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## HISTORY RUSSIAN STYLE

Valdis V. Pavlovskis

Recently, Latvian and Russian newspapers have published stories about a new law that a legislative committee of the Duma (the Russian Parliament) has been preparing that would prohibit any criticism or the rewrite of the Soviet history of World War II. Those who violate the new law will be subject to criminal prosecution, just like in the Soviet totalitarian era. The title of the proposed legislation is *Russian Federation's Action Against Efforts to Rehabilitate Nazism, Nazi war Criminals and their Supporters in the Newly Independent Countries--the Former Republics of the Soviet Union*.

Violators of the law would be officially designated as a “terrorist” by the government, and their names will be placed on an official terrorist list. These persons would be then declared as *persona non grata*, prohibited from entering Russia, denied access to Russian archives and subject to criminal prosecution. Sergei Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Emergency Preparations (EMERCON), stated that the legislation would seek to punish Eastern European and former Soviet states which deny that they were “liberated by the Red Army.” The Minister’s statement appeared particularly aimed at Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

He declared that a law needs to be passed to “stipulate criminal responsibility, for those denying the victory of the USSR over Nazi Germany.” As there are “countries within the post-Soviet space that reject both the results and the deeds of the Great Patriotic War.”

The title of the bill *Action Against Efforts to Rehabilitate Nazism...* is deceiving. It is a code word that masks the real purpose of the legislation. Recently, Minister Shoigu explained the real purpose of the bill. “The legislation is as much about denying the Soviet victory over Germany as it is about the review of the Soviet Union’s history. *They are judging our history, and we cannot let them do that,*” said the Minister [emphasis added]. The bill is part of a widespread and aggressive effort by the Russian government and right wing extremists to normalize the Soviet past.

According to a member of the Duma Committee, Aleksander Kazakov, the legislation covers foreign persons as well as Russians. He indicated that the law would be extended to cover organizations, associations and business firms that support or cooperate with the terrorists. Mr. Kazakov told the *Ria Novosti* press that the proposed list of terrorist and their supporters is already being prepared. He noted that “*all* [emphasis added] Latvian historians are terrorists.”

“It has become fashionable...to defame the Soviet way of life,” said Ivan Korbutov, a retired general who heads the Russian council of war veterans. Such actions, orchestrated at the behest of the West to discredit our glorious past, must be brought to court and the journalists responsible punished.”

Konstantin Zatulins, head of the Institute of Commonwealth of Independent States, told the media that the law would provide the constitutional base for criminal prosecution of those who deny the Soviet victory over Germany and rewrite the results of World War II. He suggested that “the government establish a permanent tribunal to monitor the situation and to prosecute the violators.” (Sort of a history police/inquisition.)

Support of the legislation has been expressed by the Prosecutor General of Russia, Yuri Chaika.

Vasily Likhachev, Deputy Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of Russia’s Federation Council, observed that the Baltic countries “...have developed an aspiration to distort [Russian] history and to display a hostile attitude towards Russia and to Russia’s history in general.”

Even the Greek Orthodox church has gotten into the act. The Bishop in charge of external affairs for the Moscow diocese, Sergei Zvonarevs, urged the adoption of the “traitors list” and urged that it be done as soon as possible.

The leaders of Russia’s leading political party *United Russia* have pledged to support the legislation, and have urged Duma to proceed with adoption of the bill as quickly as possible.

Latvian Professor Aivars Stranga at the University of Latvia stated that the proposed law “...is politically bizarre and scandalous. To wage war against free thought and free and open academic discussions with laws that equate truth to terrorism is unheard in today’s world. It will still further isolate the Russian historians from the freedom of the academic world in the free world. It is hard for me to imagine what you could do with “terrorist historians.’ I would certainly hope that it’s not to liquidate them.”

The target date for adoption of the law is May 9, 2009. The Russian media predicts that the bill will be adopted..

No one in the Baltic countries or the other new democracies denies the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany and its contribution in eliminating Nazi Germany or the great number of casualties it suffered during the War. What is questioned, however, and brought out in the light of the day for discussion are the collateral “deeds” that accompanied Soviet actions before, during and after the War such as the shared common values of Stalin and Hitler, the collaboration between the Gestapo and the NKVD (the Russian secret police); the extradition of Jewish refugees back to Nazi Germany; the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact); the Russian attack on Finland; the occupation of Eastern Poland; the Katyn Forest massacre of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, which Moscow maintains was not a war crime; the military occupation and illegal annexation of the Baltic countries for a half century; the arrests and deportations of thousands of innocent men, women and children to Siberian concentration camps; the forceful dislocation of entire ethnic groups from their homelands to different parts of the Soviet Union; and after the War, the estrangement of Europe, separating the east from the rest of the free world by an Iron Curtain. These are some of the tragic and brutal acts of the Soviet Union that the Russian government is now trying to

hide under the cover of the “anti-Nazi legislation.”

The transfer from one concentration camp to another does not mean liberation. The change from German occupation to Soviet occupation did not bring liberation to the Baltic people.

Not everyone in Russia supports the legislation, but the opposition is small and weak. For fifteen years, the scholarly community in Russia has been brownbeaten and intimidated by the government. It has lost its spirit and integrity. Nevertheless, there are still some courageous souls who dare to object to the bill. Liberal Russians fear that the legislation will be used to punish anyone who criticizes those who do not agree with the government's interpretation of Soviet history. Mikhail Kapura, Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Legal and Court issues of Duma, said that he could not share Sergei Shoigu's position. I cannot share his views on the matter, and I think that it is unduly to introduce criminal responsibility for denying the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War...” Mr. Kapura said.

The liberal Russian newspaper *Kommersant* writes that Minister Shoigu's threats of criminal prosecution could be used against not only foreigners, but also against Russian citizens. “The law could be used on trumped up charges against any historian that the government does not like,” commented history professor Nikolai Naumovs of the Moscow State University.

Jonathan Brent, editorial director of Yale University Press, and the author of a recently published book *Inside the Stalin Archives--Discovering the New Russia*, characterizes the legislation as “...sickening, a legislative falsification for the sake of Russian national pride. I oppose it in every way.”

The legislation is not just confined to Russia, it empowers and directs Russian authorities to go beyond Russia's borders to seek and punish those who challenge or disagree with their version of Soviet history. It proposes to make an official government list of “terrorists ” of people with whom the Russian authorities differ on intellectual basis. No doubt the list will be posted on the Internet for all the world to see and use. It is a cold war against scholars and all those who hold that study of history should be based on facts and truth, not some ideological dogma or political agenda.

The book burning and witch hunting legislation is aggressive, intrusive, intellectually bankrupt and morally and ethically perverted. It faces the intellectually free nations of Europe against the autocratic Russia. It limits free discussion of its own people and inhibits their contact and cooperation with persons and organizations beyond Russia's borders. It makes criminals of people who search for and speak the truth. As Jonathan Brent in a letter to me observes: “The move in Russia is dangerous and disappointing. It has worldwide implications, I believe, and, as I'm sure you are aware, has left many people thinking that a fascist or proto-fascist state is coming about without any real opposition.”

“The new Russian history is disturbing, for what it says to the next generation of Russians -- those who one would have hoped would be educated in the values of democracy. It is equally disturbing as yet further evidence that Russia has rejected a course that for so many

other societies, has led to enhanced freedom at home and peaceful relations with the rest of the world,” stated Arch Puddington, Director of Research at Freedom House.

The American Latvian Association (ALA) and the Baltic American Freedom League (BAFL) hold that the proposed legislation grossly violates the Section on *Respect for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (Section I. a. VII) of the *Helsinki Accords*. As the Russian Federation is a member state of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and as the “history” legislation would create instability and ill will in the region, ALA and BAFL have requested the U.S. Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe to review the proposed legislation and to take appropriate steps to discourage its adoption.

ALA and BAFL have also brought the proposed legislation to the attention of a number of scholarly associations and the Baltic representatives to the European Parliament.