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On December 2, 2003, the Minister of Education of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Filippov, announced that a history textbook currently in use in Russian schools was no longer acceptable and should be withdrawn from all classrooms. Just a few days earlier, President Putin had told a group of professional historians that "contemporary textbooks ought not to become a place for new political and ideological struggle." (1) This high-level attention to teaching history caught the attention of the general press. It ignited a hot debate about the connection between history and politics and about corruption in the Ministry's textbook approval process. The discussion has since escalated into broader reflections about the role of history in school and protest against government efforts to impose censorship and ideological control.

This is not the first time that history texts have caught the attention of Russian politicians. During the election campaign of 1996, both Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Gennadi Zyuganov complained that school textbooks were not sufficiently patriotic. In April 1998, the Duma education committee, then controlled by the communists, persuaded the Duma chairman to send a letter to the Academy of Education complaining that history texts contained too much about the dark spots in Soviet history. While worrisome, these interventions could be dismissed as the actions of politicians on the extremes.

In August 2001 however, Prime Minister Kasianov expressed concern that the government had not paid sufficient attention to the teaching of 20th century history and
that existing texts provided insufficient support for democracy and the market economy. He ordered that textbooks on the 20th Century be rewritten immediately. In contrast to his definition of the problem, however, those who developed the criteria for the new texts did not mention support for democracy, but invited manuscripts that would foster a feeling of patriotism and civic responsibility among students, and provide a single moral, patriotic and civic approach. A few months after Kasianov’s statement, veterans’ complaints persuaded several regions to withdraw Kreder’s "Modern History of Foreign (zarubezhnikh) Countries" from their schools because, they said, it did not properly reflect the importance of Soviet Russia in international affairs or the heroism of Russians in World War II, and was too sympathetic to policies of western countries. No politician or social group, however, has ever complained that school texts did not fully discuss the scale, purposes and practices of the GULAG, the mockery of law in the Soviet period, or the complicity of the KGB and other government institutions in Stalin’s crimes. (2) Those few books published in the mid 1990s that discussed such issues tended not to be widely distributed. (3)

The teaching of history provokes controversy in many countries. All governments seek to educate their young people with a shared understanding of the past in order to promote pride, loyalty and cohesion. In Russia, where values and regimes have been changing rapidly, it is not at all surprising that teaching history has become contentious and politicized. Authors of twentieth century textbooks face difficult challenges, in part because researchers have not yet provided new conceptualizations of the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods to guide them. They are well aware also that many of the institutions and individuals responsible for the widely condemned repression of the Soviet period are still in place. There is a tacit understanding that many historical subjects should not be examined too closely.

Yel’tsin’s rueful call for a new national idea reflected his understanding that fresh inspiration was needed to legitimize the new Russian government and draw the Russian Federation together. A common understanding of a new national idea has failed, thus far, to solidify. Actually it is surprising that politicians have paid so little attention to
school textbooks of history, despite the fact that a 2001 poll found that 70% of Russians
draw their knowledge of history from these textbooks. (4)

The text that provoked the recent political intervention is Fatherland (Otechestvennaia)
History of the 20th Century, for students in the last two years of secondary school. Its
author, Igor Doliutsky, has updated multiple editions of his book since the early 1990s.
His books were among the first to introduce accessible language and attention to the
lives of ordinary citizens into school history texts, as well as to present different, often
provocative, interpretations of events. His methodology encourages students to analyze
material, develop arguments, discuss decisions at turning points and consider the role
of individuals. In his latest, offending, edition, Doliutsky quoted two prominent Russians
to provoke debate. One stated that Russia had become a police state and the other,
that developments since Putin’s first election could be called a state coup. Students
were asked to make arguments for or against the accuracy of these statements. (5)

The education press pounced on this event. Filippov’s decision was first interpreted in
the context of their immediate concerns, namely as the result of a commercial quarrel
between publishing houses and as evidence of corruption in the whole system of
textbook approval. (6)

The Central Ministry of Education in Moscow in fact does operate a complicated system
for approving school texts that is riddled with corruption. In Soviet times, an expert
council of the ministry of education approved a single history textbook for each grade.
This text was translated as necessary, published and distributed to all schools
throughout the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, the Russian Federation’s Ministry of
Education decided to introduce variety and competition into the textbook market. It
sponsored competitions among authors and opened textbook publishing to competition.
To maintain some quality control, the ministry’s expert commission on textbooks
developed a system of approvals, or griffes, similar to the system that had existed in
Soviet times. Sections organized by discipline were charged to read manuscripts and
decide whether to recommend, permit, or reject books as suitable for general secondary
school use. The publishers had to pay a fee in order to have their books considered. Insofar as the members of the commissions are poorly paid, lack time to do their work carefully, and often have ties to the authors or publishers, the process had invited corruption. A series of so-called "textbook murders" in 1998 testifies to the high financial stakes attached to getting griffes and publishing contracts. By December 2003, seven textbooks had been approved for the 20th century history slot.

According to some accounts, a rival publisher purposely drew Doliutsky's text to the attention of politicians in order to reduce competition, and increase their own profits. There is some evidence, but no absolute proof, that this was indeed the case. (7) Whatever the reason that this book came to the president's attention, Putin immediately sent a directive to the Academy of Sciences giving them two months to find a solution to the problem with history texts. They proposed, and the ministry subsequently approved, that there be no more than three approved texts for each grade and that these texts should be written by scholars of the Academy, namely themselves. What they did not mention, understandably, was that they, as authors, would have limited initial competition and established a system designed to provide them with considerable authorial rewards.

Discussion about history texts soon spilled over from the education press to multiple articles in major newspapers such as Izvestia, Nezavisimya gazeta, and Komsomolskaya pravda. It moved beyond narrow but important accusations of corruption in the ministry and among publishers, to broader concerns about the role of history teaching and growing censorship. The most radical argued that the griffe process should be abolished completely, so that teachers and schools could make their own choices, as had been promised in the 1992 Education Law. Professional historians pointed out that history, particularly recent history, is inevitably connected to politics. They argued that it is therefore essential to have contemporary history told from multiple points of view. Many addressed the link between patriotism and history teaching, but saw no reason why nurturing patriotism required sanitizing history. Not all agreed with
Doliutsky’s approach, but all argued that young people needed to know the truth about their tragic history. Knowing these historical facts would not reduce their patriotism.

The historians did not mince words. One recalled that the country had already had experience with one history book, the History of the Communist Party (b); others reflected that three texts were easier to control than many. (8) More generally, educators lamented that all the gains of the 1990s, when textbook authors were free to choose what to write and teachers to choose what to teach, were now threatened. There had been complaints from veterans and politicians and all sorts of other groups throughout the 1990s, they recalled, but only now had high-level politicians intervened. They accused the government of trying to impose censorship and ideological control. Suddenly educators found the large public forum they had sought throughout the 1990s, but ironically not to make a case for basic reform and financial support as they had wished, but to protest a reversal of what they had already achieved. The general press was interested in their case because it offered such a glaring example of the gathering trend toward authoritarianism and censorship that now worries many Russians. (9)

National and regional histories

This recent debate about history teaching has not yet addressed the situation in the Federation’s regions where there are large non-Slavic ethnic populations. Developments suggest that the central government will face a huge challenge if it tries to reassert central control of the history curriculum. In the early 1990s, when financial and curricular responsibilities were radically decentralized, the central ministry and the regions worked out a formula whereby 60% of the curriculum became the so-called federal component, 30% the regional component, and 10% the responsibility of individual schools. It was agreed that regional history would be taught as part of this regional component. Regions began to award the griffe for approved texts. That division of curricular responsibility has served to justify the fact that Russian history texts, the federal component text, rarely include significant information about peoples of the federation other than Russians. The Russian Academy of Education, recognizing this as
a problem, in the mid 1990s encouraged the development of a text for an experimental course on the history of the peoples of the Russian Federation. Yet it, too, told the story of minority peoples entirely from the Russian point of view, Tatars, Bashkirs or Yakuts appearing when they came under Russian sway. (10) Its authors depended heavily on Marxist formulations, invariably arguing that incorporation into the Russian empire represented a progressive step in these peoples’ development. This integrative effort was not pursued, so that there is currently no school text that presents the history of all the Russian Federation’s peoples in a single narrative.

Regional historians set out to fill the gap. Local historians proceeded cautiously, beginning to publish texts in the middle 1990s. A text for grades 8-9 in Bashkortostan, for example, traces the roots of the Bashkir people back to the stone age, noting that in the 18th century, agreements with Russia were systematically broken by the Tsarist government. The authors challenge the Russian view that the Bashkirs needed to be "pacified" later in the 19th century, detail Bashkir suffering under imperialistic Russian rule and criticize the militarization of their economy. (11)

Tatarstan presents a particularly complicated situation, as two different versions of history compete for recognition, both of which might prove troubling to politicians now trying to centralize power in Moscow. Regional authorities have approved one text with an interesting introduction for the students that discusses how histories of Russia traditionally mention little about other nationalities, and offer only negative information about the Tatars. The authors tell the students about a CPSU decree in 1944 that made it impossible to do research on the history of the Golden Horde and the Tatar khanates. The text itself traces Tatar origins to the Golden Horde, emphasizing its great power, empire, military resistance to Russian rule and the subsequent scattering of large numbers of Tatars throughout what is today the Russian Federation. It also emphasizes Tatar cultural affinities with the Turks. (12) There is a competing version of the Tatar past that emphasizes its origins in the Bulghar Khanate. This text lays the case for Tatarstan sovereignty by portraying a continuous cultural presence in Tatarstan since ancient times. (13)
The peoples of the north Caucasus are also selecting and presenting histories of past glory that present Russians as invaders and exploiters, and often provide historical justification for claiming land that currently belongs to culturally distinct neighbors. (14) The principle that regions have the right to present local history was firmly established in Soviet times, and confirmed in the context of Yel'tsin’s radical decentralization. What changed was that the central ministry of education lost control over the content of regional history. These new history textbooks are among the predictable but unintended consequences of this policy. One scholar sensitive to the power of national myths has raised an alarm, but this issue appears not yet to have received attention from the Putin government. (15) Cultural nationalism is growing, at least in Tatarstan. The regional government has proposed the use of the Roman alphabet for the Tatar language, as was the case in the 1920s, despite RF constitutional requirements that all nationalities use cyrillic. Central and regional governments would appear to be on a collision course, and the Tatar government has vowed to take the case to the Strasbourg international court if necessary. (16) Despite nationalistic mythmaking in the regions, the current debate about history teaching has not touched on this issue. (17)

Modernization and Quality Control in the Russian Educational System

The controversy over teaching history is taking place in a changing educational environment. The ministry of education recently has introduced two broad policy initiatives; both mark efforts to bring Russian educational policies more into line with international practice. The first, the "Strategy of Modernization," is designed to redirect the goal of secondary school education from the inculcation of knowledge as such to the development of "competence." The ministry defines competence as the ability to find, analyze and use knowledge, solve problems and adapt to changing circumstances in the real world. (18) The Russians’ sense of urgency is increased by the findings of the OECD Program for International Assessment (PISA). In 2000, the PISA tests were administered to 15-year old students in 31 countries to evaluate their higher thinking skills, such as their ability to apply what they knew in new situations and to solve problems. The Russians, who had scored well in previous large comparative
international tests of factual knowledge, were shocked to discover that their students placed 27th in reading literacy, 26th in scientific literacy and 22nd in mathematical literacy. (19) These findings and the ministry’s response to them adds irony to the current dispute over history teaching, insofar as Doliutsky’s text is one of the few set up to develop the critical thinking skills given priority by the new modernization policy.

The second initiative with wide implications for the entire school system is the phased introduction of the so-called single state exam (edinii gosudarstvenii eksamen). It is designed to maintain quality and standards throughout the federation and to reduce corruption in the entrance application process to higher level educational institutions. The test is an obligatory written standard exam, to be taken in core subjects including history, by all secondary school students in their final year. It will serve simultaneously as a graduation exam and as an entrance exam. The ministry is also developing educational standards to be put into place in 2006, though they are, surprisingly, not yet coordinated with the new federal exam. The exams are facing opposition from varied sources: Innovative educators fear it will reward memorization and conservative teaching styles; universities and institutes resist losing total control over their admissions, and with it the many lucrative advantages of the present system; some characterize the exam as an indirect means of reinstating central control of the curriculum. In the Russian context, however, educators have made a convincing case that this is a progressive step. OECD reports and the World Bank have long urged the introduction of such an exam to solve systemic problems of corruption in higher school admissions and increase equity of access. (20)

Whether restoring central control is a primary aim of introducing the exam or not, it will certainly have that effect. The Soviet government controlled the curriculum by means of inputs, in the sense that the content of the single text and the comments of teachers were carefully scripted by the central ministry of education. Now the curriculum is to be shaped in the internationally—accepted way, by testing outputs, what students have learned. It is widely agreed that teachers will teach to the test; they want their pupils to
do well. These tests will in fact drive the curriculum. Because of the Soviet heritage of control, educators are understandably sensitive to this aspect of the exam.

Reports that some designers of the history tests seek to eliminate questions about the dark spots in Soviet history concerns those who believe students should learn the truth. If there are no questions about the ugly side of the Soviet past, teachers are unlikely to teach about them. Alexander Danilov, a historian and textbook author who has served on the ministry’s expert commission, observed that not one textbook published in 2003 discussed the repression of the Soviet era fully, nor the responsibility of those in power for what took place. (21) He laments that there has been a quiet shutdown of the pluralism and freedom of ideas and opinions of the 1990s. The withdrawal of approval from Doliutsky’s text confirms that isolated incidents involving history texts were not isolated after all, but form a pattern of increasing censorship.

Conclusions

Russia’s educators find themselves caught in a difficult situation. The ministry is pursuing its obligation to create a coherent educational system throughout the federation that will support a sense of belonging to a single country and offer equity of access to education of high quality. The single state exam is one effort to move toward this goal, one that is proving difficult to implement fairly and without corruption. The ministry is also expected to provide support for the government’s ten-year plan that identifies the creation of human capital as a top priority. (22) Educators are charged to develop an able, competent, educated workforce. They recognize that these competencies can be developed only by offering students practice and experience in finding and analyzing data, identifying and solving problems, making decisions and defending their points of view, that is, precisely by using the methodology that the Doliutsky text exemplifies. The strategies of modernization and the introduction of a universally obligatory single state exam already exist in potential tension with one another.
Political directives about what is and is not acceptable history have added a further layer of complexity to this already difficult situation, casting educational policies in a new light. Political orthodoxy can exist only at the cost of reduced stimulation for students to think for themselves and attain a sophisticated understanding of real social processes. On the other hand, there are numerous positive roles for central exams, for example, to motivate textbook writers and teachers to include the experience of ethnic minorities in federal textbooks. An educational case can be made for either side. It is the political uses of the tests that will determine their ultimate value.

The Putin administration’s decision to ban a history textbook revealed its authoritarian instincts and lack of confidence in the free exchange of ideas. It provided a focus for what many already knew, that growing political interference and censorship in education parallels a similar trend in other spheres of Russia life. The politicians’ recent concerns about history teaching focus on their own legitimacy in the short term. Putin’s government has shown no interest in aspects of history teaching that have dangerous implications for the cohesion of the federation itself. Students in several ethnically-based regions are being taught nationalistic myths about a glorious past that was cut short by Russian conquest. They are being brought up to resent Russia’s control in the past and, by inclination, to seek more autonomy or even independence in the future. Russian students, for their part, study a history that tells them little or nothing about these peoples. No one is taught to think of Russia as a multicultural federation, nor to value the legitimacy of different points of view on a common experience. (23) The creation of a version of Russia’s history that could accomplish this goal is an enormous challenge for serious academic historians. Yet, despite the warning of Chechnya, neither historians, textbook writers nor politicians have focused on this problem. The Soviet legacy of separate schools for minorities has combined with Yeltsin’s policy of decentralizing control of the curriculum from Moscow to the regional capitals, to create a potential political problem that is not being addressed. History teaching and politics continue their tortuous relationship in Russia. Despite recent changes in leadership at the Ministry of Education, it is unlikely educators will go where politicians fear to tread. No matter how clearly Russian educators may understand the need to modernize their
educational system and to teach young people to think for themselves about actual social problems and Russia’s tragic past, they have been crudely reminded that political concerns will take priority.

End Notes


2. In fact, Kasianov’s intervention had an effect contradictory to what he intended and led to the production of more patriotic, traditional texts that were less honest about the past. At the time, progressive educators noted that Kasianov appeared not to know that the newer texts did talk of democracy and the market economy and that he had been fed unrepresentative excerpts to persuade him to set up the new competition.


4. This statistic is from the Russian Academy of State Service of the Russian Federation’s poll taken in November 2001, as reported in "Round Table," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, No. 3, May 2002.


7. Ibid.

8. The reference is to the so-called Short Course, or Stalinist history text that dominated history in the Soviet period. This text provided the basic framework for the school texts produced during Stalin's time. When changing political interests demanded new versions of the past, the single school text for each grade was suitably changed. Outstanding among many articles on this theme: N. Ivanova-Gladil’shchikova, "Ne dolzhno byt’ ‘glavnogo’ uchebnika," (There shouldn’t be a "chief" textbook), Izvestia, March 13, 2004, p. 9, Shpak and Visilenko, loc. Cit., Kirill Mitrofanov, "Uchebnik dolzhenny ne tol’ko privodit’ facti, no i predstavlyat’ vosmozhnost’ ikh osporit" Vremia novostei, Dec. 18, 2003, Sergei Ivanov, "Uroki Istorii: liubov’ k rodine pepelishchu," Vedomosti, March 10, 2004. Aleksandr Danilov, head of the history faculty of Moscow State Pedagogical University, "V uchebnikah istorii net slova "repressii." Izvestiia, Feb. 14, 2004, p. 10.


11. Akhamanova et al., Istoriiia Bashkortostana, 8-9, Ufa: Kitap 1998.


16. Vera Postonova "Prokuror obviniaet latinitsu. Deputati Tartarstana gotovi otstaivat' pravo na vibor alfavita vptol' do mezhdunarodnovo suda" (Prokuror codems latin. Deputies of Tatarstan prepared to insist on their right of alphabet right up to the international court") *Nezavisimaia gazeta* No. 42 (3157), Feb. 3, 2004.


19. Interpretation of the test results is complicated, but the general situation is clear. The report can be found as of February 2003 at [http://www.pisa.oecd.org/knowledge/home](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/knowledge/home)


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