

“Historical Falsification” as a Master Trope in the Official Discourse on History Education in Putin’s Russia

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Abstract • This article explores a key claim underpinning Russian official memory politics, namely, the notion that Russia’s past (and especially the role it played in the Second World War) is the object of a campaign of “historical falsification” aimed at, among other things, undermining Russian sovereignty, especially by distorting young people’s historical consciousness. Although “historical falsification” is an important keyword in the Kremlin’s discourse, it has received little scholarly attention. Via an analysis of official rhetoric and methodological literature aimed at history teachers, I investigate the ideological functions performed by the concept of “historical falsification.” I show how it serves to reinforce a conspiratorial vision of Russia as a nation under siege, while simultaneously justifying the drive toward greater state control over history education.

Keywords • authoritarianism, conspiracy theories, Russian history teaching, Russian history textbooks, Russian identity, Russian memory politics, Russian state ideology, Russian war memory

On 1 September 2020, President Vladimir Putin opened the new school year with a special online video address to senior secondary school pupils across the country, devoted to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Red Army’s Victory over Nazi Germany.¹ Much of Putin’s address was unremarkable. Employing the standard rhetoric common to speeches in this genre the world over, Putin spoke of the importance of history in providing a “stable moral foundation, a reliable signpost that will always help you to find the correct path in life” and noted the obligation to respect the history of one’s country. He elaborated on the significance of the memory of the war, not only at the national level but within each individual family. He spoke of the bravery of the war generation and of the duty to honor their sacrifice.²

Later in Putin’s address, the tone changed. Addressing the contemporary international situation, Putin warned against complacency. The history of the Second World War, he asserted, was of urgent relevance today, at a moment when attempts were underway to revise the world order that had been established in the wake of the war and, to this end,



to “rewrite what really happened in history.” Putin went on to warn Russian pupils that

People who collaborate with the enemy in wartime ... are called and have always and everywhere been called collaborators. Those who agree with the initiators of the rewriting of history today can absolutely be called the collaborators of the present day. There have always been such people everywhere, and there always will be. They have various motivations; we won't go into the details now. It's important only to understand that this is very relevant today.³

This passage from Putin's speech exemplifies the intensity of the current atmosphere around history and history teaching in contemporary Russia. In this climate, in which pupils are enjoined to be on the lookout for “collaborators” who are ostensibly aligning themselves with Russia's enemies by undermining the legacy of the Red Army's Victory, to engage in debate over the history of the war is to risk being labeled a traitor.

As this speech illustrates, during Putin's presidency, history, and especially the history of the Second World War and the way it is remembered by young generations of Russians, has come to be framed as a matter of national security. In this article, I examine how and why Putin's neo-authoritarian regime has sought to take control over how the history of the war is narrated and interpreted in school textbooks and classrooms, under the banner of a campaign to defend “historical truth” against those seeking, as Putin put it in his speech, “to rewrite what really happened.”

This notion that history is being deliberately “rewritten” and “falsified” by Russia's enemies is a master trope in the Kremlin's rhetoric on war memory and history education. While it is sometimes mentioned in passing in the literature on Russian memory politics and history education, it has not been studied in detail in its own right.⁴ In this article, I approach “historical falsification” as a concept that structures the official discourse on history, memory, and identity in contemporary Russia. This discussion also has broader significance as a case study of the ideological uses of history education by a hybrid authoritarian state that claims (at least some of the time) to uphold principles of pluralism and intellectual freedom and hence faces particular challenges when justifying its drive for increased state control over historical narratives and interpretations.⁵ In this case, these challenges have been met by positing the existence of a hostile and systematic campaign to attack Russian sovereignty via the “falsification of history,” which demands extraordinary measures in response.

After a brief survey of the state's handling of history education in post-Soviet Russia, I introduce the key actors within or close to the Putin establishment who have been influential in shaping the official discourse

on history education and creating a moral panic around the purported threat posed by the "falsification of history." Next, I trace the emergence of the concept of "historical falsification" in the official rhetoric and policy on history education and analyze its ideological content. Finally, I examine some examples of how this discourse has been translated into concrete recommendations for history teaching and history textbooks. I show how, in the methodological literature on this topic, attempts to resolve the tensions and difficulties arising from the concept are made by introducing a distinction between "useful" patriotic myths and "harmful" myths ("falsification"), a distinction which rests on the central criterion of the given historical narrative's relation to state authority.

History Education and History Textbooks: The Case of Post-Soviet Russia

In the Russian case, the process of crafting new narratives for the teaching of national history to replace those produced by the Soviet one-party state has been particularly fraught. As has often been observed, unlike other postsocialist countries, Russia did not have the luxury of externalizing the Soviet past and building a new national narrative based on victimhood at the hands of foreign oppressors followed by liberation. This is one of the reasons for the protracted and painful identity crisis that has characterized the post-Soviet period in Russia.⁶ In addition, the emergence of an increasingly authoritarian regime, especially since Putin assumed leadership in 2000, has seen a growing drive to co-opt education for the purposes of regime maintenance.⁷ History education has been especially important in this connection. As Catherine Merridale has observed, "The past is something that dictatorships do not leave to chance."⁸

These circumstances have made for a turbulent course for post-Soviet Russian history education.⁹ School history textbooks have been the subject of periodic scandals, controversies, and campaigns.¹⁰ There have been repeated attempts to overhaul the system for producing and approving history textbooks, including a series of state interventions at the highest (presidential) level. These attempts have often occurred in the lead-up to major commemorative dates linked to the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War, the central theme of post-Soviet Russian history and memory politics. While many other nations also define themselves via mythologized narratives of past wars,¹¹ this tendency is especially marked in the case of the Russian Federation, where the memory of the Red Army's Victory over Nazi Germany has become the main pillar of national identity.¹²

Throughout the Putin era, we can observe a general trend toward increasing state control over education, and history education and textbooks in particular.¹³ A key rationale presented for this is the imperative

to reverse the damage done during the 1990s, a period which features in the official narrative of the Putin government as a kind of Dark Age—a Time of Troubles that ended with Putin’s accession to the presidency. As Putin put it in 2003, it was “essential to remove all that trash and foam which has layered up over those years” in history textbooks.¹⁴

There have been many milestones in this ongoing process of extending state control over history education. Like the broader processes of reducing the space for opposition and debate in Russian public life of which it is a part, this has not been a linear, smooth, efficient, or planned process. Nor is it purely a matter of ideology. Textbook publishing is a lucrative business, and there have been periodic reports of high-level corruption in the textbook selection and approval procedures.¹⁵

State interventions into history education can be mapped against the major political turning points in contemporary Russian history. In particular, the so-called color revolutions which took place between 2003 and 2005 were an important catalyst that intensified the Russian state’s push for greater control over the country’s political, intellectual, and media space, in what Robert Horvath has called “Putin’s preventive counter-revolution.”¹⁶ As the regime felt increasingly threatened by the prospect of facing similar challenges domestically, it moved to preempt such challenges, including via a series of measures designed to create greater ideological consistency and to strengthen the patriotic content in history textbooks.¹⁷

An important outcome of Russian memory politics under Putin has been the securitization of Russia’s past—that is, the discursive construction of the past as a matter of existential importance, as an object to be defended on a par with other more traditional objects of national security. Consequently, leading figures, not only in the spheres of culture and education, but also in security and foreign policy, have been frequent commentators on matters of history and history education. While all modern states seek to shape collective remembering through formal education,¹⁸ the involvement of members of the state security apparatus in these processes is a distinctive feature of the Russian case which warrants special attention. In the next section, I briefly introduce the key actors within or close to the Putin establishment who have been influential in setting the tone and parameters of the discussion on history education in Russia.

Key Actors

A range of different actors, institutions, and associations have been tasked with defending historical memory and promoting patriotic education in Russia during the Putin era. The most important of these include Vladi-

mir Medinskii, who served as Minister of Culture from 2012 to January 2020.¹⁹ Medinskii is one of the Putin establishment's most prominent ideologues on historical matters. He has built a career as a self-styled fighter against "black myths" about Russian history and as a defender of Russian "traditional values."²⁰

Another important figure in official memory politics is Sergei Naryshkin. Naryshkin's leading role in patriotic education exemplifies the ongoing securitization of this sphere. A former KGB officer, Naryshkin has served as director of the Foreign Intelligence Service since 2016. He was also a member of the Security Council and head of the Presidential Administration (from 2008 to 2011), and Speaker of the State Duma (from 2011 to 2016).

Both Medinskii and Naryshkin were members of the working group set up in 2013 at Putin's instruction in order to develop a single, unified Russian history textbook.²¹ They were also both involved in a high-profile (albeit short-lived) Kremlin initiative on the historical front, the presidential Russian Commission for Counteracting Attempts at Falsification of History Detrimental to Russia's Interests (henceforth, the Anti-Falsification Commission), which was active from 2009 to 2012. While the Commission was eventually disbanded, the basic approach that it championed remains in place, and so the materials it produced offer insights of continuing relevance.

Medinskii and Naryshkin serve respectively as chairs of two major historical associations, the Russian Military Historical Society and the Russian Historical Society, both of which were created as part of the 2012 Year of Russian History proclaimed by President Putin.²² The presence of these state officials as leaders of these bodies itself indicates the pressure under which the scholarly community finds itself, and the blurriness of the boundaries between the state and civil society.

The landscape also includes various state-affiliated or state-sponsored strategic think tanks that have been active in the campaign against "historical falsification." These include the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), a security think tank subordinate to the presidential administration with institutional roots in the Soviet KGB First Directorate. From 2009 to 2017, RISI was headed by General Lieutenant Leonid Reshetnikov, who was appointed to this position by presidential decree. Trained as a historian, Reshetnikov later served in foreign intelligence from 1976 to 2009.²³ In his role as RISI director, Reshetnikov displayed, via his public interviews, a deeply conspiratorial worldview.²⁴ The Institute for CIS Countries, led by Konstantin Zatulin (a hawkish voice in memory politics who has long been a proponent of "memory laws" criminalizing so-called incorrect history), is another example of a think tank that treats historical matters as strategic security issues.²⁵ Both RISI and the Institute for CIS Countries have been vocal commentators on issues

of history education, history textbooks, and “historical falsification” in the post-Soviet space and in Europe.²⁶

Other key regime-aligned figures with a stake in these issues who comment frequently on history education and memory politics include Viacheslav Nikonov, who heads the *Russkii mir* foundation (created in 2007); Aleksandr Diukov, head of the Historical Memory Foundation (created in 2008); and Nataliia Narochnitskaia, head of the European Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (created in 2008), who is based in Paris and is the founder and president of the Foundation for Historical Perspective (created in 2004).²⁷ Both Diukov and Narochnitskaia focus in particular on international dimensions of Russian and Soviet history and are fierce defenders of the heroic Soviet narrative of the Red Army’s Victory in the Great Patriotic War and its liberation of Eastern Europe.

The importance of three additional memory actors in contemporary Russia should also be noted. These are the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Foreign Ministry, and President Putin himself. While all three comment frequently on historical matters, they are not examined in detail in the present article, in part because they have been covered well in the existing literature.²⁸

The Campaign Against “Historical Falsification” in the Putin Era

The first official use of the term “historical falsification” dates from 27 May 2005, when the State Duma passed a declaration “On Attempts at the Falsification of History.”²⁹ The declaration expressed outrage at recent statements issued by the parliaments of the Baltic states and Poland, which it claimed amounted to “attempts at the crude distortion of history and the ‘embedding’ of touched-up [*podpravlennykh*] versions of the causes and outcomes of the Second World War into the current political context.”³⁰ At this stage, the main rhetorical emphasis was placed on the imperative to prevent the politicization of history.

In May 2009, the injunction to fight against “historical falsification” was enshrined at the official, institutional level when President Medvedev created the Anti-Falsification Commission.³¹ This move occurred in the wake of a significant symbolic challenge to the mythologized, heroic narrative of the Soviet Union’s role in the struggle against Nazi Germany: namely, the establishment (in the wake of a campaign spearheaded by postsocialist Central and Eastern European politicians) of the anniversary of the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (23 August) as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, or Black Ribbon Day. In anticipation of a major round of seventieth jubilee commemorative dates linked to the beginning of the war, the Russian government apparently resolved to reclaim control of the narrative,

which it did under the banner of a struggle against "historical falsification," claiming that it had been forced to "uphold historical truth" in the face of "increasingly harsh, malicious, and aggressive" attempts to propagate a distorted narrative of the war.³²

The idea to create the Commission reportedly originated within the Russian Foreign Ministry.³³ According to a member of the Commission, one of its aims was to provide politicians with "crisp [*chetkie*], documentary arguments for the conversation with [Russia's] neighbors" in the post-Soviet space.³⁴ But equally important was the task of supplying such arguments for domestic use, in order to ensure that Russian school pupils were protected against hostile historical propaganda. Consequently, issues surrounding history education and history textbooks were a key object of the Commission's work. The Commission's head, Sergei Naryshkin, emphasized that a primary aim of the Commission was to "draw the public's attention to the quality of school history textbooks" and to "help scholars and specialists to cleanse Russia's history of inventions and political lies."³⁵ Naryshkin claimed that several textbooks "abound in factual errors and belittle our country's role in world history"³⁶ and asserted that history teachers required support, because in this difficult context they often struggled "to give up-to-date [*sovremennye*] interpretations of historical processes, free from the encrustation of lies, falsification and prejudice."³⁷ The Commission set itself the task of ensuring that history teachers were provided with specialist training in the recognition and combating of "historical falsification." In this way, history education was constructed as a front line in the battle for national security, and history teachers and textbook authors were enjoined to seek special guidance from the state in this context.

Although the creation of the Anti-Falsification Commission prompted an initial flurry of analysis and speculation about its aims and ramifications, scholarly interest in this topic dwindled after the Commission was quietly disbanded three years later.³⁸ Yet, while the commission has ceased to exist, the concept of "historical falsification" is still very much alive in Russian official and public discourse and is hence worthy of our attention. The label "historical falsification" continues to be used in a range of contexts,³⁹ especially since the conservative turn that accompanied the beginning of Putin's third term in 2012. It has become even more prominent in the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in the Donbas. The need to combat "historical falsification" has been stated in various high-level, official documents such as the Russian Federation (RF) National Security Strategy (2015),⁴⁰ the State Program "Patriotic Education of RF Citizens in 2016–2020" (2015), and the RF Foreign Policy Concept (2016).⁴¹ The phrase "historical falsification" has thus become an important keyword of the Kremlin's official discourse. We can also think of this phrase as a

speech act, a phrase that *does* or *achieves* something in addition to merely describing. As is the case for other forms of authoritarian speech acts, in order to interpret this phrase we need to understand the specificity of its context, to read between the lines, and to examine the intention behind this language.⁴² What function does this phrase perform? What layers of meaning does it communicate?

First, we can note the historical resonances of this language. As various commentators have pointed out, the phrase itself has a decidedly Stalinist ring to it. As Yan Rachinskii of the Moscow branch of the human rights agency Memorial pointed out, the very name of the commission evokes Stalinist language and discourse.⁴³ Perhaps most obviously, it recalls Trotsky's *The Stalin School of Falsification* (1937) and echoes the title of the Sovinformbiuro brochure *Falsifiers of History* (1948), which was published in response to the United States State Department's publication *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-1941* (1946), which addresses the very same historical events that are the main bone of contention today.

Comparing the use of the phrase in *Falsifiers of History* (1948) and in contemporary materials on the topic, we find instances of the same rhetorical sleight of hand. In both cases, questions that amount to differences of historical interpretation and emphasis are subsumed under the category of "falsification," implying fraudulence and fabrication of evidence. Doing so conveniently makes it possible to discredit critical historical interpretations and to dismiss them out of hand without engaging with the specifics of the claims that they present. Ad-hominem attacks frequently replace genuine historical argument.

Another key feature of the literature on historical falsification is the discursive linking of historical critiques of Stalinism and contemporary neo-Nazism. The two phenomena are frequently conflated or grouped together, with neo-Nazism used as a red herring to change the subject mid-discussion, as in this article published in *Rossiiskaia gazeta* in April 2020.

The preaching of the doctrine of "equal responsibility of the Nazi and Soviet regimes" for unleashing the Second World War is neither historically founded nor morally justified, and it is the duty of all civilized states to counteract, at the state level, all attempts to rehabilitate Nazism and Nazi criminals and their accomplices, and to illuminate the events and consequences of the war in an honest and unprejudiced manner, based on respect for the immortal feat of our grandfathers and fathers.⁴⁴

As this quote illustrates, the "anti-fascist" dimension of this discourse, together with its invocation of the sacred memory of those who died for the Soviet cause, are important elements that underpin its strong moral thrust and serve to close off discussion.

The anti-falsification crusade also relies upon strawman arguments that fundamentally misrepresent the ways in which the history of the Second World War is narrated in Europe and the United States. As part of the Anti-Falsification Commission's deliberations in 2012, for example, Nataliia Narochnitskaia claimed that falsification of Second World War history had reached the point where "[i]t is completely possible to assume that, in a couple of decades' time, western textbooks will [claim] that on one side fought the democratic United States and Britain, and on the other, two totalitarian monsters."⁴⁵ Again, this is a move that can be traced back to the late Stalin period, and the same false claim (that the Western Allied powers systematically suppressed the facts about Munich and appeasement) can be found in both *Falsifiers of History* (1948) and in present-day statements.⁴⁶

One key strand of the rhetoric links up to an international discourse around the merits of truth-based history and the dangers of the politicization of history. Thus, for example, we find frequent claims that the best antidote to historical falsification is to go back to the primary sources. For example, at a meeting of the Anti-Falsification Commission held in 2009, Sergei Naryshkin emphasized that

the aim of the commission is not to rewrite history; it does not intend to act as some kind of censor or oversight organ. We proceed first and foremost from the principle of freedom of historical scholarship, from an understanding of the fact that historical truth ... must be sought and defended first and foremost based on primary sources.⁴⁷

Most recently, in January 2020, President Putin announced the creation of a new archival center designed specifically to counter Western attempts to distort history.⁴⁸

Most academic historians would agree that archival research is central to the historian's craft and work and would welcome the prospect of increased accessibility to state archives.⁴⁹ But few would subscribe to the notion that archival documents offer a transparent window onto a pristine historical reality, enabling access to objective facts and to the past "as it really happened," in the Rankean tradition. When it comes to the history of complex events in international history, it is rare for primary sources, even when they are handled with care by skilled specialists, to yield unequivocal black-and-white answers to difficult questions. It is hard to imagine the archival documentary equivalent of the smoking gun that would definitively settle the long-running and often acrimonious historical debate over the causes and significance of the Soviet Union's signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, or over the course of European diplomacy in the lead-up to the Second World War more broadly.

Perhaps the most important frame associated with the concept of “historical falsification” is that of existential threat. During his long term as Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii was a vocal proponent of the notion that Russia’s survival would depend on its ability to “take back control” of its history. In 2016, he warned for example that

The ultimate aim of the falsification of history will become to dismember the country, to deprive us of territory, of sovereignty. Because only in this way, by implanting the information virus in our heads, by [sowing] contempt for our own history, for our own fathers, can the country be destroyed. We already went through this before, in 1991.⁵⁰

Medinskii frequently points in this way to the Soviet collapse as an object lesson in the importance of resisting pressure to adopt a critical view on national history. He has often argued that the historical revolution under Gorbachev was a fatal watershed. In an article published in 2010, he observed that “[e]xactly twenty years ago, the theme of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was raised, the beginning of the war in [*sic*] public consciousness. We confessed to all mortal sins. Barely half a year passed, and the country collapsed.”⁵¹

The Great Patriotic War is often held up as the only historical event that continues to offer the prospect of symbolic continuity and survival for the nation in the wake of the catastrophes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the words of Aleksandr Diukov, director of the Historical Memory Foundation, “in the perestroika years all twentieth-century [Soviet] history was subjected to genuine desecration ... In this situation, [the Soviet] victory [over Nazi Germany] remained essentially the only positive event in twentieth-century Russian history ... the memory of the Great Patriotic War has become the foundation of national identity.”⁵² The memory of the war is all that is left of Russian identity, a last bastion that must be protected at all costs.

There is a clear consensus within the Putin establishment that military history must play an absolutely central role in history education. As Viacheslav Nikonov has put it, the nation is constituted above all else by the correct remembrance of military victories.⁵³ It is also clear that no ambiguity or nuance is to be permitted when teaching the history of the war. One analyst from RISI, Tamara Guzenkova, noted of the Ukrainian case that Ukrainian pupils were characterized by a “depressive” response to the history of the war, “because it’s unclear who’s the hero, and who’s the traitor.”⁵⁴ The patriotic pro-Kremlin literature often presents the distinction between hero and traitor or friend and enemy as a crucial aim of history education. According to one 2003 text, one alarming result of the “washing away” of Russia’s historical memory in recent decades is the fact that “a significant part of the Russian population today does

not know who and where her enemies and friends are [or] what threats really exist to the state's national and military security."⁵⁵ The teaching of military history in particular is held up as an essential antidote to this problem.⁵⁶ This applies also to history texts produced for children with special educational needs. One 2017 manual for teachers of intellectually disadvantaged children notes the usefulness of history for teaching "universal human values," citing "defense of the Fatherland" among the examples of such values.⁵⁷ The manual emphasizes that teachers must be "emotionally involved" when handling the history of the Great Patriotic War, so as "to inspire pupils to formulate judgements about civic duty, patriotism, treachery, heroism and so on."⁵⁸

Finally, we can note that the official discourse on "historical falsification" is fundamentally conspiratorial at its core. A crucial assumption underlying the discourse is the notion that hostile actors are actively and deliberately working to destroy and distort Russian historical consciousness, including by "brainwashing" the younger generation. Sometimes concrete states and individuals are named in this connection, but often the identities of the falsifiers are left vague. It is frequently stated or implied that public debates about historical issues are orchestrated by shadowy forces behind the scenes. Medinskii identified two main positions on this issue.

We all know very well that in recent times, the historical theme is being inserted more and more actively into public consciousness ... There are two polar points of view on this ... The first point of view is that nothing special is going on here, that this is all random and spontaneous and that there is no need to seek out any ill will behind this ... The second point of view is that this is no accident ... In actual fact, nobody's interested in the fate of poor dismembered Poland, who started the war, who signed what in Munich, what Molotov and Ribbentrop were up to. This is simply an informational pretext; the real interest is something entirely different.⁵⁹

For Medinskii, this "real interest" is to win over

people's minds, a struggle whose ultimate goal is the seizure of territory and money. Because it is absolutely clear that declaring war on Russia with the aim of detaching the Kaliningrad region or the Kurile Islands is a labor-intensive task with poor prospects. But brainwashing us like they did in '89—that can be done ... If this theme [of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact] is reactivated, then everyone will be brainwashed and we ourselves will hand over both Kaliningrad and the Kuriles. And throw in Sakhalin while we're at it.⁶⁰

Sergei Naryshkin interprets the issue in a similar vein.

The sustained advance of our country does not fit with the plans of the well-known world powers that wish to see Russia with limited autonomy, incapable of realizing strategic national priorities in order to guarantee development of the individual, society and the state. It is precisely with their silent agreement and cynically concealed financial encouragement that a genuine information war is being waged against Russia. History has been chosen as the battlefield. More precisely, the falsification of history.⁶¹

The notion of an “information war” being waged against Russia has long been a staple of extreme nationalist rhetoric, but as these quotes illustrate, it has now firmly entered mainstream official rhetoric. It also appears to have achieved some currency when it comes to influencing public opinion. A poll conducted in 2018 found that 66 percent of Russians believed that there was a Western conspiracy aimed at “rewriting Russian history in order to diminish the country’s greatness.”⁶²

The discourse on “historical falsification” is part of a broader trend, whereby conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking have become increasingly prevalent in Russian public life in recent decades. Eliot Borenstein has traced the movement of post-Soviet Russian conspiracy theories from the fringes to the center,⁶³ and Ilya Yablokov has argued that a distinctive feature of post-Soviet Russian conspiracy theories is the fact that it is “the political and intellectual elites [who] are [the] major producers and disseminators” of these theories, which are used to boost the state’s legitimacy and power.⁶⁴ In the case of the discourse on historical falsification, these conspiracy theories also serve to explain away unpalatable interpretations of Russian history, which can be dismissed out of hand as politically motivated.

History education and history textbooks occupy a prominent position in Russian conspiracy theories, fitting into broader notions of an “information war” being waged by the West with the aim of destroying Russian identity via an attack on the nation’s memory. The billionaire philanthropist George Soros is an important protagonist in these anti-semitic conspiracy theories,⁶⁵ in connection with claims about his role in funding “color revolutions” aimed at overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the region, and also regarding the Russian school history textbooks that were funded through Soros’s Open Society Foundations as part of the massive program of support for Russian education that the foundation provided in collaboration with the Russian Ministry of Education in the early 1990s.⁶⁶ These textbooks have been the subject of a number of furious media campaigns at various points since the late 1990s. The most frequent objection regards the textbooks’ handling of the history of the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War.⁶⁷ The following statement by Armen Oganesian, editor-in-chief of the Russian Foreign

Ministry journal *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, is typical of the way the issue is commonly framed.

The famous Soros ... decided that if Russians were finding it impossible to think up a national idea for themselves, then let's do it for them. And what did he do? He began to change history textbooks in Russia. He created and began to finance structures for changing historical consciousness.⁶⁸

While the Open Society Foundations' mission in the postsocialist space, as elsewhere in the world, is unquestionably ideological, the patriotic literature dismisses its actual aims (the promotion of democracy and human rights, including via support for the humanities) as screens concealing its "real aim" of undermining the Russian sense of self by destroying the nation's pride in its own history. According to Oleg Matveichev and Anatolii Beliakov, the Soros textbooks "'demonstrated' that Russia had no victories, science or culture; that it had no great scholars, poets or field commanders and that its entire history was a dreary chain of crises and failures."⁶⁹

The Soros-funded history textbooks are often described as a kind of time bomb, a slow-acting "sleeper" weapon designed to shape the future by influencing the younger generations, and by exploiting their impressionability and vulnerability to propaganda. One text on the subject of the Soros-funded history textbooks begins with the epigraph, "'If you want to defeat your enemy—educate his children'—Eastern wisdom."⁷⁰ For historian Elena Malysheva, commenting in June 2020, the problem is that individuals raised on the Soros textbooks are now passing these values on to their children, while the grandparents, who had lived through the war, are no longer alive to counter this with the truth.⁷¹ Alarmist warnings about historical falsification tap into anxieties of this kind regarding the passing of the generation of the last living witnesses.⁷²

Soros's foundations no longer operate within the Russian Federation. A long state campaign to discredit him culminated in November 2015, when Open Society Foundations and the OSI Assistance Foundation (along with various other NGOs) were officially declared "undesirable organizations."⁷³ Soros-funded textbooks have been targeted by some regional authorities as part of campaigns against "historical falsification." In January 2016, in the Republic of Komi, dozens of books funded by Soros were burned after a regional official described them as encouraging "a distorted perception of national history among young people and popularizing precepts alien to Russian ideology" and requested that the local authorities remove them from the libraries of educational institutions.⁷⁴

In August 2017, Soros-funded books were reportedly also removed from local libraries in Arkhangelsk Oblast.⁷⁵ Yet Soros and his history

textbooks remain a key reference point in the Russian geopolitical imaginary. Consider, for example, this statement by the Russian-trained general and former head of the Ministry of State Security of the Luhansk People's Republic, Roman Shadrin, who mentioned Soros's history textbooks in his reflections on why men in the Donbass were reluctant to enlist to fight in the war.

Over twenty-three years they've turned people into zombies. If we lose, they'll start to inject us with an inferiority complex. And who'll write our history textbooks? George Soros. First, they'll tempt us with chewing gum and Coca Cola. Then will come the gays and lesbians; people will say "Look how cool that is!" We'll start wearing G-strings. Then they'll legalize drugs ... The next stage will be letting people go to Europe to study ... And we'll be slaves. Russians will be put on their knees. Therefore, we must show our teeth.⁷⁶

This quote is a vivid example of how the discourse of "historical falsification" links up with and feeds into a whole set of other anxieties and fears regarding national sovereignty and identity. Geopolitics, gender politics, fantasy, and xenophobia—all of these are swirled together in contemporary Russian conspiratorial culture. In this mix, issues relating to history education are an important element and protecting historical consciousness has been held up as a core patriotic duty for Russian history teachers and textbook authors. In the following section, I shall examine some of the attempts that have been made to translate this discourse into concrete methodologies for the classroom.

Fighting "Historical Falsification" in the Classroom

At the First Russian National Congress of Teachers of History and Social Science in March 2011, teachers gathered to discuss how to "defend adolescents from false information about the Russian past."⁷⁷ Addressing the Congress, Naryshkin asserted that teachers must educate their pupils to become citizens capable of distinguishing "real history" from "falsification." He presented this as a matter of acquiring critical thinking skills, noting that "[t]he modern school is called upon not only to convey information, but also to call upon our young generation to think independently ... to know how to evaluate facts and to understand that history is a complex multi-factor process."⁷⁸ Yet it was clear that these skills were to be applied only to a narrow set of subjects designated by the state and from a single, mandated perspective. As Prime Minister Medvedev put it in 2013 during a discussion about history textbooks, "there are events regarding which there cannot be differing interpretations; for example, the victory in the Great Patriotic War."⁷⁹

In 2012, discussions around the school history curriculum continued to emphasize the theme of "falsification," with calls to introduce new sections on the topic into textbooks and teaching manuals. The Ministry of Education and Science organized a competition for the design of new teaching materials devoted to the problem of historical falsification⁸⁰ and tasked the Prosveshchenie publishing house with producing a series of new pedagogical materials on problems of "falsification" of Russian history. The resulting materials highlight some of the difficulties involved in formulating a clear and coherent definition of "historical falsification." They also show the ideological contortions that are required in order to marry this concept with its ostensible aim of teaching critical thinking skills.

According to an article published in the journal of the Institute for CIS Countries, history textbooks should, theoretically, expose pupils to different historical interpretations in order to provide them not only with "an understanding of the main methods of falsification of the fatherland's history" but also with "logical skills with which to overcome them, thereby [helping pupils] to develop a kind of immunity in this sphere."⁸¹ How, though, can this be achieved without simultaneously inviting pupils to apply these skills to the Great Patriotic War myth itself? This is only one of numerous intractable problems and dilemmas that teachers face when addressing the topic of "historical falsification" in the classroom.

The materials produced by Prosveshchenie in 2012 included a document that summarized the principles underlying the need "to develop supplementary elements addressing the falsification of national history for the course 'History of Russia.'"⁸² The document begins as follows.

In the conditions of a changing world order and of the strengthening of Russian statehood and of the role of Russia in world politics, we also find an intensification of political struggle, one of the means of which is the falsification of [Russian] history. Falsification of history can be defined as the conscious distortion of historical facts, their tendentious interpretation and the selective citing and manipulation of sources with the aim of creating a distorted image of historical reality.⁸³

The document identifies two main groups of "falsifiers": those with "socio-political (political, geopolitical and ideological) motivations, the majority of which can be linked with the aims and tasks of anti-Russian propaganda," on the one hand, and those driven by "personal-psychological, commercial motivations (the desire for self-assertion, fame ... [and] public recognition by generating a 'sensation' capable of overturning existing public perceptions of the past)," on the other.⁸⁴ It notes that anti-Russian falsifications are often linked to attempts to claim material compensation for damage incurred in the past.⁸⁵

Many of the new theoretical and practical materials grapple with the question of how exactly to define “historical falsification.” Where and how should the line be drawn when establishing whether a particular interpretation is “tendentious”? One textbook definition notes that falsifications are not only limited to “distorted or fabricated documents” but also include

the works of those historians who, instead of critically analyzing sources and juxtaposing historical documents, testimonies and facts, use only those [materials] which prove the correctness of their version of an historical event. In essence, while referring to a pluralism of opinion, these historians use scholarship as a political instrument to convince society of the correctness of a given position.⁸⁶

In general, the definitions of “historical falsification” in the methodological literature for teachers have tended to be too vague in some places and too narrow in others. While examples of outright forgeries of historical documents could be dealt with in a straightforward manner, most practical exercises of this kind in the new textbooks relate to earlier periods in imperial Russian history.⁸⁷ The lack of classroom exercises in combating “historical falsification” regarding more recent history only highlights the fact that for the most part, the really problematic historiography—on the most important contested and sensitive events from the Stalinist era, for example—does not easily lend itself to being “unmasked” as fraudulent.

Many of the theoretical and practical materials produced for teachers on the theme of “historical falsification” were produced by Evgenii Viazemskii, a professor at the Institute of Content and Teaching Methods at the Russian Academy of Education. In an article published in 2012, Viazemskii noted that while the state had mandated the need to tackle this problem, a comprehensive scholarly approach had yet to be developed. Viazemskii argued that society, and sometimes history teachers too, tended to perceive the so-called falsification of history “in the narrow, unambiguous sense of the ‘rewriting of history.’”⁸⁸

Without pausing to explain or elaborate this suggestion that history should not be “rewritten,” Viazemskii goes on to assert that this elementary approach “does not help to explain the phenomenon of the falsification of history ... the aims, motivations and mechanisms of the falsification of history [or] the main directions of attempts at the falsification of Russian history in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.”⁸⁹

Later in the same article, we find the key to Viazemskii's approach to defining "historical falsification"; namely, the notion that it is the state that is the ultimate arbiter of historical truth. Viazemskii says that for history teachers, a particular challenge is

to clarify the objective "truth of history," which must be liberated from historical myths and falsifications of history as attempts at the conscious distortion of history. It is essential for today's history teachers to know the specificities of state educational policy ... to understand the tasks that the state is setting before the school ... It is essential for pedagogues to think through a set of questions determined by the state's history policy, which is interlinked with history education, and to find their own answers to the challenges of the contemporary situation. Practice shows that these problems are complex for pedagogues.⁹⁰

Again, the clear message here is that teachers must look to the state for guidance. In 2013, Viazemskii published, as part of a series of materials designed to assist teachers in navigating these waters, a teacher training program which includes a special section on "historical falsification" as a "sociocultural, political and publicly significant phenomenon of the contemporary world" and offers sample exercises and strategies for handling this topic in the classroom.⁹¹

In 2017, Viazemskii and coauthor Ol'ga Strelova published a manual designed to provide teachers with "methodological training in how to expose and counteract attempts at falsification of history." The manual offers concrete examples of how "historical falsification" is to be approached in the classroom⁹² and proposes a solution to the conundrum set out above (the danger that techniques of combating "falsification" might be turned against the state's own history narrative). Viazemskii and Strelova address this problem by drawing a distinction between "falsification of history—a destructive phenomenon" and "historical myth-making—an organic part of the cultural process."⁹³ Likewise, they distinguish between "useful" patriotic myths and "incorrect" or "harmful" myths, which comprise "*falsification*, which means tendentious interpretation, selective citation and other forms of manipulation of sources, including outright forgery of documents, with the aim of creating a distorted image of historical reality" (original emphasis).⁹⁴ The differences between these categories are set out in tabular form (reproduced in English translation below).

This scheme and this teaching manual offer a rather depressing demonstration of what history teaching informed by the discourse of "historical falsification" might look like in practice, whereby historical practice is essentially reduced to an exercise in the rooting out of heresy.

Table 1. Myths and Falsifications of History in the Contemporary Period.⁹⁵

Line of comparison	Myth	Falsification
Nature and functions	“Useful” for the individual, for society, and for the regime, because it legitimizes the present, offers models, and facilitates the formation of a positive national and civic identity for the individual.	“Harmful” because it distorts the past, forms incorrect historical knowledge, undermines the feeling of respect for the past and loyalty to the contemporary authorities, and produces a negative identity for the individual.
Authorship	The creators of myths remain in the shadows; the myth is constructed and presented in such a way as to convince [the target audience] that “this is how it was.”	Authors are clearly personified, and are characterized by a predominance of negative individual qualities and character features.
Target audience	People of different ages and professions, but united by a “common fate” and by love and respect for the Fatherland and for [their] ancestors.	The nation; citizens obligated to preserve sovereign statehood, basic national values, historically formed state unity, and so on.
Influence on the individual and society	Soft	Hard [<i>zhestkoe</i>]
Model of relations	A person needs myths and heroes as part of a system of coordinates for orientation in life, among people, and in history.	Counteracting, resisting, exposing [<i>razoblachit'</i>].

Conclusion

The official discourse on “historical falsification” is not static and has evolved substantially over the course of the Putin era. The declaration on this topic issued by the Russian State Duma in 2005, which acknowledges that the small nations of Europe suffered and fell “hostage” to the great powers during and after the Second World War, sounds mild and reasonable compared to the current state of this discourse. The year 2020 began with Putin pledging to war veterans that he would “shut the filthy mouth” [*zatknut' pogonyi rot*] of those daring to “change [*pereinachit'*]

history, to serve it up in a false light and diminish the role of our fathers and grandfathers, our heroes who perished defending their Motherland and essentially the whole world from the brown plague."⁹⁶ This aggressive and dehumanizing language reached a new pitch during the eightieth Victory Day celebrations, when those who questioned the need for lavish military parades during a pandemic were described as "cockroaches" on Russian state television.⁹⁷

It remains to be seen how and to what degree the official discourse on "historical falsification" will be implemented in practice in schools. More work needs to be done to track its appearance in the new textbooks produced under the 2013 Historical-Cultural Standard or in the history section of the Unified State Examination (the final secondary school examination).⁹⁸ Scholars and educators have been vocal critics of issues surrounding the notion of "combating historical falsification," and in any case, as we have seen, the contradictions, tensions, and fissures in the official discourse make it difficult to translate this notion into concrete teaching materials. But whether it is translated into concrete measures or remains in the form of patriotic cant to be spouted in official settings, it seems clear that this concept will continue to play an important role in shaping the ideological climate in which history teaching takes place.

This article has illustrated some of the corrosive effects of this discourse on the state of historical scholarship and debate. The continued dominance of this approach to history in Russian schools and public life can only further degrade the country's intellectual and political climate, leaving no room for ambiguity, nuance, or complexity, undermining trust in scholarship, and rewarding those willing to conform to political and intellectual orthodoxy. Nominally aimed at decoupling history from politics, the discourse of "historical falsification" does precisely the opposite.

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Notes

1. The online lesson was also open to students at various military academies and other educational institutions affiliated with the Russian Defence Ministry.
2. "Otkrytyi urok 'Pomnit'—znachit' znat'," [Open lesson "Remembering Means Knowing"] President of Russia official website, 1 September 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63983>.
3. Ibid.
4. An exception is Anton Weiss-Wendt's recent study of the political uses of history in Russia, which takes this phenomenon as its point of departure. Anton Weiss-Wendt, *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control over the Past* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).
5. On Putin's Russia as a hybrid regime, that is, one that "combines important elements of both democracy and autocracy," see Henry E. Hale, "Eurasian Politics as Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Putin's Russia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 33–41. I follow Vladimir Gel'man in using the term "authoritarian" as a loose synonym for "nondemocratic," that is, to refer to systems where power is not transferred through electoral contestation. Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 5–6.
6. For an excellent recent study of this phenomenon, see Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
7. For a comparative study of the use of education in Russia and China to create obedient systems and preempt threats to authoritarian regimes and their leaders, see Karrie J. Koesel, "Legitimacy, Resilience, and Political Education in Russia and China: Learning to be Loyal," in *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, ed. Karrie Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Weiss (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020), 250–278.
8. Catherine Merridale, "Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 13–28 (here 13).
9. On developments in Russian history education from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, see Viktor Shnirel'man, "Rossiiskaia shkola i natsional'naia ideia," [The Russian school and the national idea] *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 6, no. 50 (2006), <http://www.intelros.ru/index.php?newsid=293> and Natalia Tregubova, Liliya Erushkina, Alexandr Gorylev, and Alexey Rusakov, "Russia as the Ambivalent Inheritor of the Soviet Union: The Case(s) of Russia," in *When the Future Came: The Collapse of the USSR and the Emergence of National Memory in Post-Soviet History Textbooks*, ed. L. Bennich-Bjorkman and S. Kurbatov (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2019), 29–35. For a comparison of narrative templates employed in Soviet and post-Soviet history textbooks from the 1990s, see James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98–115. For a regional case study of patriotic education programs on the war, see Vicky Davis, *Myth Making in the Soviet Union and Modern Russia: Remembering World War II in Brezhnev's Hero City* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 239–258. On the pre-Putin history of the State Program for Patriotic Education, see Håvard Bækken,

- "The Return to Patriotic Education in Post-Soviet Russia: How, When, and Why the Russian Military Engaged in Civilian Nation Building," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 5, no. 1 (2019): 123–157.
10. These include a major controversy around history education which erupted during Putin's first term over Igor' Dolutskii's senior secondary school textbook *Twentieth-Century Russian History* (1st ed., 1993), the 2001 edition of which had invited pupils to reflect on whether contemporary Russia was a "police state." This scandal culminated in Putin's call for an urgent review of history textbooks, which resulted in a rehaul of the procedures for the official evaluation and approval of textbooks in 2004–2005. On the Dolutskii textbook controversy, see Thomas Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 168–173. Another prominent controversy was that surrounding a teaching manual by A. V. Filippov, which notoriously described Stalin as an "efficient manager"; on this controversy, see David Brandenberger, "A New Short Course? A. V. Filippov and the Russian State's Search for a 'Useable Past'," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 4 (2009): 825–833; Elena Zubkova, "The Filippov Syndrome," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10, no. 4 (2009): 861–868; Todd H. Nelson, "History as Ideology: The Portrayal of Stalinism and the Great Patriotic War in Contemporary Russian High School Textbooks," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2015): 37–65 (here 40–41, 55–58).
 11. See further T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, eds., *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) and A. Soltysik Monnet, "War and National Renewal: Civil Religion and Blood Sacrifice in American Culture," *European Journal of American Studies* 7, no. 2 (2012).
 12. There is a large body of literature on this topic. For useful starting points, see Olga Malinova, "Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin," in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 43–70; T. C. Wolfe, "Past as Present, Myth, or History? Discourses of Time and the Great Fatherland War," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, and C. Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 249–283; and Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
 13. On teachers' responses to these developments, see Joseph Zajda and Ken Smith, "Secondary History Teachers' Responses to Historical Narratives in School History Textbooks: The Russian Federation," *Educational Practice and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2013): 27–61.
 14. "Putin: shkol'nye uchebniki—ne ploshchadka dlia politicheskoi bor'by, c istorii 'nado sniat' vsiu shelukhu i penu,'" [Putin: School textbooks are not a platform for political struggle, all the "trash and foam must be removed"] newsru.com, 27 November 2003, <https://www.newsru.com/russia/27nov2003/pres.html>. On the Kremlin's narrative about the 1990s, see Otto Boele, "'Perestroika and the 1990s—Those Were the Best Years of My Life!' Nostalgia for the Post-Soviet Limbo," in *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the*

- Empire's Legacies*, ed. Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 203–223 (here 206–207).
15. See Boris Grozovskii, “‘Prosveshchenie’ ot Rotenberga. Kak ‘patrioticheskie’ uchebniki druga Putina zakhvatili rynek obrazovaniia,” [“Enlightenment” from Rotenberg. How Putin’s friend’s “patriotic” textbooks seized the education market] *The Insider*, 11 February 2019, <https://theins.ru/opinions/140359>. See also Dagmara Moskwa’s article in this special issue.
 16. Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2011). Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton have argued that the color revolutions resulted in a situation in which “Moscow could no longer distinguish what the West couched as democratic change from loss of influence. Geopolitics and geo-ideas were now hopelessly entangled.” Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 78.
 17. Other measures taken as part of this reaction included the placing of new restrictions on the operations of NGOs in Russia (2004).
 18. See Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, 67–71.
 19. In January 2020, Medinskii was appointed Presidential Aide.
 20. Medinskii has published numerous books and articles on this topic. See, for example, *O russkom p’ianstve, leni i zhestokosti* [On Russian Drunkenness, Laziness, and Cruelty] (Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2007); *O russkom rabstve, griazi i “tiur’me narodov”* [On Russian Slavery, Filth, and the “Prisonhouse of Peoples”] (Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2008); *O russkom vorovstve, osobom puti i dolgoterpenii* [On Russian Thievery, Special Path, and Long-Suffering] (Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2008); and *Mify o Rossii* [Myths about Russia] (Moscow: Abris, 2017). Medinskii’s doctoral dissertation, published in 2011, provoked a lengthy scandal following allegations of plagiarism.
 21. Aleksandr Milkus, “Novyi uchebnik istorii budet pokhozh na skazku, rasskazannuiu na noch’,” [New history textbook will be like a bedtime fairytale] *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, no. 85, 21 June 2013.
 22. Or rather, recreated, since both societies harken back to imperial predecessors. An alternative body, the Free Historical Society, was created in 2014 (<https://volistob.ru/>).
 23. Mariia Pozdniakova, “Leonid Reshetnikov: ‘SShA visiat na voloske’,” [Leonid Reshetnikov: “The US is hanging on a thread”] *Aif.ru*, 3 February 2016, http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/leonid_reshetnikov_ssha_visyat_na_voloske.
 24. Pozdniakova, “Leonid Reshetnikov”; Leonid Reshetnikov interview with *Radonezh*, 15 January 2016, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/89697.html>; Mikhail Paniukov, “Leonid Reshetnikov: Rusofoby proderzhatsia na Ukraine eshche maksimum 20 let,” [Leonid Reshetnikov: Russophobes will hold on in Ukraine for a maximum of twenty years] *KP.ru*, 11 October 2015, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26444.7/3314664/>.
 25. See <http://www.materik.ru/>. On its website, the Institute describes itself as an “autonomous non-commercial organization.” It lists the main users of its analyses as the State Duma, the Foreign Ministry, the Security Council, the Presidential Administration, the Ministry for Culture, and others (materik.ru/institute/about).

26. For example, RISI and the Anti-Falsification Commission co-organized a major conference on representations of the Second World War in history textbooks in the CIS and the EU. See <https://histrf.ru/uploads/media/default/0001/26/79eb0ba13557685738353f3e1d736335fa777583.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2021). For the proceedings of the conference, see <https://histrf.ru/biblioteka/great-victory/articles/b/xi-chiem-nashie-slovo-otzovietsia> (accessed 3 March 2021). For similar events on the issue of history textbooks, see <https://histrf.ru/uploads/media/default/0001/26/9a5272ca110a7329f236a27f227eb555e5fe121a.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2021).
27. The mission of the Foundation for Historical Perspective centers on "counteracting falsification of Russian history and facilitating the formation of a positive image of Russia in the eyes of European and world public opinion." Its position is "based on the principles of nationally oriented conservatism." See <http://www.fiip.ru/about/aims/> (accessed 3 March 2021). Narochnitskaia was also a member of the Anti-Falsification Commission.
28. On the Church and memory politics, see Weiss-Wendt, *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History*, 61–72; Kathy Rousselet, "The Church in the Service of the Fatherland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 1 (2015): 49–67; Tatiana Voronina and Zuzanna Bogumil, "A Time of Persecution or a Time of Glory? The Russian Orthodox Church's Centenary Commemorations of the 1917 Revolution," *Religion, State, Society* 48, no. 2–3 (2020): 161–79; Julie Fedor, "Setting the Soviet Past in Stone: The Iconography of the New Martyrs of the Russian Orthodox Church," *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, 28, no. 1–2 (2014): 121–153; and Julie Fedor and Tomas Sniegón, "The Butovskii Shooting Range: History of an Unfinished Museum," in *Museums of Communism: New Memory Sites in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Stephen Norris (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 305–343. On the foreign policy dimension, see Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "The Geopolitics of Memory," *Eurozine*, 10 May 2007, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-geopolitics-of-memory/>; Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemotional Security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 221–237; Ivan Kurilla, "The 'Return of Stalin': Understanding the Surge of Historical Politics in Russia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 429 (May 2016), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/return-stalin-understanding-surge-historical-politics-russia> (accessed 22 January 2021); and Nils Muižnieks, ed., *The Geopolitics of History in Latvian-Russian Relations* (Riga: Academic Press of the University of Latvia, 2011). For a discussion of Putin's historical views and interventions, see Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II," *History and Memory* 29, no. 2 (2017): 90–124; Sergey Radchenko, "Vladimir Putin Wants to Rewrite the History of World War II," *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/vladimir-putin-wants-to-rewrite-the-history-of-world-war-ii/>; and Elizabeth A. Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and World War II in Russia," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172–200. Most recently, in June 2020, copies of Putin's latest historical reflections were circulated by the Russian embassy to history professors at German universities with the recommendation that they be used in "future writings on history." See "Russia Peddles Putin's WWII Essay to German Historians—DW," *The Moscow*

- Times*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/25/russia-peddles-putins-wwii-essay-to-german-historians-dw-a70693>.
29. *O protivodeistvii popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii narodov v ushcherb interesov Rossii: Sbornik materialov [On counteracting attempts to falsify the history of nations detrimental to Russia's interests: A collection of materials]* (2013), <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/41d54c47347ee1e7b7ea.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2021), 47–48.
 30. "Zaiavlenie. O popytkakh fal'sifikatsii istorii," [Declaration. On attempts to falsify history] No. 1923-IV GD, 27 May 2005, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901935214>.
 31. This came in the wake of calls, in February 2009, for a law to be passed criminalizing denial of the Soviet Victory. For an analysis of these events, see Pål Kolstø, "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and What Did It Achieve? A Reassessment," *Slavonic and East European Review* 97, no. 4 (2019): 738–760. A "memory law" of this kind was eventually passed in 2014.
 32. "O Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine, istoricheskoi istine i o nashei pamiati," [On the Great Patriotic War, historical truth, and our memory] Videoblog Dmitriia Medvedeva, 7 May 2009, <http://blog.da-medvedev.ru/post/11>.
 33. Iuliia Kantor, "'Istoriei upravliat' nel'zia,'" ["History cannot be managed"] *Vremia novostei*, 7 July 2009, www.vremya.ru/print/232671.html.
 34. Vasilii Khristoforov, in Kantor, "'Istoriei upravliat' nel'zia.'"
 35. "Zasedanie Komissii po protivodeistviu popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii v ushcherb interesam Rossii," [Session of the commission to counteract attempts to falsify history detrimental to Russia's interests] Kremlin official website, 28 August 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/administration/5336>.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. See special issue edited by Dmitry Gorenburg, "The Politics of Russian History," *Russian Politics and Law* 48, no. 4 (2010); Miguel Vázquez Liñán, "History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin's Russia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2 (2010): 167–178; and Isabelle de Kéghel, "Na puti k 'predskazuemomu' proshlomu?: Kommentarii k sozdaniiu Komissii po protivodeistviu popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii v Rossii," [On the path to a "predictable" past? Commentary on the creation of the commission for counteracting attempts to falsify history in Russia] trans. Aleksandr Kaplunovskii, *Ab Imperio* 3 (2009): 365–387.
 39. Use of the label "historical falsification" is not restricted to Russia. The phrase was also used, for example, by the Estonian parliament in its resolution "On Historical Memory and the Falsification of History" in February 2020. See Anastasiia Rumiantseva, "V Gosduma otsenili priniatuiu v Estonii rezoliutsiiu o roli SSSR v voine," [The State Duma assesses the resolution passed in Estonia on the USSR's role in the war] *RT na russkom*, 19 February 2020, <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/720277-deputat-rezolyuciya-rol-sssr>. The term "falsification of history" is also used by right-wing historians in Poland to refer to Jedwabne. See Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Jedwabne: History as a Fetish," in *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust*, ed. Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 40–63, here 48.

40. The RF National Security Strategy mentions the "manipulation of public consciousness and falsification of history" as tools used by some countries for geopolitical ends in the "increasingly intense confrontation in the global information space." "Strategiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii," [National security strategy of the Russian Federation] *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 31 December 2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>.
41. The RF Foreign Policy Concept states that "Russia, adhering to universal democratic values, including guaranteeing human rights and freedoms, sees its tasks as: ... to firmly counteract all manifestations of extremism, neo-Nazism, racial discrimination, aggressive nationalism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, attempts at the falsification of history and its use in the aims of aggravating confrontation and revanchism in world politics, attempts to revise the outcomes of the Second World War [and] to facilitate the depoliticization of historical discussions." "Kontseptsiiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (utverzdena Prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. V. Putiny 30 noiabria 2016 g.)," [The foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on 30 November 2016)] RF Foreign Ministry website, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248 (accessed 5 March 2021).
42. As Hank Johnston points out, in authoritarian societies, with their "between-the-lines speech contexts ... knowing what is intended is crucial to interpreting what is said." Hank Johnston, "Talking the Walk: Speech Acts and Resistance in Authoritarian Regimes," in *Repression and Mobilization*, ed. Christian Devenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 108–137, here 109.
43. See also Kolstø, "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission," 745–747.
44. Viktor Zavarzin and Kanybek Imanaliev, "'Protivostoiat' popytkam perepisat' istoriiu mozhno tol'ko argumentirovannoi pravdoi,'" ["Argued truth is the only way to counteract attempts to rewrite history"] *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 28 April 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/04/28/protivostoiat-popytkam-perepisat-istoriiu-mozhno-tolko-argumentirovannoj-pravdoj.html>.
45. Nataliia A. Narochnitskaia, "'Kontsert velikikh derzhav' nakanune reshaiushchikh sobytii," [Concert of great powers on the eve of decisive events] in *O protivodeistvii popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii narodov v ushcherb interesam Rossii: Sbornik materialov* (2013), 63–78, here 63, <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/41d54c47347ee1e7b7ea.pdf>. Another example is Aleksandr Verdusov's observation that "It would not be an exaggeration to assume that it is entirely possible that by the centennial of the beginning of the Second World War, the plus and minus signs of historical reality will have definitively been reversed to suit political expediency ... only ritual 'victims of Stalinism' will remain. And the colossal, real victims of Nazism will be systematically erased from political discourse as an inconvenient truth for the ideological heirs of the Munich conspiracy." Aleksandr Verdusov, "Perepisyvaia istoriiu," [Rewriting history] in the *spetsproekt "Istoricheskoe srazhenie,"* [The historical battle] *Izvestiia*, undated, <https://protectmemory.iz.ru/> (accessed 3 March 2021).
46. See, for example, Narochnitskaia, "'Kontsert velikikh derzhav,'" 63.

47. "Zasedanie Komissii."
48. "Putin: Rossiia otvetit Zapadu na iskazhenie istorii ob"ektivnymi dannymi," [Putin: Russia will respond to the West's distortion of history using objective data] *RT na russkom*, 19 January 2020, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/news/709511-putin-zapad-istoriya>.
49. It should be noted that the Putin government's record on matters related to archival access is generally dismal. A key trend is its tendency toward the reclassification of materials that had been declassified in the early 1990s. This trend began in the mid-1990s and intensified during Boris Yeltsin's second term.
50. "Medinskii predrek 'raschlenenie strany' iz-za fal'sifikatsii istorii," [Medinskii has predicted "dismemberment of the country" as a result of the falsification of history] *Snob*, 16 November 2016, <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/116643/>.
51. Vladimir Medinskii, "Cui prodest?," [Who benefits?] *Aktual'nye kommentarii*, 22 January 2010, http://actualcomment.ru/cui_prodest.html.
52. Aleksandr Diukov, *Rastoptannaia Pobeda: Protiv lzhi i revizionizma* [Victory trampled upon: Against lies and revisionism] (Moscow: Yauz, Eksmo, 2011), 1.
53. "What is a people, a nation? First and foremost, this is respect for victories. For us, this is respect for the Great Patriotic War, in which our country destroyed one of the most terrible enemies of humanity and sustained the greatest losses. It is precisely the past that forms citizens worthy of a great country." Nikita Viatchanin, "Istoricheskuiu pamiat' nado zashchishchat'—Nikonov," [Historical memory must be defended—Nikonov] *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, 14 February 2017, <https://www.pnp.ru/social/2017/02/14/istoricheskuyu-pamyat-nado-zashchishhat-nikonov.html>.
54. "Kniga kak instrument fal'sifikatsii istorii," [The book as a tool for the falsification of history] RISI website, 11 September 2012, <https://riss.ru/events/2089/>.
55. V. A. Zolotarev, "Prolog," in *Voennaia strategii: Podgotovka i vedenie vojn Novogo i Noveishego vremeni*, [Military strategy: Preparing and waging the wars of the modern and contemporary era] S. N. Mikhalev (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2003), 5.
56. Guzenkova has observed that the modern trend toward teaching the history of war with an increased focus on civilians and other victims rather than traditional operational military history is, in general, undermining the national consciousness. "Kniga kak instrument fal'sifikatsii istorii."
57. I. M. Bgazhnokova and I. V. Karelina, *Mir istorii: Istoriiia Otechestva. Metodicheskie rekomendatsii. 6–9 klassy. Uchebnoe posobie dlia obshcheobrazovatel'nykh organizatsii, realizuiushchikh adaptirovannye osnovnye obshcheobrazovatel'nye programmy* [The world of history: The history of the patria. Methodological recommendation. Classes 6–9. Training manual for general educational organizations conducting adapted basic general educational programs] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2017), 28.
58. *Ibid.*, 49.
59. "TsSKP: Stenogramma zasedaniia kruglogo stola na temu: 'Fal'sifikatsiia istorii i istoricheskie mify, kak instrument sovremennoi politiki,'" [TsSKP:

- Stenogram of Session of round table on the theme: "Falsification of history and historical myths as a tool in modern politics] accessed 22 January 2021, <http://old.cskp.ru/recs/10621/?print>.
60. Medinskii, "Cui prodest?"
 61. Sergei Naryshkin, "Chestnaia istoriia—kliuch k formirovaniu doveritel'nykh otnoshenii mezhdu narodami," [Honest history—A key to forming trusting relations between nations] in *Velikaia Pobeda*, ed. S. E. Naryshkin and A. V. Torkunov (Moscow: MGIMO-Universitet, 2015), vol. 6, "Za chestnuiu istoriiu," [For an honest history] book 16, "Prezidentskaia komissiiia," [Presidential commission] 10, <https://historyrussia.org/images/img-knigi/pobeda/t6.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2021).
 62. Cited in Keith A. Livers, *Conspiracy Culture: Post-Soviet Paranoia and the Russian Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 11.
 63. Eliot Borenstein, *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), x.
 64. Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 2.
 65. Soros is also the chief protagonist in various other conspiracy theories around the world. See for example Avi Selk, "Debunking the George Soros-was-a-Jew-killing-Nazi Conspiracy Theory," *Washington Post*, 30 May 2018; Griff Witte, "Once-Fringe Soros Conspiracy Theory Takes Center Stage in Hungarian Election," *Washington Post*, 17 March 2018; Talia Levin, "Conspiracy Theories about Soros Aren't Just False. They're Anti-Semitic," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2018. See also Julia Carrie Wong, "Facebook Reportedly Discredited Critics by Linking Them to George Soros," *Guardian*, 15 November 2018.
 66. Examples of these conspiracy theories include the following. "Some consider him [Soros] an agent of the mighty Rothschild financial clan; others believe he's a CIA agent. We won't go deeply into studying this theme but shall turn to what bothers every Russian citizen whose children may have studied using textbooks in which Russian history was rewritten with Soros' money." Dmitrii Beliaev, *Razrukha v golovakh: Informatsionnaia voina protiv Rossii* [Devastation in (people's) heads: Information warfare against Russia], <https://public.wikireading.ru/71078> (accessed 9 July 2020).
 67. Most texts on this subject single out, in particular, A. A. Kreder's textbook, *Noveishaia istoriia XX vek* [Twentieth century contemporary history] (1995). See Vladimir Tikhomirov, "Uchebniki, kotorye lgut: Pochemu deti mogut ne uznat' o nashei Velikoi Pobede?," [Textbooks that lie: Why might children not learn about our great victory?] *Life.ru*, 8 May 2017, <https://life.ru/p/1004790>. Kreder's textbook was banned in several regions in 1998. E. Guz', "Shkol'nyi uchebnik po istorii v usloviakh transformatsii gosudarstvennoi obrazovatel'noi politiki rubezha XX–XXI vv.," [The school history textbook in conditions of transformation of the state educational policy at the turn of the twentieth-twenty-first century] *Postsovetskii materik* 1, no. 21 (2019): 111–121, here 114.
 68. Naryshkin and Torkunov, *Velikaia Pobeda*, 79.
 69. Oleg Matveichev and Anatolii Beliakov, *Troianskii kon' zapadnoi istorii* [The trojan horse of western history] (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2014), 5.

70. Beliaev, *Razrukha v golovakh*.
71. “‘Sledovatel’no’. Istoricheskaia pamiat’: sokhranit’ dlia potomkov!,” [“Consequently”. Historical Memory: Preserve It for Descendants!] *Sledstvennyi komitet Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 20 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61OVcYq9lnU> (around 11:30).
72. See Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus,” in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–40, here 2–3.
73. “Genprokuratura RF vkluchila Fond Sorosa v spisok nezhelatel’nykh organizatsii,” [RF office of the prosecutor general includes Soros foundation in list of undesirable organizations] *TASS*, 30 November 2015, <https://tass.ru/politika/2483822>. Since 2012, Russian organizations receiving foreign grants and funding are required to register as “foreign agents.”
74. Elizaveta Maetnaia, Andrei Vinokurov, and Aleksandr Braterskii, “‘Chuzhdye rossiiskoi ideologii knigi,’” [“Books alien to Russian ideology”] *gazeta.ru*, 14 January 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/01/13_a_8020199.shtml.
75. “Vlasti ob’iasnili iz’iatie knig ot fonda Sorosa iz bibliotek v Pomor’e,” [Authorities explain removal of Soros foundation books from libraries in Pomor’e] *RIA Novosti*, 11 August 2017, <https://ria.ru/20170811/1500202740.html>.
76. Roman Shadrin, 2015 interview, cited in Aleksandr Fast, “‘Uchebniki istorii kto nam napishet? Dzhordzh Soros,’” [“Who’s going to write our history textbooks for us? George Soros”] *TJournal.ru*, 16 November 2017, <https://tjournal.ru/news/62330-uchebniki-istorii-kto-nam-napishet-dzhordzh-soros>.
77. “Uroki istorii vyvedut na novyi uroven’,” [History lessons to be taken to a new level] *Vesti*, 31 March 2011, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2131361>.
78. *Ibid.*
79. Elena Kriviakina, “Medvedev sel za partu,” [Medvedev gets behind the school desk] *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, no. 117, 3 September 2013.
80. “Shkol’nyi kurs istorii izbaviat ot iskazhenii,” [School history course to be rid of distortions] *Russkii obozrevatel’*, 11 May 2012, <http://www.rus-obr.ru/ru-web/18055>.
81. Guz’, “Shkol’nyi uchebnik po istorii,” 117.
82. The materials produced by Prosveshchenie also included new sections on “historical falsification” that were added to two existing history textbooks: A. A. Danilov, L. G. Kosulina, and M. Iu. Brandt, *Istoriia: Rossiia i mir. Drevnost’. Srednevekov’e. Novoe vremia*, [History: Russia and the world. Antiquity. Middle ages. Modern era] 10 klass (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2012) and L. N. Aleksashkina, A. A. Danilov, and L. G. Kosulina, *Istoriia: Rossiia i mir v XX-nachale XXI veka*, [History: Russia and the world in the twentieth-early twenty-first centuries] 11 klass [year 11] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2012).
83. “Opisanie sistemnogo predstavleniia informatsii (analiticheskie materialy)” [Description of systematic presentation of information (analytical materials)] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2012), 54, <http://old.prosv.ru/Attachment.aspx?Id=28483> (accessed 31 December 2020).
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

86. A. A. Danilov, L. G. Kosulina, and M. Iu. Brandt, *Istoriia: Rossiia i mir. Drevnost'. Srednevekov'e. Novoe vremia*, 10 klass (Moscow: Prosveshchenie; undated, but apparently 2012 edition), 27, http://old.prosv.ru/info.aspx?ob_no=37231 (accessed 31 December 2020).
87. A. A. Danilov, *Fal'sifikatsiia otechestvennoi istorii: Kniga dlia uchitel'ia* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, undated, but apparently 2012), <http://old.prosv.ru/Attachment.aspx?Id=28481> (accessed 31 December 2020). The exercises provided here deal exclusively with fifteenth- to nineteenth-century history.
88. E. E. Viazemskii, "Problema fal'sifikatsii istorii Rossii i obshchee istoricheskoe obrazovanie: teoreticheskie i prakticheskie aspekty," [The problem of the falsification of the history of Russia and general historical education: Theoretical and practical aspects] *Problemy sovremennogo obrazovaniia* 1 (2012): 28–43, here 29, http://pmedu.ru/res/2012_1_4.pdf (accessed 3 March 2021).
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., 40.
91. E. E. Viazemskii and O. Iu. Strelova, *Programma dopolnitelnogo professional'nogo pedagogicheskogo obrazovaniia: "Aktual'nye voprosy prepodavaniia istorii v shkole"* [Program of Supplementary professional pedagogical education: "Current issues in the teaching of history in schools"] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2013), 9, http://old.prosv.ru/info.aspx?ob_no=37231 (accessed 31 December 2021).
92. E. E. Viazemskii and O. Iu. Strelova, *Proektnaia deiatel'nost' shkol'nikov na urokakh istorii: uchebnoe posobie dlia obshcheobrazovatel'nykh organizatsii* [History lesson project activities for pupils: Training manual for general educational organizations] (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2017), 15.
93. Ibid., 11.
94. Ibid., 44.
95. Ibid., 47–48.
96. "Putin poobeshchal zatknut' 'poganyi rot' tem, kto perepisyvaet istoriiu," [Putin promises to shut the "filthy mouth" of those who are rewriting history] *RIA Novosti*, 18 January 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200118/1563581123.html>.
97. "Ataka na Pobedu," [Attack on victory] *60 minut*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0Y4Lfbt32M>. This program also featured homophobic slurs against critics of the Victory Day parade; see comment around 13:00 that "We like the Victory Parade but these guys like gay parades."
98. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.