

RUSSIA'S NEW "MINISTRY OF TRUTH"

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THE NEW FASCISM, A STATE BUILT ON LIES, COMMISSION AGAINST HISTORY, A BACKWARD TRADITION OF MANIPULATING HISTORY, KREMLIN WANTS TO "CORRECT" THE RECORD, WHEN INTERPRETING HISTORY BECOMES A CRIME, MEDVEDEV IMPOSES CONTROLS OVER RUSSIAN HISTORIANS, WITH APOLOGIES TO ORWELL are just some of the titles of newspaper articles reporting the creation of a commission with the George Orwellian title--*Commission to Counteract the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russian Interests*--just established by the President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. The commission's mandate is to stop and find ways to counter falsified historical facts and conclusions promulgated by post-Soviet states and Eastern European states that belittle or disparage the international prestige of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin calls it "falsification" and "rewriting of history." In plain language, the purpose of the commission is to defend the official version of Soviet history and to conceal the horrid reality of the state's communist past. Whereas, the Kremlin maintains that the commission is required to protect the honor of the nation, Kremlin critics say that it is needless, and a move to restrict freedom of speech that could be used against those who disagree with the government.

The Presidential decree establishing the commission also recommended measures to counter the alleged falsifications, however, Medvedev's press service declined to comment what those measures might entail.

The official reason given by the Kremlin for creating the commission is to counter the increasingly aggressive attempts by the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe to rewrite Soviet history to Russia's disadvantage. Supporters of the commission claim that Baltic and former Soviet Bloc nations have "a very peculiar view" of that period in history: they see themselves as "victims" of Soviet occupation and domination. This has angered the Kremlin. Moscow insists that the Soviets liberated the countries and deserve their gratitude for that.

The Baltic countries were occupied by the Red Army in June of 1940 following a secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939). Shortly after the invasion, they were illegally annexed into the Soviet Union against their will. Five decades of totalitarian regime and ethnic cleansing followed the annexations. When the Kremlin talks about liberating the Baltic countries, one of the cardinal principles of George Orwell's "Truth Ministry" from the novel *1984* comes to mind: "Truth is lies and lies is truth."

The President's commission lacks true historians and abounds in bureaucrats. Of the 28 members, 25 are high ranking government officials and members of the Duma. All are Kremlin-friendly, committed conservatives. Only three historians serve on the commission, and even they are not independent researchers or scholars. Two members are government appointed directors of government run institutes, and the third is the Director of the Federal Archive

Service. “None of them is recognized among the professionals,” stated Roy Medvedev, a noted Russian historian to the *Kommersant*, a liberal newspaper. The rest of the commission includes representatives from the Federal Security Service (former KGB), the Foreign Intelligence, the Defense Ministry, the Armed Forces, the Russian Security Council, the Ministry of Justice, the Foreign Ministry, the Duma etc. The commission is headed by the President’s Chief of Staff, Sergei Naryshkin, known as a conservative and a loyal supporter of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The tone of the commission was set by the President when he announced the formation of the commission. “We must fight for the historical truth,” he declared, making sure there will be no pussyfooting around. Words such as enemies, war, fight, defeat, assault, confront, counterattack and punish are used frequently by the members in explaining the purpose of the commission. Their attitude is ultra national, militant and assertive bordering almost on religious zealotry. “Voltaire’s well known declaration: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it” is something that the commission members evidently have never heard of.

There is no doubt that the commission will be a very powerful body due to its high status, the high profile and influence of its members, and support from the government run media. Since “falsification of history” is a very broad and vague definition, their area of responsibility is only limited by their imagination. Two topics are almost sure to be first on the commission’s agenda Holodomor (the 1932--1933 famine in Ukraine planned and executed by Stalin) and the occupation and annexation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union.

The government controlled media, of course, immediately praised the government on “the timely move” to save Russian history from the “falsifiers”--mainly Ukrainians, Balts and Poles.

Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin lawmaker and member of the commission, addressing the issue declared: “There’s an information war going on. The new commission will ensure the Russian view prevails.”

The Armed forces representative, the Chief of the General Staff, Army-General Nikolai Makarov, said that a part of the commission’s job is “to neutralize their [falsifiers] possible negative consequences on Russia’s image.”

Sergei Mironov, Speaker of the Federation Council recommends criminal prosecution of anyone repudiating or belittling the accomplishments of WWII.

The most blatant cases of falsification according to the *Ria Novosti* press have been Ukraine’s attempts to have the Stalin-era famine recognized internationally as an act of ethnic targeted genocide, the Baltic claim of forceful incorporation into the Soviet Union, and Latvia’s request for reparations.

The more liberal media and Kremlin critics view the President’s commission as backsliding to a totalitarian Soviet past when the government had a monopoly and control of intellectual research and findings, when communist crimes were passed over and independent historians attempting to write the truth were arrested and sent to gulags.

“You cannot struggle against falsification of history by creating a bureaucratic commission,” says Sergei Solovyov, editor of *Scepsis*, a liberal journal to promote cross-cultural debate. “Either it will be completely useless or it will become a tool for suppressing people with different points of view.”

Oleg Orlov, a leader of the *Memorial Center*, a nation wide human rights group in Moscow, stated that the commission is an attempt to impose a government view on historical truth. “This is an attempt to put a lid on any proper objective look at history inside Russia,” stated Orlov.

Boris Belenkin, research director at the Memorial Center, who tracks Soviet-era repressions and campaigns for human rights, says the commission shows little promise and could make his job more difficult. “It could be a form of pressure for regional educators, archivists, and officials to put a special spin on history and make archival information less accessible...The people will see this as reverberating with Soviet-era rhetoric, which is familiar to them,” he said.

Vladimir Priblovsky, an analyst with the Russian Panorama think tank, said the commission has all the typical traits of Soviet-era prejudices.

Edward Lozansky, the President of American University in Moscow, writes in an Internet article: “One does not have to create another bureaucratic body to prove several basic historical facts, the interpretation of which is pretty straightforward, and I assume is shared by the overwhelming majority of unbiased people, except those of course who want to rewrite history for different reasons.”

Other critics claim that the Kremlin is trying to whitewash Soviet history in order to justify the roll back of human rights in Russia; it is a part of Putin’s plan to create an ideological foundation for what is happening in Russia today. Even former President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev has reservations about the commission and wonders about its real purpose.

Russian historian Yulia Latynina summarizes the President’s commission as an idea that plays into the hands of “mastodons in epaulets,” copied from George Orwell’s novel *1984*, and a popular joke about Russia as a country with an unpredictable past, she told the Associated Press.

The pro-Kremlin Russia party, led by Putin has submitted to Duma a companion bill to the President’s commission that would designate critics of Soviet history as “terrorists.” The Orwellian implications of the bill have already raised concerns among liberals that it would proscribe the Kremlin’s vision of Russian history, stifle debate and outlaw criticism of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. The bill equates criticism of Soviet WWII history with rehabilitation of Nazism. The “terrorists,” would be declared as *persona non grata* and their names listed on the state’s official terrorist list. Such persons would be denied entry into Russia and access to the Russian government archives, and they could be prosecuted. The law would apply to both foreigners as well as Russians. Violation of the law would be considered a criminal offense the penalty for which would be three to five years confinement and/or a fine up to \$32,000. Supporters of the bill again claim that it is a response to the near abroad countries belittling and trashing Soviet history.

The proposed bill is not designed to fight neo-Nazis or fascist ideology. Instead, it will allow criminal prosecution of individuals who, for example, question the ethics, facts or consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the accords of the Teheran, Yalta, or Potsdam summits, the Katyn massacre, the generalship of Marshall Stalin or any other event. The Duma bill and the President's commission both backtrack to the Stalinist-era.

The sane and professional way for Russia to counter falsification of history is to open its archives to historians. But ironically the Russian government is doing the direct opposite. It is closing the archives to the public. This is a direct violation of the Russian constitution and a number of legal decrees issued by former President Boris Yeltsin that require open access to the public. The documents connected with the mass deportation of Balts are now off limits to Baltic historians. A Latvian historian researching the deportation documents was recently told that he would not be allowed access to the documents any longer.

The proposed goals and the spirit of the Duma "terrorist" law and the Presidential commission violate Russia's constitution and a number of other Russian laws. They also violate the United Nation's Charter and UN Resolution 2005/38 on the right of freedom of opinion and expression adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights. The resolution reaffirms the right of every person to hold opinions without interference, as well as the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers. In addition, both the future law and the new commission violate the section on *Respect for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

As Russia is a member of both organization, the UN and the OSCE have a duty to investigate the consequences of the proposed restrictions on independent historical research and free speech.

The Russian Federation played an important role in the breakup of the Soviet Union. A role that Russia can and should be proud of. A few statements have been made to that effect by the current leadership in the Kremlin, but they have not been as clear and definitive as the Kremlin statements glorifying previous communist regimes. A clear and unambiguous policy denouncing the mistakes of the past would considerably improve Russia's image in the world. It would portray Russia as a free and democratic nation, and a worthy and trusted neighbor. Russia's image then would do just fine without presidential commissions and laws that threaten and punish people who search for the truth.