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Davide Cocetti

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Corresponding Address: Davide Cocetti, Univ. di Bologna, Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà, Piazza S. Giovanni in Monte, 2, 40124 Bologna, Italy

Under the State Supervision: Academic History in Putin's Russia. An interview with Alexander Makhov

DAVIDE COCETTI

Univ. di Bologna, Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà
davide.cocetti@studio.unibo.it

In the interview, a young researcher, Alexander Makhov, recounts his first-hand experience of studying the relationship between public authorities and academic historians in 21st century Russia, in particular the way in which state memory policy influences the academic discourse concerning Soviet history. Over the past two decades, due to Putin's increasingly censorious interventions, this type of research has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, in Russia.

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SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS; REWRITING HISTORY; RUSSIA; MEMORY LAWS

Alexander Makhov è dottorando in Sociologia presso la Graduate School for Social Research dell'Accademia polacca delle scienze di Varsavia. Ha conseguito la laurea triennale (BA) presso la Volgograd State University e il master (MA) presso la Higher School of Economics di Mosca, entrambe in Storia. Per la sua tesi di dottorato si occupa del rapporto tra le autorità pubbliche e gli storici accademici in Russia, in particolare del modo in cui la politica della memoria di Stato influisce sul discorso accademico riguardante la storia sovietica. I suoi interessi di ricerca includono la politica dell'identità e la politica accademica nei regimi illiberali, la sociologia della storiografia e la politica della memoria in Russia. È autore dei saggi "Lubyanka Square - Monument of an Unresolved Conflict", in *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 9, 2015; "Everyday Knowledge about the Past in discussions on online forums", in *Novaya i Noveyshaya Istoria* 1, 2015.

Pur non avendo mai ricevuto sanzioni o intimidazioni dalle istituzioni, Makhov ha dovuto lasciare la Russia, suo Paese di origine, per poter affrontare liberamente le ricerche legate alla sua tesi di dottorato. Il controllo dello Stato russo sul discorso storico e storiografico è divenuto

sempre più rigido nel corso degli anni. Basti pensare alle numerose manipolazioni della storia del XX secolo che hanno accompagnato una retorica sempre più aggressiva nei confronti dell'Ucraina: l'intera operazione militare iniziata nel febbraio 2022 è stata giustificata nei termini di un'operazione di *denazificazione*. Chi ha provato a contrapporre uno sguardo più oggettivo e meno mistificante sul passato ha incontrato ostacoli sempre maggiori alla sua attività di ricerca.

Emblematico è il caso di Memorial, associazione che sin dalla fine degli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso si è occupata delle violazioni dei diritti umani in Unione Sovietica e nella Russia post-sovietica. Come molte altre organizzazioni non governative attive a livello internazionale, Memorial ha dovuto fare i conti con la controversa legge russa sugli "agenti stranieri" (ovvero su chi riceve donazioni dall'estero), entrata in vigore nel 2012. Crescenti tensioni hanno accompagnato i rapporti tra le istituzioni russe e l'Associazione, che infine è stata accusata di aver violato la legge. Il processo si è concluso il 28 dicembre 2021, con il provvedimento giudiziario per lo scioglimento di Memorial.

How do Russian institutions shape and manipulate the past? What is the balance sheet of the Soviet experience drawn in Russia today? What has changed since the time of Yeltsin and, before that, the USSR?

In today's Russia state politics of memory plays an enormous role in legitimizing the political regime. Political institutions spend a large amount of their resources on controlling and directing the discourse on national history. The ministries of culture, education, and science have wide ideological functions – from fostering patriotism to fighting counter-state narratives – aimed at forming a loyal majority. The state constantly increases the resources assigned for ideological aims, which makes institutions compete for these funds and deepen the ideologization of history and public memory. The main direction of state memory politics is set by president, while institutions, organizations and various political entrepreneurs convert Putin's statements into policies, programs, projects, and initiatives.

The growing role of the memory policy attracts more and more actors. Since 2014 history and memory became a matter of the Security Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prosecutor's office, and

the Investigation Committee. The presence of siloviks (securocrats) in the area of memory politics immediately changed the character of memory policy – it turned from ideologization to securitization. The first memory law was passed already in 2014, it was supposed to fight the ‘rehabilitation of Nazism’, but in fact it just criminalized counter-official interpretations of the history of World War II. As a result, the Russian memory policy is shaped on the one hand by the work of ideological institutions and agencies (such as the Russian Historical Society and the Russian Military Historical Society) and on the other by the strengthening the securitization of national politics.

The memory policy in Russia is shaped by a statist narrative on national history, which is delivered to the society by means of top-down guidelines and red lines. In a nutshell, the statist narrative claims that the state’s needs and interests prevail over individual ones, because the state guarantees security, continuity and well-being for its citizens. From this point of view, the ‘powerful and mighty state’, one which is able to impose its will inside and outside the country, is always a sign of a ‘proper rule’. For this reason, the history of the USSR, especially Stalin’s rule, is so attractive for Putin while the Perestroika and the 1990s, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are so shameful for him. Putin is cherry-picking facts demonstrating the power of the Soviet Union, but he forgets to say about millions of lives of ordinary people destroyed by state repressions or wasted for the sake of geopolitical domination.

Putin’s memory policy differs from Yeltsin’s to the same extent as their political regimes differ. They are simply antipodes. I think it will not be an exaggeration to say that Yeltsin did not use memory politics to legitimize his rule. He relied on democratic and liberal values, in particular, on pluralism in culture, politics, media and education, which he opposed to the Communist monopoly in ideology. Today it sounds fantastic, but in Yeltsin’s time teachers and schools had the right to choose among democratic, communist, and monarchist history textbooks. Already in 2001 Putin’s government initiated a revision of the school textbooks. This simple example demonstrates how different these two presidents are.

Two “levels” of historical narrative can be identified in any country: a more popular one – the result of memory policies, anniversaries and school teaching

- and a more purely academic one. How do these two levels converge and how do they differ in Russia? What role do school textbooks, traditionally the meeting point between these two levels of narrative, play?

Until 2014 Russian historians widely shared an opinion that academic history existed parallelly to the public one – they did not compete or overlap each other. Though it was a naïve point of view, there were few examples of state intervention into the field of academic history. One of them was the commission against falsification of history, which finished its work without any result in 2012. Another example was the single standard for school history education designed by academics, along with the ministries of education, culture and sciences. The idea of the single standard was proposed by Putin in 2013 and had a clearly ideological goal – it set up guidelines in history writing for the authors of school textbooks. The introduction of the standard was a turning point, signifying the prevalence of ideological aims over academic expertise.

The further convergence of academic history and state memory policy happened in 2014 after Russia started a hybrid war in Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea. Academic historians re-framed Ukrainian history in a way that allowed to justify Putin's politics – they argued that Eastern Ukraine, called by them 'Novorossiya' (New Russia), was historically part of Russia, and Crimea was mistakenly given to Ukraine. That was a clear indicator that academic history is subordinated to the state memory policy, and has to fulfil its orders. The directors of history research institutes and rectors of leading universities played a huge role in the ideologization of academic history. They transmitted the state order to the research agenda in academic organizations, receiving extra funds for their loyalty. This trade-off turned them into loyal servants of government officials.

What are the risks for a historian in Russia? What is the breaking point beyond which a researcher cannot go?

The Russian state applies different policies to academic and activist historians. Academic publications and discussions are officially not subjected to the recent memory laws. Though there is no guarantee that some professor will not be arrested, in fact, in the last ten years there were no cases of scholars under arrest or prosecuted because of their

interpretation of history. As far as I know, the only such case happened in 2009 in Arkhangelsk, when the local Federal Security Service (FSB) initiated a case against academic historian Mikhail Suprun. The historian worked on a publication containing the lists of Russian Germans repressed in the 1940s in the Arkhangelsk region. FSB filed a case under the article on disclosure of personal information of the relatives of the repressed people. Finally, the historian was acquitted by the court, but this case echoed widely across Russia – archives restricted access to the documents about repressions, and historians became much more cautious.

Though authorities do not prosecute academic historians, there are many ways to reduce their criticism using organizational pressure – the most effective one is the threat of being fired. Historians at Russian universities are quite defenseless: they have short-term contracts and no independent labor unions. The rector may simply not prolong their contract or force them to resign, in case they attract the attention of the police or FSB. Historians from the Academy of Sciences are in a better position, because the Academy is self-governed and has significant autonomy. However, they are also very vulnerable to the institutional pressure, which comes from the Government, goes through directors of research organizations and, in fact, impacts every academic in Russia. In case a research institute decides to resist to this pressure, the Ministry of Science may call back the license for awarding academic degrees, cross out the institute's journal from the Ministry list of academic journals, or even assign a new temporarily director. There is a well-known case of historian Kirill Alexandrov, who defended his doctoral thesis about the Russian Liberation Army (Nazi collaborators) in Saint-Petersburg Institute of History. Some veteran organization organized a protest against this defense, the director of the institute was pressed to cancel the defense, but he decided to resist and the institute's doctoral council awarded Kirill Alexandrov his doctoral degree. However, the Ministry of Science canceled the degree and later called back the council's license. The rebellious director lost his post, the new one chose a loyalist strategy – the institute goes in line with the official memory policy, praising “the great rulers of Russia”.

Though many scholars in Russia see no restriction for their academic work coming from the authorities, for me it is obvious that there are

strict “red lines” no one is allowed to cross. This might be seen by the example of the academic discussions about the beginning of World War II. In the 1990s and early 2000s it was common to put Stalin on a par with Hitler and talk about the same totalitarian expansionist nature of their regimes, but in mid 2000s the discussion turned around – Stalin was “rebranded” as a defender of his country and the whole world in the face of the Nazi danger. Twenty years ago it was common for leading Russian historical journals to discuss Stalin’s plan to attack Nazi Germany in 1941, however now it is not discussed there anymore. The very topic of the Soviet-Nazi cooperation in 1939–1941 is almost not discussed in Russian academic journals. Another good example is the discussion about the cause of Stalinist repressions. While in the 1990s historians discussed either it was cleansing of particular groups of society or it was simply intimidation of all groups to make everyone fully obedient, by the late 2000s the discourse changed historians started to talk about repressions as the result of anti-Soviet politics of the West and Stalin’s fear of military intervention. The discourse on the history of Stalinism and World War II became much less critical to the Soviet state, but various statist interpretations got much more popular. This is the effect of state memory policy and loss of academic freedom in Russia.

Activist historians are under much greater threat, in fact, any public claim or comment in social media, which puts Stalin and USSR on a par with Hitler and Nazi Germany might be considered in today’s Russia a criminal act of ‘rehabilitation of Nazism’. Any public criticism concerning Soviet activities during World War II might be the reason for suing the one voicing it for a misinterpretation of history. Independent NGOs, which tried to continue their activity after 2014, are now either banned or closed, due to the threat of persecution. A very well-known case is that of Yuri Dmitriev, an activist historian who excavated the remains of the victims of the state terror, and was arrested in December 2016, after his activism attracted attention of the local FSB office. It is sad evidence of the great risk historians face, when questioning the state’s monopoly on memory.