

ARCHIVAL POLICIES AND HISTORICAL MEMORY IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

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Abstract: Although the situation with Russian archives under Vladimir Putin remains deeply frustrating in many cases, it is not as bad as commonly assumed. Russian archives have always been difficult to access, and many of the current problems continue from the Yeltsin era. Russia has yet to make an honest assessment of its history, something it must do to ensure that the past does not come back to haunt it.

Coming to terms with recent traumas is bound to be difficult for any society, especially when the trauma was inflicted from within. In all of the former Soviet republics, a full historical reckoning will discomfit many people, just as it did in Germany after World War II. Millions of ordinary Soviet citizens were, to one degree or another, complicit in the Stalinist repressions by serving as informers (*stukachi*) or supporting the regime in other ways. In the post-Stalin era, the State Security Committee (KGB) continued to recruit millions of informants, whose identities would be disclosed if Soviet records were ever fully opened. Most of the East European countries have opened their Communist-era state security records and revealed the identities of collaborators, but the former Soviet republics other than the three Baltic countries have been unwilling to do the same. Quite apart from the controversy surrounding state security records, many powerful individuals in the former USSR who held senior positions

in the Soviet regime have done their best to prevent archival records from being opened and to forestall a thorough historical reckoning.

The former Soviet republics are hardly unique in their reluctance to confront past abominations and crimes. Numerous long-established democracies—Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Japan, and the United States—are among the countries that have had spotty records at best in coming to terms with horrendous events of the past. Considering that only two decades have passed since the Soviet Union broke apart, it is hardly surprising that Russia and other former Soviet republics have not yet been able to make a full reckoning with their own histories of repression, violence, and social degradation.

Even though the process of coming to terms with the past has been a formidable one for Western countries, it has been even more onerous in the former USSR, especially in Russia, which took on the role of the “legal successor state” to the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, a status that, for some Russian leaders and elites, tends to blur Russia with the USSR. In Russia, as in other countries around the world, public memory has emerged in part from a competition among elites—a competition that Putin has sought to control for the past twelve years, undoing some of the tentative (if imperfect) gains achieved by Boris Yeltsin.

This essay begins with a brief overview of the partial opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and then discusses the very limited efforts by the largest of the former Soviet republics, Russia, to come to terms with the Soviet past.

Archival Policies and Post-Soviet Politics

The degree of archival openness in the former Soviet Union varies markedly from country to country. Access to Soviet-era records in the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) has been unrestricted since the early 1990s. The former Communist party and KGB archives in these three countries are completely open. Although most of the documents in the Baltic archives pertain to the local countries, the archives also contain copies of many central Soviet party and KGB documents, almost all of which are still classified in Moscow. Hence, the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian archives have contributed greatly to the study of Soviet history and Soviet foreign policy, overcoming some of the major obstacles in Russia.¹

No other former Soviet republics have emulated the Baltic countries in declassifying everything from the Soviet era, but a few countries have

¹ Microfilmed copies of many of the Lithuanian KGB archive records are now also available on some 1,100 microfilm reels at Stanford University’s Hoover Archives. See the Lietuvos SSR Valstybės Saugumo Komitetas collection. Microfilms of the Estonian KGB records also are being acquired by the Hoover Archives.

gone a considerable way toward opening their Soviet-era records. Ukraine, in particular, has long made the files of the Ukrainian Communist Party fully available at the Central State Archive (TsDAHOU) in Kyiv, a policy that is unlikely to change under Viktor Yanukovich.² (The files were freely accessible during the ten years under Leonid Kuchma as well as the five years under Viktor Yushchenko.) During the final two years of Yushchenko's presidency, the Ukrainian KGB records (now housed at the archive of the Ukrainian Security Service, the SBU) were made much more accessible by the director of the SBU archive, Volodymyr Vyatrovych. Vyatrovych indicated that he wanted to open the entire archive (as has been done not only in the Baltic countries but also in the Czech Republic and the former East Germany), but he was removed from his post shortly after Yanukovich became president in early 2010, and all access to the archive ended. Despite this setback, researchers interested in Ukrainian KGB documents can still find large quantities of them in many files at TsDAHOU.

In both Georgia and Moldova, as in Ukraine, documents stored in the former Communist party and state archives are fully accessible. In Georgia, researchers also enjoy reasonably good access to the former KGB archive, especially for the Stalin era. In most of the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan, however, restrictions on archival collections are much tighter. The only exception is Kyrgyzstan, where access to former Kyrgyz Communist party records (including the top organs) is largely unrestricted.³ In Uzbekistan, by contrast, the Soviet-era archives are almost wholly inaccessible. Some Uzbek documents from the pre-World War II period have been made available, but no access at all has been granted to the Uzbek Politburo or KGB records from any period.⁴ Much the same is true about Azerbaijan. In Kazakhstan the situation is a bit better, with most of the Stalin-era records open, but access to documents from later decades is almost nil.⁵ In Turkmenistan and Tajikistan the archives have been almost wholly inaccessible.

² For a full guide to the holdings of TsDAHOU, see Boris Ivanenko et al., eds., *Putivnyk: Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan' Ukrainy* (Kyiv: TsDAGO Ukrainy, 2001). See also the bimonthly journal *Arkhivy Ukrainy* published by the Ukrainian archival service and the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory in Kyiv.

³ In June and October 2011, I worked without any problem in the Kyrgyz central state archive, ordering Politburo and Central Committee files of the former Kyrgyz Communist Party.

⁴ When I tried in 2003 to gain access to the Uzbek Communist Party Politburo records from the late 1960s, I failed. The archival authorities kept establishing new hoops for me to jump through, and each time I jumped through one, they created a new one. After more than two weeks of this stonewalling, I finally gave up.

⁵ Among those who have drawn very well on the Kazakh archives is the Italian scholar Nicolò Pianciola. See, for example, his article "Famine in the Steppe: The Collectivization of Agriculture and the Kazak Herdsmen, 1928-1934," *Cahiers du monde russe* (Paris), Vol. 45, Nos. 1-2 (2004), pp. 137-192.

In Russia, the status of the archives in the Putin era has been bleak in many ways, but it is a more complex situation than often realized. Although a few setbacks have occurred since Putin came to office, access to archives has not deteriorated as much as some observers (including me) had initially feared. The basic point to emphasize here is that access to the Russian archives has *always* been limited, even at the start of the Yeltsin era. Indeed, the greatest setback for archival research on the Soviet era occurred at the very start of the Yeltsin era, when Yeltsin decided that he would not open several of the most important archives—the Presidential Archive (formerly the Politburo Archive), the KGB archive, the foreign intelligence archive, and the military intelligence archive. To this day, none of these archives has ever been made accessible to ordinary researchers. Recently declassified documents reveal that at least one of Yeltsin’s closest advisers, Gennadii Burbulis, urged the president to open all the former Soviet archives and to disband the KGB repressive apparatus, but other advisers cautioned him against it, and Yeltsin ultimately sided with the latter group. Occasionally some scattered documents from these archives have been released and published (and a few important leaks have occurred, most notably the transcriptions of documents brought out by Vasilii Mitrokhin and by Alexander Vassiliev), but otherwise everything in them is still sealed.⁶

The next greatest setback for archival research in Russia occurred in April 1993, when the former archive of the Communist Party’s central apparatus and Secretariat (an archive now known as RGANI and then known as TsKhSD, covering the post-Stalin era), which had been fully accessible since mid-1992, was abruptly closed for nearly a year. When it reopened in 1994, large sections of it (including the vast majority of files pertaining to foreign policy, military policy, foreign intelligence, and the internal security organs) were no longer accessible.⁷ To this day, most of those “re-classified” files have not been reopened.

Another setback under Yeltsin occurred in the latter half of the 1990s when the Russian Foreign Ministry archive stopped giving out materials

⁶ Scanned images of the full Vassiliev archive (nine notebooks of transcribed Soviet intelligence documents) and some of the Mitrokhin documents are available on the Cold War International History Project website (www.cwilhp.org). On the importance of the Vassiliev documents, see the special issue on “Soviet Espionage in the United States during the Stalin Era,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer 2009). The rest of the Mitrokhin documents, unfortunately, are available only in translated excerpts included in two published collections: Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and Christopher M. Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

⁷ For a thorough explanation of this episode, see Mark Kramer, “Archival Research in Moscow: Progress and Pitfalls,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue No. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 1, 18-39.

that were of much interest. Curiously enough, though, this disappointing shift finally began to ebb around 2007, when the Foreign Ministry archive started to be slightly more accommodating to researchers. Access to materials there is still very limited and no finding aids have yet been made available (even though the Norwegian Nobel Institute gave the archive \$100,000 in 1992 to declassify them), but the outlook is not quite as bleak as it seemed ten years ago.

Even more significant is the reversal of another setback that initially seemed to bode ill about archival access under Putin — the abrupt closure in September 2003 of *opisi* 128, 133, and 135 of *fond* 17 at the archive now known as RGASPI (the former Central Party Archive, covering mostly the period before 1953). These collections consist of thousands of voluminous files of documents pertaining to Stalin's foreign policy from 1945 to 1953, most of which had been available to researchers from the early 1990s until they were suddenly re-classified in 2003. In November 2008, the three *opisi* were reopened, and the large majority of the files, after being off-limits for five years, were again made available for research.

Also, despite a few nettlesome setbacks under Putin, it is important to note that some crucial sets of documents that were not released under Yeltsin have become available for the first time over the past eight years or so. These include numerous collections at RGASPI (particularly some valuable personal papers, or "*lichnye fondy*," of top leaders and the extremely important "*osobyie papki*" documents that were discussed or reviewed at Stalin-era Politburo meetings) and at GARF (many collections) and even RGANI (particularly the crucial Malin notes and related documents from Khrushchev-era Communist Party Presidium meetings, the Central Committee plenum transcripts and associated documents from 1967 through 1990, and the complete records and support documents from the Soviet Communist Party's congresses).

In short, it has been a mixed bag for the Russian archives in the Putin era. Setbacks have occurred, but some of these setbacks have been reversed, and some gains have occurred. Western scholars and journalists who do not actually work in the archives tend to assume that everything was fine under Yeltsin and that the situation has deteriorated markedly under Putin. In reality, the situation has been far more complicated than that. Things in the archives were highly imperfect (and indeed often dismal) under Yeltsin, and crucial setbacks occurred long before Putin came on the scene. The archival situation remains highly imperfect (and indeed dismal) under Putin, but it has not deteriorated as much as I had feared it would. What clearly *has* deteriorated a great deal is the accuracy of the history that Russian high school students are being taught in their state-approved textbooks, but that is a different matter.

The most troubling development in the Putin era has not been a

shrinking of archival access (which has not really occurred), but the effort made by the Russian government to establish common declassification procedures for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In effect, the Russian authorities have sought to mandate tighter restrictions in former Soviet republics that have been more willing than the Russian government to open their archives. The push for common procedures began in June 2004 when Putin spearheaded the signing of an “agreement on the mutual protection of secret information in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.”⁸ Although the CSTO at the time consisted of only six members (Uzbekistan later joined in 2006), none of which had gone further than Russia in granting access to their archives, the agreement set an important precedent for other such documents.

The drive to forge common declassification and secrecy policies was intensified in October 2011 when Russia and four other CIS countries (Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) signed an “agreement on procedures for reviewing the degree of secrecy of information classified during the existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”⁹ The six other CIS countries were listed as potential signatories but did not actually sign the agreement at the CIS summit on 18 October. As of mid-2012, the Ukrainian and Moldovan governments (both of which have had much less restrictive policies than Russia on archival access) had given no indication that they would in fact sign it. Their abstention is important because Ukraine almost certainly was the intended target of the agreement, particularly for documents pertaining to the famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s. The release of incriminating documents on the famine from the Ukrainian SBU archive after the Orange Revolution had angered the Putin administration, and Russian authorities evidently viewed Yanukovich’s election as a good opportunity to try to compel Ukraine to wait for Russia’s approval before releasing anything more. Work on drafting the agreement began in April 2010, shortly after Yanukovich was elected.¹⁰ Even though Yanukovich was sympathetic to Russia’s concerns, he has been unwilling to subordinate Ukraine so conspicuously to Russia’s control. Still, the very fact that Putin has tried to impose Russia’s preferences on Ukraine and the

⁸ “Soglashenie o vzaimnom obespechenii sokhrannosti sekretnoi informatsii v ramkakh Organizatsii Kollektivnoi Bezopasnosti,” signed in Moscow, 18 June 2004. The agreement entered into force in August 2005 after Kyrgyzstan ratified it. See “V ramkakh ODKB vstupilo v silu Soglashenie o vzaimnom obespechenii sokhrannosti sekretnoi informatsii,” *Kazakhstan Today*, 10 August 2005, p. 9.

⁹ “Soglashenie o poryadke peresmotra stepeni sekretnosti vedenii, zasekrechennykh v period sushchestvovaniya Soyuzha Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik,” signed in St. Petersburg, 18 October 2011.

¹⁰ “Stepen’ sekretnosti svedenii, zasekrechennykh v period sushchestvovaniya SSSR, budet peresmotrena,” 22-23 April 2010, press release issued by Commonwealth of Independent States.

other CIS member-states is a worrisome sign even if does not result in any immediate change of policy.

Nevertheless, despite the many onerous obstacles to research in the former Soviet archives and the dim outlook, scholars now have opportunities that seemed wholly implausible as recently as 25 years ago.

The Politics of Historical Memory in Russia

One of the hallmarks of Yeltsin's presidency in Russia was his willingness to facilitate a more accurate and thorough understanding of the Soviet past. This effort had begun under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Soviet historians, journalists, and public commentators were allowed, for the first time, to discuss sensitive topics in Soviet history, including the Stalinist terror, the "thaw" and de-Stalinization campaign under Nikita Khrushchev, and the stifling conformity of the Brezhnev era. By the spring of 1988, even foreign policy issues were coming under renewed scrutiny — a trend signaled initially in May 1988 by the publication of a lengthy article by Vyacheslav Dashichev in *Literaturnaya gazeta*.¹¹ Over the next few years the Soviet government acknowledged certain "mistakes" and misdeeds in its policies toward other countries, particularly Communist countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

Nonetheless, the historical reassessments under Gorbachev had their limits, and nearly all of the relevant archival sources remained off-limits. The situation changed fundamentally after the Soviet Union broke apart and Yeltsin emerged as president of the independent Russian Federation. In addition to opening some of the former Soviet archives (albeit imperfectly), he released selected materials from key archives that remained closed to researchers. Yeltsin not only shed light on many of the internal abuses and atrocities of the Soviet era, but also went much further than Gorbachev in promoting reassessments of Soviet foreign policy, including episodes that were still largely taboo during the Gorbachev era.

In particular, Yeltsin declassified archival collections that Gorbachev had refused to open. Crucial documents pertaining to the Katyń massacres of 1940, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet Union and the crisis in Poland in 1980-1981, the shooting down of a South Korean airliner in 1983, and other topics in Soviet foreign policy were released in the 1990s, often during visits by Yeltsin to the relevant countries. The declassification of key documents became, in some sense, an instrument of Yeltsin's foreign policy, as

¹¹ Vyacheslav Dashichev, "Vostok-zapad: poisk novykh otnoshenii – O prioritakh vneshnei politiki Sovetskogo gosudarstva," *Literaturnaya gazeta* (Moscow), No. 20 (18 May 1988), p. 14. In December 1988, Dashichev's article was voted one of the best to have appeared in *Literaturnaya gazeta* in 1988.

he sought to develop friendly relations with countries that until recently had been either dominated by or hostile to the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin also made considerable efforts to come to terms with the internal consequences of Stalinism. Initial attempts to confront Stalin's legacy long predated the Yeltsin era, going back to the de-Stalinization campaign launched in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Soviet Party Congress as well as his further push on de-Stalinization in 1961. Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin was highly selective (focusing mainly on the Communist victims of Stalin's terror) but was enormously important in dissipating the godlike aura that had surrounded Stalin even after death. However, the process of de-Stalinization ended and was even partly reversed after Khrushchev's ouster in October 1964.

Not until the late 1980s, with the glasnost-era revelations under Mikhail Gorbachev, did a further drive to face up to the horrors of Stalinism begin in Soviet Russia. After decades of whitewashing, those revelations sparked wide public interest and excitement, but the demise of the Soviet Union largely deflated the Russian public's eagerness to make a reckoning with Stalinism. Even as Yeltsin released more documents in the early 1990s attesting to Stalin's depraved callousness and criminality, the Russian public barely seemed to notice. The late Aleksandr Yakovlev, who played a crucial role in promoting reform during the Gorbachev era and then continued to serve as head of an official rehabilitation commission until his death in October 2005, was instrumental in the release of millions of pages of documents concerning the mass repressions of the Stalin era. In an interview in June 2001, Yakovlev said, "reading all these documents about horrible crimes and atrocities and bloodshed and suffering frightens me. It frightens me that people in this country could have behaved that way. But what frightens me even more is the fact that the large majority of people in [Russia] are completely indifferent to this information."¹²

The process of historical reckoning was never completed under Yeltsin, and it nearly ground to a halt after Putin took over from Yeltsin at the end of 1999. The problem was not a lack of information per se; by the time Putin came to power, scholars and other experts in Russia (and abroad) had produced overwhelming evidence of the millions killed under Stalin and had meticulously analyzed the repressive apparatus that served the dictator's whims. Instead, the problem was a lack of commitment on the part of the Russian government, which in turn fueled a wider indifference and a lack of interest on the part of the Russian public.

Part of the problem in Russia in coming to terms with Stalin's legacy is the continued presence of officials who served in high-level posts in the Soviet Communist Party, the Soviet government, and the Soviet state

¹² Interview of Yakovlev with the author, in Moscow, 11 June 2001.

security forces (KGB). These officials have been averse to harsh reassessments of the past and have sought to prevent the release of sensitive documents that would show the Soviet regime's activities in a sinister light. Putin, for example, has repeatedly said that he profoundly regrets the demise of the Soviet Union, describing it as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century."¹³ Although Putin has acknowledged that "excesses" occurred under Stalin and has taken part in ceremonies commemorating Stalinist repressions against the Russian Orthodox Church, he has also frequently hailed the "monumental accomplishments" of the Soviet regime, including the accomplishments of Stalin. Putin also often speaks proudly about the Soviet KGB, the notorious state security and foreign intelligence agency for which he worked for sixteen years in the 1970s and 1980s, carrying on the efforts of officers and foreign agents who served Stalin's regime. The main successor agencies to the KGB, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service, extol the KGB's legacy in publications and on their websites.¹⁴

The proclivity of Russian leaders to hark back to the symbols and institutions of the Soviet regime and the Stalin era has made it extremely difficult to overcome that terrible legacy. Yeltsin had an opportunity early on to promote a thorough historical accounting, but he squandered it. Not only did he keep the most important Soviet-era archives tightly sealed, he also failed to ensure the systematic removal of statues of Vladimir Lenin and of other monuments glorifying the Soviet regime, and he was unwilling to disband (or even scale back) the sprawling state security organs, which were just as symbolic of Stalinist terror as the SS and Gestapo were of Nazi atrocities. Although the KGB was reorganized in late 1991, the agency's repressive apparatus and personnel were preserved essentially intact and renamed the FSB.

These inauspicious trends ebbed only slightly during the four years under Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev made some commendable statements denouncing Stalin and holding out hopes of a fuller reckoning with Soviet atrocities, but he did not follow up with any concrete action. Moreover, in May 2009, Medvedev (with Putin's strong support) established a presidential commission to "counter attempts at falsifying history against Russia's interests."¹⁵ The Orwellian name of the commission had the unintended effect of implying that the Russian government would welcome historical falsifications as long as they were "beneficial to Russia's interests." The

¹³ "Poslanie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina Federal'nomu sobraniyu RF: 2005 god," *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), 26 April 2005, pp. 1, 2-4.

¹⁴ See, for example, Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti RF, *Lubyanka 2: Iz istorii otechestvennoi kontrrazvedki* (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv, 1999).

¹⁵ "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii o Komissii pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii po protivodeistviyu popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii v ushcherb interesam Rossii," Ukaz Prezidenta RF No. 549, 15 May 2009, in *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), 20 May 2009, p. 2.

commission met numerous times in 2009, 2010, and 2011, and for a while the formation of the body seemed to portend a stifling clampdown on free historical debate, especially regarding the two issues of greatest importance to Putin: the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933 and the Soviet Union's role in World War II. But the actual impact of the commission's work was never clear, confined largely to prolix discussions with little connection to actual history. The mere existence of the commission was a symbolic reminder of Putin's interest in fostering a particular historical narrative with little regard for what the evidence might show. It thus had the potential to stifle public discussion that could be depicted as "detrimental to Russia's interests." The disbandment of the commission in early 2012 meant that it could no longer have a chilling effect on public debate, but the three years of its operation underscored the continued problems in Russia in facing up to the Soviet past.¹⁶

Even during the remarkable easing of tensions between Russia and Poland in the spring of 2010 after the tragic air crash in Smolensk on April 10, 2010, the Russian government refrained from pursuing a broader historical reckoning. The anti-falsification commission continued to meet, and eventually some of the earlier disingenuous assertions about the Katyn massacres, suggesting that they were perpetrated by German rather than Soviet forces, returned to Russia's official discourse. The publication of a remarkable article by Sergei Karaganov in the state-sponsored *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in July 2010, forcefully denouncing not only Stalinism but also Stalin's admirers, raised hopes anew that the Russian government would finally seek to face up to the past.¹⁷ But those hopes proved in vain. The theme put forth by Karaganov, a long-time establishment insider, influenced some of the deliberations of the Valdai Club (which meets each year for a few days of discussions organized by the Russian government ostensibly as a show of openness but also as a propaganda vehicle) in September 2010, but it had little resonance beyond that. Neither Medvedev nor Putin proved willing to take up the mantle to push for a systematic, high-profile reckoning with the Soviet past and the construction of memorials to Stalin's victims. Indeed, no sooner had the Valdai Club's discussions ended in September 2010 than the anti-falsification commission met and returned to all of its standard bromides, a trend that continued until the commission was dismantled in 2012.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 14.02.2012 Nr. 183 'Ob utverzhdenii sostava Komissii pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii po formirovaniyu i podgotovke rezerva upravlencheskikh kadrov, izmenenii i priznanii utrativshimi silu utrativshimi silu nekotorykh aktov Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii,'" Ukaz Prezidenta RF No. 183, 14 February 2012, in *Sobranie zakonodatelstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii: 2012 g.* (Moscow), Vol. 8, Part III, p. 988.

¹⁷ Sergei Karaganov, "Russkaya Katyn," *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), 22 July 2010, p. 3.

¹⁸ "Sostoyalos' sovместnoe zasedanie Komissii po protivodeistviyu popytкам fal'sifikatsii istorii v ushcherb interesam Rossii i Mezhdvestvennoi komissii po zashchite gosudarst-

The lack of a thorough reckoning with the past has had deleterious effects on the Russian population. So long as the symbols and institutions of Stalinist repression are still flourishing in Russia, the prospects for democracy will be dim. The former Communist countries that have done the most to encourage a thorough reckoning with the crimes of the Communist period have enjoyed much greater stability than the countries that have avoided any reappraisal of the past or that have embarked on the process selectively or halfheartedly. Deep and lasting democratization in the former East-bloc states has made the most headway when the iniquities of the Communist period have been exposed to public light and when leaders of these countries have unequivocally denounced the individuals who were complicit in systematic cruelty and terror.

Courageous organizations in Russia like Memorial and the Democracy Foundation have done extremely valuable work in documenting the terror and mass repressions of the Stalin era, but a full reckoning with the Stalinist past must encompass the whole society and the whole polity. The change of generations, unfortunately, has not helped. Young Russians are almost as inclined as their elders to look favorably on Stalin, and surveys in the past several years have revealed that most Russians from 18 to 24 now view the world in roughly the same way that Putin does — that is, they believe that Russia is being unfairly hounded by “enemies,” especially the United States, and that Russia must assert itself as a “great power.”¹⁹

In light of these unfavorable trends, the task of facing up to the many horrors of Stalin’s rule will require integrity on the part of public officials in Russia — officials who take no “pride” in the Stalinist regime’s “monumental achievements” and are instead committed to overcoming Stalin’s invidious legacy once and for all. The return of Putin as president in 2012, and the possibility that he will hold that office until 2024, may well stymie any further attempt to come to terms with the evil of Stalin’s regime. Putin made a few conciliatory gestures during the Russian-Polish semi-rapprochement in the spring of 2010, but overall he has given every reason to believe that he is unwilling to “rehash the past” (the dismissive term he regularly uses.) In the absence of a fuller historical reckoning, Stalin’s baleful legacy will remain a blight on Russia’s future.

The experiences of well-established democracies like Germany, Japan, Australia, and the United States confirm that coming to grips with egregious abuses and horrors of the past is a difficult and often arduous process. But the experiences of those countries also show that the further

vennoi tainy,” *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), 8 September 2010, p. 1.

¹⁹ Analiticheskii Tsentri Yuriya Levady (ATsYuL), “Nastroenie molodykh rossiyan o nastupayushchem godu: Press-vypusk,” December 2011, parts 1-4. See also ATsYuL, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie — 2011: Ezhegodnik* (Moscow: Levada Tsentri, 2012), pp. 26-28.

the process goes, the better from the standpoint of democratic stability and social cohesiveness. Although some degree of “public forgetting” and “selective memory” is inevitable, the more fully that societies come to terms with traumatic events of the recent past, the less likely it is that these events will one day come back to haunt them.