviet times, the existence of this secret protocol was concealed and notoriously denied. Then, during Glasnost, in 1989 the new Soviet Parliament (The Congress of People's Deputies) admitted the pact existed and condemned its secret protocol as legally defective and invalid.<sup>16</sup> As late as 2009, President Putin has gone on record as condemning the pact as morally unacceptable,<sup>17</sup> but in the renewed historical discourse, this is being portrayed as a victory for diplomacy and for Stalin personally. The new narrative in Russia is that there was no other way; refusing Ribbentrop's offer would have put the Soviet Union in a far worse military and political situation.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the temporary and 'pretended' alliance with Hitler allowed for the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany.

Stalin has now been elevated to join the greatest historical Russian heroes and is by some Russians even considered divine.<sup>19</sup> The current regime has not only exonerated Stalin openly and officially of his crimes, but even encouraged his rehabilitation.<sup>20</sup> According to Levada-Center survey data, the public's respect for Stalin increased from 29 percent in 2018 to 41 percent in 2019. During the survey, when asked; "What role did Stalin play in the life of our country?" 70 percent of respondents believed he had a positive impact, even though 45 percent also responded that human sacrifices made were not justified.<sup>21</sup> It seems that many Russians have quickly forgotten that Stalin personally decided to approve the murder of nearly 22 thousand Polish prisoners from the war in Katyn on March 5, 1940.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Roman Goncharenko, Russian embassy hawks Putin World War II article, *Deutsche Welle*, June 24, 2020 <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-embassy-hawks-putin-world-war-ii-article/a-53932390> (Accessed June 26, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Documents of the XX century, Постановление Съезда народных депутатов СССР о пакте Молотова-Риббентропа от 24.09.1989 г. [Resolution of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 09.24.1989], <http://doc20vek.ru/node/3261> (Accessed June 9, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> wyborcza.pl, Web site, List Putina do Polaków - pełna wersja [Putin's letter to Poles - full version], August 31, 2009 [https://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,6983945,List\\_Putina\\_do\\_Polakow\\_pelna\\_wersja.html?disableRedirects=true](https://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,6983945,List_Putina_do_Polakow_pelna_wersja.html?disableRedirects=true) (Accessed June 9, 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Russian Newspaper RGRU, Иного выхода не было [There was no other way], August 22, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/08/22/reshenie-sssr-zakliuchit-pakt-o-nenapadenii-s-germaniej-osnovyvalos-na-razvedke.html> (Accessed June 9, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Mada Jurado, Russian Orthodox Church: Stalin could have made a good bishop, *Novena News*, January 18, 2020, <https://novenanews.com/russia-orthodox-church-stalin-could-have-made-a-good-bishop/> (Accessed July 26, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Peter Rutland, Neil Shimmiel, Putin's dangerous campaign to rehabilitate Stalin, *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/13/putins-dangerous-campaign-rehabilitate-stalin/> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Levada-Center, ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ МНЕНИЕ-2019 [Public Opinion -2019 Yearbook], p. 174. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OM-2019.pdf> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Katarzyna Utracka, The Katyn Massacre – Mechanisms of Genocide, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, May 18, 2020 <https://warsawinstitute.review/issue-2020/the-katyn-massacre-mechanisms-of-genocide/> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

These responses are despite the fact that in 2010 Russia's parliament issued a statement confessing that the killings had been carried out on Stalin's orders.<sup>23</sup>

A visible sign of Stalin's new role in historical discourse are monuments. When Putin came to power, there was not a single monument to Stalin in Russia. Today there are more than a hundred, supposedly installed on private initiative with approval or support from the authorities.<sup>24</sup>

Two Russian historians now argue that another example of an effort to rewrite a guilt-free version of Russia's past is that thousands of political prisoners executed by Stalin's secret police in Karelia, and buried at Sandarmokh were not victims of Stalin's but instead were Soviet soldiers executed by the Finnish Army during World War II. The Russian Military historical Society<sup>25</sup> sponsored excavation looking for evidence to support this highly contested theory put forward by two Karelia historians.<sup>26</sup> This is another attempt to rewrite the history in Russia by distorting the sources and making strange interpretations of them.<sup>27</sup>

In Ukraine, Russia places responsibility for the war crimes committed by Nazi Germany in World War II with Ukrainian nationalists, and hides executions made by the Red Army under the Holocaust narrative. Babyn Yar (Kiev, Ukraine) is the site of "the largest single massacre in the history of the Holocaust."<sup>28</sup> In commemoration of the 80 year anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy, the Kremlin has offered 100 million US dollars for the construction of a memorial to Jews "who became victims of Ukrainian nationalists', slaughtered 80 years ago." This narrative has been largely disproved by a majority of historians, since leaders of Ukrainian nationalistic movements were also among those executed in Babyn Yar.<sup>29</sup> While there were Jewish victims killed there, there were also: prisoners of the Red Army; degraded Soviet party leaders; Roma; patients of the Pavlov Psychiatric Clinic; members of various groups of the resistance movement (including communists, Ukrainian nationalists, and Polish

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<sup>23</sup> BBC NEWS, *Europe court criticises Russia over Katyn massacre inquiry*, October 21, 2013

<https://warsawinstitute.review/issue-2020/the-katyn-massacre-mechanisms-of-genocide/> (Accessed July 8, 2020)

<sup>24</sup> Krim Realii, *В Нижегородской области России установили памятник Сталину [A monument to Stalin was erected in the Nizhny Novgorod region of Russia]*, June 25, 2020 <https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-nizhegorodskaya-oblast-pamyatnik-stalinu/30690195.html> (Accessed November 30, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> The Society was created by the President Putin (Decree No. 1710) December 29, 2012 with the aim of consolidating the forces of the state and society in studying the military historical past of Russia, promoting the study of Russian military history and opposing attempts to distort it, ensuring the popularization of the achievements of military historical science, raising prestige military service and education of patriotism. <https://rvio.histrf.ru/officially/ukaz-1710>

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Higgins, *He Found One of Stalin's Mass Graves. Now He's in Jail*, *New York Times*, April 27, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/world/europe/russia-historian-stalin-mass-graves.html>, (Accessed June 25, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Irina Takala, *Venäläistutkijat syyttivät suomalaisia sotavankien tappamisesta: Asiakirjat todistavat systemaattisen historian vääristelyn [Russian investigators accuse Finns of killing prisoners of war: Documents prove systematic distortion of history]*, *Suomen Kuvalehti*, June 22, 2020 <https://suomenkuvalehti.fi/jutut/kotimaa/venalaistutkijat-syyttivat-suomalaisia-sotavankien-tappamisesta-asiakirjat-todistavat-systemaattisen-historian-vaaristelyn/> (Accessed June 25, 2020)

<sup>28</sup> Alexandra Wagner, "Сзади стоят Путин и Сурков". Кто финансирует мемориал в урочище Бабий Яр ["Putin and Surkov are standing behind." Who finances the memorial in the tract Babi Yar], *Svoboda*, September 29, 2019 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30185426.html>, (Accessed July 2, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Proştir Museum, *Web site, Меморіальний центру жертв Голокосту "Бабин Яр": плани і наміри [Babin Yar Holocaust Memorial: Plans and Intentions]*, October 1, 2016, <http://prostir.museum.ua/post/38005> (Accessed July 2, 2020)

nationalists) that were executed on the site.<sup>30</sup> But the Kremlin has been keen to rewrite this part of the history and put the blame entirely on Ukrainian nationalists.

With a new historical discourse, painful memories are being erased, like the war in Afghanistan. In 1991 Levada Center survey, only 3 percent of respondents believed that the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was justified. In 2014 it was just 9 percent, but in 2019, the number had increased to 22 percent. Meanwhile the number of those who believed it was not necessary to send troops to Afghanistan dropped from 88 (1991), to 68 (2014), and to just 55 percent by 2019.<sup>31</sup>

In Russia, the state has even taken control over the so called non-political Victory Day “Immortal Regiment” marches. Immortal Regiment marches commemorate loved ones who died in World War II in which families carry photographs of lost relatives in the processions. With the Russian government’s involvement, the event has now been re-focused to promote patriotism and loyalty rather than remembering the country's war dead.<sup>32</sup>

Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, one of the first things the new regime did was to announce that Russian history textbooks would replace Ukrainian versions. Russian occupied areas would be given a vastly different interpretation of some of the most contentious periods of the 20th century while the Ukrainian version would be overwritten. The Kremlin is fully aware that, if they can control the history children are taught, it is easier to manage them in the future. In Ukraine, history and geography syllabi were altered with a greater Russian bias, as part of a systematic campaign to rid breakaway territories of western influences.<sup>33</sup>

### **Religion Revival**

Just after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, about two-thirds of Russians officially claimed no religious affiliation. Now, 30 years later, Christianity is thriving after a 70-year period of atheistic Soviet rule. 71 percent of Russians identify as Orthodox. President Putin has encouraged this revival from which he has also benefited, both at home and abroad.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war, Putin stated that Russia’s involvement was to protect Christians from the Islamic State.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> Alexandra Wagner, *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Levada-Center, ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ МНЕНИЕ-2019 [Public Opinion -2019 Yearbook], p. 169. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OM-2019.pdf> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

<sup>32</sup> The Moscow Times, *Russia's 'Immortal Regiment' Marches On Victory Day*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/09/russias-immortal-regiment-marches-on-victory-day-a65537> (Accessed June 9, 2020)

<sup>33</sup> Jack Losh, Rebel-held Ukraine overhauls education system as it aligns itself with Russia, *The Guardian*, August 16, 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/16/ukraine-rebel-territories-education-system-overhaul-russia> (Accessed June 26, 2020)

<sup>34</sup> Gene Zubovich, Russia’s Journey from Orthodoxy to Atheism, and Back Again, *Religion & Politics*, October 16, 2018 <https://religionandpolitics.org/2018/10/16/russias-journey-from-orthodoxy-to-atheism-and-back-again/> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>35</sup> Christina Maza, Putin Vows to Rebuild Christian Syria, Restoring Churches and Bringing Refugees Home, *Newsweek*, May 12, 2017 <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-putin-rebuild-christian-syria-churches-735539> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

Orthodox Church supported this “holy war”<sup>36</sup> as do some American evangelicals, who are likewise concerned about Christians in the Middle East.<sup>37</sup>

President Putin uses traditional Christianity for political effect. He often invokes the Russian Orthodox Church in his public speeches, giving the church a much more prominent place in Russian political arena than his predecessors did. With this connection between politics and religion, Putin has set himself up as a defender of traditional and ancient European moral values. Examples are Putin’s notion of fighting for Christianity, opposing homosexuality, and penalizing divorce.<sup>38</sup> He wants to be seen fighting against, as he says, “a moral crisis in the West.”<sup>39</sup> He also sought to justify Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 by invoking a shared religious and cultural history.<sup>40</sup>

### **Analysis**

The politicization of history in Russia has been re-energized. By manipulating the facts and rewriting the interpretation of history, Putin and his regime aim to legitimize their authoritarian practices. New religious narratives have been accepted not only in Russia, but also by many conservatives around the globe, and even in the U.S.<sup>41</sup> The current Russian regime has limited history to the accomplishments of czars and political and military leaders, while treating people as expendable resources. This new historical narrative seems to be quite effective and is radically changing the Russian people’s perceptions of their own history.<sup>42</sup>

The number of Russians who believe that Stalin played a positive role in the country’s history has grown consistently. Stalin, like Putin now, promised to bring stability after a period of war and social chaos. Putin has used the same historical narrative, following the idea that Russia requires a strong hand to prevent internal disorder and protect the country and its people from external aggression. This narrative enabled Stalin in the past (and now Putin), to forge a political system that does not challenge the personal authority of the great leader.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fred Weir, Is Russia's intervention in Syria a 'holy war'? Russian Orthodox Church: 'yes', *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 23, 2015 <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2015/1123/Is-Russia-s-intervention-in-Syria-a-holy-war-Russian-Orthodox-Church-yes> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>37</sup> Franklin Graham, Putin's Olympic Controversy, Morality & Nations in a Changing World, *Decision Magazine*, February 28, 2014 <https://decisionmagazine.com/putins-olympic-controversy/> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>38</sup> Alexis Mrachek, How Putin Uses Russian Orthodoxy to Grow His Empire, *Heritage*, February 22, 2019 <https://www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/how-putin-uses-russian-orthodoxy-grow-his-empire> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>39</sup> Nicolai N. Petro, Russia's Orthodox Soft Power, *Carnegie Council*, March 23, 2015 [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/727#\\_ftn1](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727#_ftn1) (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Putin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, *President of Russia Web-Site*, March 18, 2014 <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>41</sup> Anne Applebaum, The False Romance of Russia, *The Atlantic*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/false-romance-russia/603433/> (Accessed November 9, 2020)

<sup>42</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, Our Dark Past Is Our Bright Future: How the Kremlin Uses and Abuses History, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 5, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81718> (Accessed June 22, 2020)

<sup>43</sup> Peter Rutland, Neil Shimmiel, Putin’s dangerous campaign to rehabilitate Stalin, *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/13/putins-dangerous-campaign-rehabilitate-stalin/> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

In the current Russian narrative, Poland is blamed for the outbreak of World War II, and the need to start the Great Patriotic War, while the Soviet responsibility was minimal or nonexistent. President Putin claims that the Soviet army saved many lives in Poland after it occupied the country's vast eastern areas in 1939.<sup>44</sup> The new Russian historical discourse has turned black into white, making the villain into a savior.

The Kremlin is also connecting other countries in its new historical narrative. By committing others to the new Russian narrative, Moscow hopes to gain more credibility. For example, last June, in Rzhev (Russia) there was an official opening of a monument to commemorate Kyrgyz soldiers who died in the Great Patriotic War.<sup>45</sup> Also, embassies of the Russian Federation in Central Asian countries have been previously distributing free "ribbons of St. George" to the local population to commemorate the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War. However, in the last decade, the ribbon of St. George, a symbol of military valor in Russia, became a disputed topic in many of the countries of the former USSR.<sup>46</sup> Amidst the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, St. George's ribbons were worn by the opponents of the Ukrainian government as of identification marker for the pro-Russia activists. The perception of the ribbons has changed, from symbolizing the Soviet struggle against fascism to become a sign of the Kremlin's encroachment on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of sovereign countries. Some of Kremlin's attempts have thus been countered in many countries like Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, where governments have limited the use of the ribbon of St. George, by either replacing them with their own national symbols or banning their use completely.<sup>47</sup>

Russia is not the only country with an obsession about shaping a new national historical discourse. Many other European countries also have attempted to redefine their narratives and change the nations' collective memory. But Russia stands out because of its categorical refusal to discuss all uncomfortable historical issues, and because of the extremely aggressive tone of its discourse and politicization of history.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Russian regime and Putin specifically seek to enforce in the public mind a narrative to restore the country's lost pride and its empire-like status. The Kremlin is once again capitalizing on sentiments ever present among the Russian populous and rallying people around the flag to repel ancient enemies' encroachment. In the narrative of Putin's Russia, they are the champions of sacred European and religious traditions. This justifies any sacrifice or suffering that the people have to endure, and any

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<sup>44</sup> Sergey Radchenko, Vladimir Putin Wants to Rewrite the History of World War II, *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/vladimir-putin-wants-to-rewrite-the-history-of-world-war-ii/> (Accessed June 21, 2020)

<sup>45</sup> Kabar, *Kyrgyz, Russian leaders talk over phone*, June 24, 2020, <http://en.kabar.kg/news/kyrgyz-russian-leaders-talk-over-phone/> (Accessed June 26, 2020)

<sup>46</sup> Makhinur Niyazova, Георгиевская лента: отменить нельзя оставить [St. George ribbon: you can't leave undone], *24KG*, April 8, 2015, [https://24.kg/perekrestok/10353\\_georgievskaya\\_lenta\\_otmenit\\_nelzya\\_ostavit/](https://24.kg/perekrestok/10353_georgievskaya_lenta_otmenit_nelzya_ostavit/) (Accessed December 22, 2020)

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Kim, St. George's Ribbons and Their Dubious Symbolism in Post-Soviet Central Asia, *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 7, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/st-georges-ribbons-and-their-dubious-symbolism-in-post-soviet-central-asia/> (Accessed December 22, 2020)

<sup>48</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, Our Dark Past Is Our Bright Future: How the Kremlin Uses and Abuses History, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81718>, May 5, 2020, (Accessed June 22, 2020)



demand from the Russian regime. This could lead to a revival of Brezhnev Doctrine, whose foreign policy demanded that the Soviet Union (and now Russian Federation) intervene (including militarily) in countries where socialist rule in the past (or Russian interests now and in a future) was under threat<sup>49</sup> – something which is entirely incompatible with today's rule-based world order.

Putin's renewed historical narrative is radically changing the Russian people's perceptions of their own history and has implications on relationships with other nations who have forgotten the historical facts. As the 2019 poll has shown, where 46 percent of respondents were not aware of the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>50</sup> Putin is also making an effort to halt all criticism of his Soviet predecessors, as he has supported criminalizing comparisons between Stalin's U.S.S.R. and Hitler's Germany. Whenever it helped his narratives and needs, Putin himself has repeatedly spoken out against "rewriting history" and attempts to distort the truth about the Great Patriotic War.<sup>51</sup>

The good news is that there are people in Russia fighting against fake narratives. In October, there was once again an annual event in Russia known as "Return of the Names," a nationwide happening of remembrance for millions of victims of the Communist regime. Every year, Russians gather near the former KGB headquarters in Moscow and in cities across the country to read out the names of relatives and others who ceased to exist under Soviet rule.<sup>52</sup>

As President Putin's Russia rewrites history, it also tries to control the narratives about the near and future history, as it has done in the Ukraine and Syria. That is what Russia will do also in Libya, and Central Asia. As polls show the Russian people already accept the invasion of Afghanistan in large numbers.

To counter Russia's distorted historical narrative from spreading and gaining hold in the Central Asian States, the US needs a longer strategic influencing perspective, combined with vast and well supported education programs. A good example of low a cost and long-term US influence program to change perceptions of youth is the yearly USAID projects to donate children's books to schools and libraries in the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Web page, Brezhnev Doctrine (Accessed July 8, 2020)

<sup>50</sup> Levada-Center, ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ МНЕНИЕ-2019 [Public Opinion -2019 Yearbook], p. 166.  
<https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OM-2019.pdf> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

*In 2017 number was 44 percent, but number of respondent who had not heard about the pact at all was 33 compared to 40 percent in 2019.* Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, September 26, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/09/26/molotov-ribbentrop-pact/> (Accessed June 11, 2020)

<sup>51</sup> Radio Svoboda, Путин поддержал запрет сравнивать СССР и нацистскую Германию [Putin supported the ban on comparing the USSR and Nazi Germany], October 28, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30917088.html> (Accessed November 30, 2020)

<sup>52</sup> Memorial Site, Web page, <https://october29.ru/> and <https://base.memo.ru/> (Accessed November 30, 2020)

<sup>53</sup> USAID, *USAID donates 385,000 books to 900 schools*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/kyrgyz-republic/press-releases/sep-26-2019-usaid-donates-385000-books-900-schools> and U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, *USAID donates 285,000 children's books to schools and libraries in the Kyrgyz Republic*, September 24, 2020, (Accessed December 7, 2020)

**Recommendations:**

- Monitor how Russia involves CAS and ME states in its new historical narrative and actively counter RUS narratives, as appropriate, by cooperating with other organizations.
- Monitor how Russia portrays events in current conflicts, such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya to fit their narrative.
- Take advantage of opportunities at USCENTCOM disposal to demystify falsehood of Putin's new hijacking of history and promote events dealing with the issue.
- Engage and support allies and partner countries, who are targeted by Russian propaganda and their re-written historical narratives, to intensify common countering efforts by boosting legitimate education.