CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND THE SOVIET UNION: CONTINUITY AND CONFRONTATION

THE IMAGE OF THE SOVIET UNION WITHIN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

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Declaration:
This work is substantially my own, and where any part of this work is not my own, I have indicated this by acknowledging the source of that part or those parts of the work.

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Over the two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian society has continued to rely upon Soviet history for national pride and identification. Critics have voiced concerns over this reliance, arguing that the prevalence of symbols from Russia’s authoritarian past hampers Russian democratic development and has led to a rehabilitation of Stalinism.

This thesis argues that analysis of the relationship between Russia and its Soviet past has more often than not existed in a contextual vacuum. It seeks to rectify this situation by contextualizing the Kremlin’s policy towards its uses of Soviet history. It argues that Soviet and Russian national identity are closely intertwined, making a condemnation of and total separation from the period impossible. It argues that the incorporation of Soviet symbols into the modern Russian Federation has been a policy of pragmatism, seeking to maintain ideological unification in a country lacking a national identity and social divided after the 1991-2000 decade of transition. It works to show that widespread Soviet rehabilitation has not occurred and where nostalgia exists, its nature is benign. The thesis illustrates that important changes have occurred in the Kremlin’s policy towards the Soviet Union under President Dmitri Medvedev, working upon the state consolidation achieved under Vladimir Putin and heralding a more critical stance towards Russia’s past.
I would like to thank my supervisor, John Brookfield. I am particularly grateful for his patience with my many panicked emails and constructive feedback. Our conversations were both entertaining and informative.

I am grateful to Alice, my beautiful friend, without whom I wouldn’t have gotten through the year.

For my grandfather Eldar, whose dacha and eternal patriotism I will always remember

And for my grandmother Galya, whose strength, patience and good cooking I only hope to one day emulate.
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INTRODUCTION

It has been twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reemergence of a young, democratic and capitalist Russian Federation. But whilst two decades has passed, relics of the Soviet time are still prominent in everyday life. Pressure to erase the Soviet imprint upon Russia’s landscapes waned after the early 1990’s (Gill 2005, p. 493), the body of the revolutionary Vladimir Lenin continues to lie in the mausoleum and the Soviet Red Stars still adorn the Spasskaya Tower of the Kremlin. The Soviet era continues to be represented on metro stations and street names - Oktiabr’skaya’ (named after the October Revolution), Biblioteka Lenina (Lenin’s Library) and even Marksistskaya (Marx). The prevalence of Soviet images stands in contradiction to the symbols of the new Russia, a country meant to be free from its authoritarian past and working upon civic and democratic cornerstones. The Soviet presence illuminates the confusion as to how the new Russian nation relates to its Soviet history – is it a time to be used as a lesson against the excesses of the state or an era which should be lauded for its many achievements?

Since the turn of the Millennium and the election of presidents Vladimir Putin (2000, 2004) and Dmitri Medvedev (2008), critics have argued that Russian society has increasingly and worryingly re-embraced the Soviet identity. The combination of increased authoritarianism of Russia’s political system under Vladimir Putin and his re-installment of Soviet symbols, such as the melody of the Soviet anthem, has caused observers to draw parallels between modern Russia and the old Soviet state. These parallels were heightened still further due to Putin’s emphasis on Russian patriotism as well as his perceived approval of the old regime, stating that the breakup of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century” (Putin 2005a; Robertson 2009) and the prevalence of fondness and nostalgia
towards the Soviet era by the majority of the Russian population (62 per cent in 2008, Nikolayenko, 2008). With at least half of mainstream TV sponsored or owned by the state and promoting the glorification of Soviet events such as the Great Patriotic War, it is no surprise that many (especially Western critics) seem both critical and confused as to the intentions of the Kremlin.

SIGNIFICANCE AND AIM OF THE THESIS

The aim of this thesis is to provide the reader with an understanding of the role that Soviet history plays in contemporary Russian politics by focusing especially on the role of the memory of the Great Patriotic War and the figure of Joseph Stalin (loosely termed the ‘image’ of the Soviet Union) within the post-2000 Russian political landscape. It does so by focusing specifically on why the Kremlin uses the Soviet image within its policies, how it has done so and seeks understand the implications of any such role.

Current approaches to the study of the Soviet image are limited by two factors – the underlying presumption that Russia is transitioning towards democracy and by extension, the lack of attention paid to broader contextual developments in the Russian nation. As a ‘transitional’ state, Russia’s reluctance to condemn its authoritarian past is seen as an inhibitor to the achievement of true democracy (Nikolayenko 2008; Mendelson and Gerber 2005; 2006; Forest, Johnson and Till 2004, p. 358; Also see Rawls 1993). Contextual influences, such as the traumatic events of the 1990’s and their impact on how Russians perceive the Soviet past are sidelined and any support by the authorities for Soviet symbols is taken as Soviet rehabilitation (Beichman 2005; Mendelson and Gerber 2006; Osborn 2009).

This thesis aims to fill in this gap in literature by addressing the issue of Soviet memory in a critical and nuanced fashion, moving away from the theoretical assumptions of the transition
paradigm and working to draw out the broader relationships present between the state, national symbols and history. It emphasizes the societal and political changes which have occurred over the past two decades and analyses the use of the Soviet image as a response to these developments in the post-2000 decade.

The post-Soviet Russian experience with Soviet memory is, at its utmost core, an issue of national identity. Russia is a unique case in the group of former USSR nations as it has the uncomfortable role of being proclaimed to be the centre of the Soviet ‘empire’. Whilst some argue Russia was never the imperial core of the Soviet Union, (Dunlop 1994; Molchanov 2000, p. 270), others have argued (confusingly) that Russia fulfils the obligations of a successor state but does not take on the moral or legal responsibilities of Soviet authorities (Kosachev 2010). This places Russia in a position not available (nor very much desired) to other Soviet states – it becomes the oppressor rather than the oppressed and limits the ability of Russia to claim victim status. The assumption that Russia is just a ‘smaller’ version of the USSR is reflected in much of the literature on the topic, where Russia is required to atone for events in the Baltic during World War 2 or to pay reparations to families of Polish soldiers killed in the Katyn massacre (Andrieu 2011, p.199).

Unlike other former USSR republics Russia is limited in its ability to create a narrative where the Soviet Union was seen as an imposed aberration from an otherwise ethnic and organic national identity. Soviet and Russian identity are closely intertwined, which means that condemning the Soviet Union serves to condemn Russian identity as it was understood for over seven decades. Therefore post-Communist Russia not only has to figure out how to process the Soviet Union within its collective memory but must also undertake the enormous task of creating a new national identity. Therefore, this analysis draws upon the concepts of nation building and political myth in order to show that the use of the Soviet image is closely related to Russian attempts to reconstruct and consolidate its statehood.
I argue here that the Kremlin’s re-adoption of Soviet Symbols and the heavy emphasis on patriotism is not indicative of how Russians are remembering the Soviet times nor is it an attempt to return to the USSR. Instead, it is the response to the lack of coherent post-Soviet national identity and the need to revive a state weakened politically, economically and ideologically over the 1990’s decade. The use of the Soviet image has been above all an exercise in pragmatism with the goal of keeping the nation unified and from further fracturing. The Kremlin’s approach to the Soviet image has therefore been dictated by post-Soviet conditions rather than an attempt to establish a state led and pro-Soviet ideology. The role of pragmatism, with the aim of national consolidation, is also reflected in the changing attitudes towards the emphasis on patriotism and Soviet history throughout the 2000 – 2011 decade. Putin’s first presidential term revolved around national unification and solidifying Russian borders and nationhood. During this time, the Kremlin used Soviet symbols as a means of boosting the morale of a disillusioned nation and to create continuity with the past. The goal of the Putin presidency has been to create a national narrative which seeks to move away from the polarizing politics of his predecessor and to integrate the positives and negatives of the Soviet regime into Russian history. The inclusion of Soviet symbols in the post-Soviet Russian identity narrative has in fact led to a period of tentative social unity, allowing for the country to re-establish itself both domestically and on the world sphere. Medvedev on the other hand, has softened the push of patriotism, and building upon the consolidated Russian Federation, has slowly focused on vocalizing critical analysis of the Soviet past. Both Putin and Medvedev have in fact begun to deal with the Soviet legacy in the later decade of 2000 - 2011 signaling a willingness to open this chapter of Russian history.
EXISTING ARGUMENTS

The literature dealing with the image of the Soviet Union in the post-2000 world has been varied but unfortunately splintered. The prevalence of the Soviet image has most often been attributed to the presidency of Vladimir Putin and much less attention has been paid to the term of President Dmitri Medvedev, from 2008 to date, missing important changes in policy in regards to the Soviet image and to de-Stalinisation.

Provided in the section below is a brief outline of the arguments that have surrounded the presence of Soviet symbols within the Russian Federation as of the year 2000. Due to word limit constraints, this overview is not exhaustive, but aims to give the reader the main arguments leveled against the question of what is the role of the Soviet image in the Kremlin’s policies in the 2000 decade.

THE TRANSITIONAL PARADIGM

The transitional paradigm is prominent within analysis of Putin’s and Medvedev’s presidencies (the former especially) – Russia has emerged from a totalitarian regime and has slowly squandered its ability to transit into a fully fledged democracy, hampered by the continued prevalence of the Soviet image within the Russian state (Mendelson and Gerber 2005; 2006; Beichman 2005; Kramer 2001, Etkind 2009; Merridale 2009; Andrieu 2011). The apparent attempts of the Kremlin to establish a state run ideology of patriotism, working on the nostalgia and memory of Soviet greatness, is argued to legitimize the growing
This stunting of Russian political development is argued to occur through two main channels, both of which are underscored, and limited by, the transition paradigm. The first relates to the dictates of transitional justice theory – the lack of Russian democracy is blamed on the failure of the post-Soviet government to “process” Soviet memory. ‘Transitional justice’ refers to a set of practices, such as truth commissions or compensation policies, which work to address a violent past in a period of regime transition and to establish a break, moral and political, with the previous regime (Barahona De Brito 1997; 2010; Boraine 2006). Transitional justice is also approached from the perspective of studies of democratisation and as something integral to the movement towards democratic political systems.

Russia appears to be the neglected case in studies of transitional justice, with most analysis focusing on the smaller Eastern European nations which have had clearer attempts to deal with authoritarian memory (Kuzio 2005; Urban 1994, p. 733; Wanner 1998; Sarsembayev 1999). Studies of transitional justice also tend to focus on the specific processes undertaken – for example the Russian ‘Trial of the Communist Party’ (Benomar 1993), or are often limited to the 1990’s period and fail to incorporate wider contextual influences which have affected the behaviour of the Kremlin since then (Adler 2001; Andrieu 2011; Forest and Johnson 2002). Analysis focuses upon the dire consequences of the post-Soviet elite failing to deal with Soviet memory and reiterate the argument that Russia should take responsibility for the atrocities committed under the regime (Andrieu 2011; Barahona de Brito eds. 2001).

But the relationship that post-Soviet Russia has with its Soviet history is a predicament that is taken for granted within this literature and which undermines the causal assumptions of the
argument. Many Russians do not perceive themselves to be the oppressors of other nations within the USSR, especially as many Russians themselves were oppressed during the regime. Whilst Russia may be the legal successor to the USSR, this does not immediately imply that Russia should carry the moral and financial responsibilities (Kosachev 2010; Torbakov 2011 p. 220). For years, Soviet Russian citizens believed in the unity of the Soviet peoples and the idea that Russia should bear the USSR’s “historical guilt” is a hotly contested and controversial issue amongst all political strata (Polit.ru Roundtable 2008; Tishkov 2010).

The second channel is an extension of the transitional justice argument – Vladimir Putin has legitimated his growing centralisation of power by creating a political myth centered on the glories of the Soviet Union (Mendelson and Gerber 2008; Andrieu 20011; Sherlock 2007; Beichman 2005). By establishing a ‘positive’ rehabilitation of Soviet symbols, he has appropriated nostalgia for the Soviet Union and therefore has prevented liberal development of the Russian state. But again, the transition paradigm underscores this argument. Working under the categorization that Russia is a transitional state “trends and developments that do not move the political system further along the path towards democracy are automatically categorized as a step in the opposite direction; political actors are cast as either villains or heroes” (Burrett. 2009, p. 72). But as mentioned earlier, this restricts the ability to which Russian development is able to be understood. By emphasizing a theoretical trajectory towards democracy, the Russian state is removed from realistic demands upon its resources or the context to which it must respond.
Closely related to the argument above is the idea that the presence of the Soviet image within the post-2000 Russian Federation exists as part of the wider political myth established by the Kremlin to legitimize its rule. In this literature, the focus centers on the political myth as the key driver in the obtainment of legitimacy by the ruling group. Following the argument posited by the constructivist school of nationalism (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1990), elites and states actively construct national identity around unifying historical events and ideas. Bottici and Challand (2006 p.316) define political myth as “continual process of work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience”. More specifically, according to Thomas Sherlock (2007, p.3) political myth “may be defined as a narrative of past events that gives them special significance for the preset and the future”. In this way, those who wield or hope to wield power generate legitimacy by establishing symbolic linkage with previous successors (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Critics have accused the Kremlin of justifying its recentralization of power through the manipulation of nostalgia felt by many citizens for Soviet times (Sherlock 2007; Mendelson and Gerber 2006; Miller 2010; Schuster 2009). Parallels are drawn between modern Russia and the Soviet state, where Putin’s leadership style has been called into question as favouring a ‘Soviet style’ of heavy-handedness and the stifling of freedom (Merridale 2009; Sherlock 2007; Mendelson and Gerber 2005; Robertson 2009; Financial Times 2009). The importance which Putin has placed on the prevalence of the state in society has been justified by the creation of a political myth of Russian ‘genetic’ predisposition and natural inclination to live with as strong state (Putin 1999). He has managed to conflate in the minds of Russian citizens
the slow improvements in living standards and the heightened centralisation of power into the hands of the Kremlin with the increased emphasis on patriotism (Laruelle 2009, p. 18). The Kremlin’s goal of returning Russia back to its superpower status is argued to have relied on the memories of the glory of the Soviet Union for social support (Lukyanov 2010).

This argument is deficient in several areas. First of all, such explanations conflate the Kremlin’s emphasis on ‘patriotism’ with the alleged ‘rehabilitation’ of Soviet symbols. The term ‘patriotism’ is used often and without any clear definition but can relate to several policies or ideas within the post-Soviet context. ‘Patriotic Education’ is interchanged with ideas of ‘patriotic policies’ – the first relating to actual educational programs run by the Kremlin whilst the latter can refer to a variety of concepts, not excluding wider nation building approaches. Secondly, this sole focus on Soviet symbols ignores the fact that the Kremlin has relied on many non-Soviet symbols within its patriotic agenda or what, in fact, the ‘patriotic agenda’ represents. Richard Sakwa (2004) has emphasised the Kremlin’s attempt to create a narrative of historical continuity, including within it both Soviet and pre-Soviet symbols, for a country void of any ideological or social unification after the collapse of Soviet identity (Sakwa 2004; Laruelle 2009 p.151). Part of this perceived manipulation by the Kremlin is addressed in literature which targets the ‘politicisation of history’ under both Putin and Medvedev. Discussions focus on the way Russia remembers the Soviet Union, and especially through its emphasis on a ‘historically positive’ remembrance of the Second World War (better known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia) (Sherlock 2007; Kramer 2001; Lipman 2004; Benn 2010).
To answer the question of what is the role of the Soviet image within post-Soviet Russia this thesis emphasizes contextual influences and their impact upon Russian policy decisions in order to highlight the Kremlin’s relationship to the post-Soviet space. For this reason, Chapter One discusses the general decline of Russia during the 1991-2000 decade, and works to highlight how this impacted upon the way citizens relate to the Soviet era. It works to outline the context which allowed the Soviet image to remain a divisive issue within the post-Soviet space by analyzing the approach to Soviet history of President Yeltsin.

Chapter Two builds upon the ideological vacuum discussed in Chapter One and analyses the Kremlin’s creation of a ‘nation for a state’ in the 2000-2011 period (Sakwa 2004, p. 162). It looks at the tenets of this nation building agenda, especially throughout the earlier years of the Putin presidency. The Chapter aims to give the reader an understanding of the variety of policies enacted by the Kremlin for the goal of state consolidation.

Chapter Three answers two main questions – Has there been glorification of the Soviet Union throughout this decade and what impact has the persistence of the Soviet image had upon Russian political development, also analyzing the role played by Dmitri Medvedev. It does so by outlining the specific role of the Soviet image within this wider schema. The Chapter draws upon the contextual developments discussed by the previous two chapters and seeks to show that the Kremlin’s policies have been dictated by conservative pragmatism rather than of patriotic ideology, as some critics have claimed.

The thesis draws upon a wide variety of theoretical literature which reflects the argument of the thesis in that the Kremlin’s actions have been influenced by a variety of both overlapping and non-related factors. Transitional justice theory is discussed parallel to theories of nation
building, especially from the constructivist school of nationalism. Literature on the importance of collective memory and the role of history within nation formation is also employed. This breadth reflects the complex position in which Russia has found itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Primary sources are used where applicable and heavy reference is applied to Putin’s and Medvedev’s speeches, interviews as well as Russian sociological surveys. Due to an understanding of the Russian language, Russian sources are referenced and used preferentially over Western ones, although logistical limitations as to the extent of this apply.
To look at Russian politics in the post-2000 period without observing the events of the previous decade is significantly limiting for several reasons. The effect that the ‘Wild 90’s’ had on Russian post-2000 political development is not definite – no one can know what would have happened had someone other than Vladimir Putin been elected. But this period engendered a specific environment of national vulnerability, upheaval and uncertainty and the effects of this on citizen morale cannot be understated. The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it briefly outlines the rapid fall in social, political and economic stability of the Russian state during the 90’s decade, memories of which influenced the Russian decision making process in the post-2000 space. Second, it works to show the identity vacuum which developed under the Yeltsin presidency, especially the difficulty of processing the difference between the idea of ‘Soviet’ and ‘Russian’ people and which influenced the way Putin dealt with the memory of the Soviet Union.

A note of caution – this chapter is far from exhaustive and arguments about the role of the 1990’s in Russian political development are varied. Given the vast array of influences Russia was subject to during the 1990’s, providing a definitive answer as to why the country dealt with the memory of its former state in the way that it did is not something this author will venture to achieve. However, this chapter aims to bring out the key issues which are argued here to have influenced the way Russia has dealt with the image of the Soviet Union in the post-2000 period.
NEW RUSSIA IN DECLINE

The 90’s decade was characterized by an overwhelming and rapid weakening of Russian political, social and economic structures. The association of this upheaval with democratic reforms negatively impacted the perception of liberal principles within Russian society and has had an ongoing impact on the way liberal supporters are perceived in the post-2000 period. Economic liberalisation began swiftly - three weeks after the resignation of Gorbachev - and was enacted in full swing with rapid-fire privatisations and the lifting of price controls, actions to which 70% of the Russian population voiced opposition (Klein 2007, p. 224). The economic decline Russia experienced, especially after the stability of the Soviet Union, was remarkable. In 1989, 2 million people in Soviet Russia were living in poverty. By the mid 1990’s the figure was 74 million in a country of approximately 148 million people (U.S Library of Congress 2011a; Milanovic for the World Bank 1998).

The full scale privatisation of some 225 000 state owned enterprises resulted in scandal as public property was auctioned off for a fraction of its worth (McClintick 2006). Life savings of millions were wiped out in days with hyperinflation wreaking havoc for citizens whilst a new class of ‘robber barons’, the oligarchs, emerged. Having created their wealth from the unlawful sale of state property, gaining monopolistic positions in key industries and having made astronomical returns of their new investments, the oligarchs developed into a politically connected group which plundered the Russian state of its wealth. The movement of profits offshore reached rates of $2 billion a month (Laruelle 2009).

The benefits the oligarchs received under the Yeltsin period were repaid to the President through the estimated $100 million in financing that were provided for the 1996 election. This amount, thirty three times the legal limit, was also coupled with 800 percent more
The threat of revival of the Communist Party from 1993 onwards pushed this election funding, which, besides protecting already established oligarch acquisitions, saw Yeltsin give off further state assets, the base of Russian industrial and natural wealth, including oil (Hough et al 1996; Laruelle 2009 p. 122).

The economic ravages were coupled with a decline in almost all social indicators possible. In the five years between 1989 and 1994, male life expectancy dropped from 65 to 57. This mortality rate was also strongly affected by the increase in deaths of young people from unnatural causes including murders and suicides. The life expectancy of men in 2004 had yet to reach 1990 levels, remaining at around 59 (Rosstat 2010). The Gini coefficient, measuring the equality within countries, sky rocketed from around 0.22 in the late 1980’s to above 0.4 in 1994 and peaking at 0.5 (with perfect inequality being at 1) (Trading Economics 2011; Shleifer and Treisman 2005; Milanovic for World Bank 1998). By 1996, crime rates were 40% higher than those of 1990 with the increase continuing till around 2002. White collar crime increased during the early 1990’s also, with swindling and extortion increasing 67.2 and 37.5 percent respectively. Theft and burglary made up almost 2/3rds of all crime. Of particular concern was the exponential increase in homicide rates. In the first four months of 1994, Russia experienced on average 84 murders a day. The homicide rate of 1994 and 1995 was double that of 1990 (U.S Library of Congress 2011b; Weiler 2004).
The collapse of the USSR also brought the issue of Russian national identity to the fore. As Molchanov (2000 p. 269) notes, “Russian nationalism is, historically speaking, a relatively new phenomenon”. The expansion of the Tsarist Empire was built at the cost of ethnic Russian nationalism rather than being based on it (Dunlop 1994; Hosking 1997; Tolz 1998 p. 267) resulting in much of Russian national identity developing on a basis of supra-national identity during the Soviet period (Shevel 2011 p. 181). As Dunlop (1994 p. 603) states: “During the 70 years of communist rule, most Russians had come to accept the regime’s attempt to identify their interests as a people with those of the USSR as a whole”. Expressions of ethnic Russian identity were discouraged whilst Soviet traditions were mixed with Russian, leading to the “difference between the two to be blurred by time and place” (Guroff and Guroff 1994 p.86).

In 1991, Russia was required to establish an identity separate from the one that had been so closely associated with the Soviet Union. Unlike neighboring ex-Soviet states, Russia was the legal successor to the Soviet Union and its geographically largest component. Because of this, the option of ‘returning’ to a pre-Revolutionary identity was problematic. Russians were not able to create a narrative of colonization and domination under Soviet rule unlike other former states, even if they had compromised a large part of the victims of the Soviet system (Kuzio 2005; Urban 1994, p. 733).

Boris Yeltsin’s political inclinations lay of course with the pro-Western and anti-communist camps, maintaining an anti-Soviet stance and seeking to establish the new Russian state on democratic and liberal principles, holding Western models as ideal. His campaign platform for the 1996 election sought to contrast the revolution and upheaval of the Soviet past with
the promise of stability and well being in the future (Yeltsin 1996 in Smith 2002). References to economic stagnation and queues as well as the lack of freedom within the Soviet Union were combined with virulent anti-Communist attacks, especially in regards to the Stalin period (Smith 2002, pp. 145 – 147). Yeltsin abandoned Soviet symbols and emphasized a return to the “real Russia”, a path led astray during the 1917 revolution. As Smith writes, “For Yeltsin, the state was both new and ancient but never middle-aged. His inauguration conspicuously omitted any Soviet symbols and rituals” (Smith 2002, p. 160).

The close relationship of the Soviet and Russian meant that such attempts at Soviet erasure caused significant divisiveness in the Russian political sphere and complicated ideas of how Soviet memory should be ‘dealt’ with. Attempts were made to discuss the repressions and abuses of the Soviet Union through such instruments as the 1991 Law on ‘The Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression’ and through the publication of Stalinist atrocities by liberal forces (Barahona De Brito eds. 2001; Smith 2002). But by the mid 1990’s even democrats began to abandon their efforts at discrediting communist ideology, feeling that enough had been done since the days of perestroika and making little attempt to criminalize the Communist party (CPSU) (Smith 2002; Sherlock 2007). Indeed, how could calls for criminalisation be pursued when the political elites of the time had risen to their positions and established themselves within the Communist regime? The intimate connection many of the new oppositional leaders held with the CPSU prevented the idea of an outright ban (Forest and Johnson 2002; Smith 2002). The ideological break was considered enough. Meanwhile, the Communists argued that Stalin’s era was incomparable to the Communist party at the turn of the century and so, while the party was apologetic, it claimed no direct responsibility for the abuses that had occurred over the seven decades of its rule (Smith 2002).

This connection with the CPSU and the broader regime was not only limited to the elites. Ordinary people by the millions had been involved in the party, often in the most banal
manner. Citizens had obtained free health care, education, secure employment and stability within their lives. Many were too young to have experienced Stalin’s rule. Condemning the regime would mean lifetimes would have been declared amoral and need to be disregarded. At the trial of the Communist party, Sergey Adamovich Kovalyov, who was at the time a human rights activist, argued that the Communist party had taken extensive transgressions against its own people and the law. He added that part of the responsibility lay with each individual. Unwittingly, this exact statement earned him praise from leaders of the CPSU and only illustrates the difficulty of attempting to condemn a regime the size and nature of the USSR (Kovalyov quoted in Adler 2004).

Therefore, whilst Yeltsin voiced his condemnation of the Soviet Union and quiet openly employed anti-Stalinist rhetoric, Smith also points to the fact that there was a reluctance to systemically attack both the Communist party and the recent past as it remained a sensitive and inflammatory issue for most Russians (Smith 2002, p. 159; Sherlock 2007). For example, the ‘trial’ of the Communist Party only occurred when the Communists themselves attempted to take Yeltsin to court (Smith 2002 p. 176). Yeltsin therefore found himself in an uncomfortable position: his attempts at condemnation of the Communist regime served to polarize the population but his simultaneous avoidance of ‘dealing’ with the Soviet memory in any systemic fashion meant that the period of Soviet history was essentially left in limbo. Soviet history proved to be a difficult memory to process and Yeltsin’s haphazard and half-hearted attempts to address the past only served to reflect this (Sherlock 2007).
FAILURE TO CONSOLIDATE DEMOCRATIC IDEAS

In an attempt to establish a new post-Soviet national narrative, the Yeltsin ruling elite began to emphasize the symbols of Tsarist Russia as the true Russia. Formally adopting (although not legally, as Parliamentary consensus could not be reached) the double headed eagle as Russia’s national emblem, Peter the Great was then declared to be the ideal historical model (Kolstø 2006, p. 686). Yeltsin also made the symbolic reconciliatory gesture of attending the reburial of Tsar Nicholas II to recognize his murder by Bolsheviks and establish links with the revived Orthodox Church (Rossiskaya gazeta 1998).

Nevertheless, Yeltsin’s attempt to create a political myth centering upon pre-Revolutionary Russia failed to resonate with the people. The ‘Patriotic Song’ by Glinka was adopted as the national anthem but was widely disliked, criticised for its lack of lyrics and lack of inspiration (Zolotov 2000). In 1998 the Russian Soccer World Cup team complained that it failed to inspire any patriotic effort (Franklin et al 2004). The struggle to find fitting national symbols continued with the creation of new commemorative events: the 12th of June now marked ‘Russian Independence Day’, whilst 12th of December represented the flawed constitutional referendum of 1993 (Oxford Analytica Brief 2007). The Kremlin also decided to transform the anniversary of the October Revolution, marked on the 7th of November, into a day of Remembrance and Reconciliation but failed to provide a supporting narrative. Ultimately, all of the new dates failed to arouse the same patriotic fervor achieved by the symbols of the Soviet Union, their shallow roots and links to a corrupt regime eviscerating any potential effectiveness.

A poignant example of the failure of the Yeltsin period to form a national identity based on Tsarist and post-Soviet symbols was the inability to turn the putsch of August 1991 into a
national day of victory. High hopes and democratic dreams had abounded in the period and the victory could have provided an effective symbol of commemoration. The trolleybus used as a barricade during the standoff was initially moved to the Museum of Contemporary History and had the potential to serve as a sign of a new and civic Russia (Forest and Johnson 2002). But in 1998, the wreck was removed from public viewing, apparently being judged a symbol that held little value and which only resonated as a reminder of the failure of the Russian democratic experiment. The reason for the failure of Russians to rally around this point is difficult to determine concretely, but two factors can be said to have contributed - the failure of the Yeltsin regime to pursue this foundation myth with conviction (Sherlock 2007); and the failure to buttress this myth with at least minimal material or real benefit. Thus the extensive economic, social and cultural dislocation as well as the poorly performing democratic institutions added to the mockery of ‘civic nationalism’ (Forest and Johnson 2002). The Curator of the same Museum commented that “Maybe if people’s lives had improved after 1991, the orange trolleybus-barricade would have remained a symbol....But if you’re not getting your wages paid, you lose interest in your ideals” (York 1998, p. 5; Forest and Johnson 2002).

The debate over Lenin’s body also reflected the ideological fracturing within the Russian state. Yeltsin had made repeated threats to bury Lenin’s body, demoting the Revolutionary’s role in the new Russian state. But the threats of burial resulted in elevated tensions and demonstrators began picketing outside the mausoleum whilst renewed interest in the site led to increased queues. The Communists wrote an open letter to Yeltsin, arguing against such ‘vandalism’ (Chicago Tribune 1999) and protestors kept watch over the body whilst the Orthodox Church showed its tacit approval for the burial, stating that it was immoral to keep the body unburied (Skvortsov, 1999). At the end of his term, Yeltsin chose not to bury Lenin. Although “Yeltsin suggested that it could fit in his program of reconciliation, eviction of
Lenin’s remains from the mausoleum would have distressed many Russians” (Pinsker quoted in Smith 2002). Opinion polls at the time of the Tsar’s burial also showed an almost equal split of opinion on whether to bury Lenin (Weir 2011). By not committing to Lenin’s burial, Yeltsin had inevitably showed that he lacked the symbolic alternatives with which to supplement a new Russian identity or that he had established what form this identity would take.

CONCLUSION

Along with increasing disillusionment in the new ‘democratic’ practices of the Russian political elite and lack of national identity, nostalgia for the Soviet Union began to increase amongst all sectors of the population (Laruelle 2009). It is hardly surprising to see the rise - whilst in 1992 60% of the adult population in Russia regretted the dissolution of the regime, in 1997 and 1999 this number rose to 84% and 85% respectively (Interfax 2000). At the end of the 1990s, 78 percent of Russians felt that the best period of their life was under Leonid Brezhnev (Dubin 2003). By 2001, only 7 percent of those surveyed stated that the Soviet Union had no positive qualities (White 2002).

Yeltsin’s presidency had shown the difficulty of establishing a Russian identity void of Soviet history. His decision to abstain from Lenin’s burial symbolized the fractured state of Russian political and ideological opinion at the end of the millennium and added to the ambivalent nature of Russian self-identity. The close relationship of Soviet and Russian identity meant that attempts at erasure elicited strong emotional objections whilst a new national identity failed to rally citizens due to its novelty and association with shambolic
institutions. The psychological trauma of the unraveling of Soviet atrocities during this time cannot be understated –

“If this had happened to Americans, or Brits, it would have been culturally catastrophic; to lose the equivalent of, say Texas and California, to be told that all the founding fathers right down to FDR were a bunch of criminals, to discover that you are regarded as on the par with Hitler in terms of the accepted description of 20th century evils that we have since overcome” (Interview with Tony Judt in Torbakov 2011, p. 219)

Thus the Russian Federation headed towards the eve of the millennium ideologically fractured, with limited means to support its population and a level of instability that engendered increasingly fond memories of the USSR.
The aim of this chapter is to address the first two presidencies of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008), paying special attention to what Richard Sakwa terms “the Putinite counter-movement” to the excesses of the 1990’s (Sakwa 2008). The Kremlin’s focus on consolidation and the reassertion of the state was symptomatic of very real social problems that threatened the fabric of the Russian nation. The early 2000’s was marked by an increase in the centralization of power under the Kremlin. However, As Michael McFaul (2001, p.88) argues, the establishment of a democratic system was not the Putin administrations priority. But neither was the establishment of an authoritarian Russian state. Increased centralization of power was part of the focus on consolidation, allowing Putin to reconcile antagonistic political forces and prioritizing at all times unity and security, even if this has meant undertaking contradictory policies. This section also deals with the importance of political myths, and explores the way states establish legitimacy in reference to Putin’s actions.
At the turn of the millennium, Russia was characterized by its instability and lack of clear national consensus. As discussed in Chapter One, the lack of such a narrative was partially due to Yeltsin’s inability to determine how to process the Soviet Union within Russian history and by extension, establish an alternative national narrative. This was matched by a steep decline in all sectors of economic and social life. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in 1998 that “the main fields of our national state, economic, cultural and moral life were destroyed or pilfered in the past decade. We live literally among ruins and pretend that this is a normal life” (Solzhenitsyn 1998). As chosen successor to the Presidency, Vladimir Putin embodied the image of the strongman who would revive the weakened state and bring back social stability. The discursive field which he employed emphasized the need for political and social unity, knowing full well that the divisive nature of the Yeltsin period had led to social dislocation. His mandate focused on three key areas – the establishment of unity (collective and historical), stability and the revival of Russian national identity (conceptualized in the historic idea of ‘Russkaya derzhava’ - Russian Greatness). As Putin stated in his Russia at the Turn of the Millennium, a foundational speech outlining his vision for Russian development (Manifesto):

“The fruitful and creative work, which our country needs so badly, is impossible in a divided and internally atomized society, a society where the main social groups and political forces do not share basic values and fundamental ideological orientations. Twice in the outgoing century has Russia found itself in such a state: after October 1917 and in the 1990’s”- (Putin 1999)
Putin’s first presidential mandate (2000-2004) focused especially on the issue of national stabilization, a result of the multiple threats to the Russian national fabric. Over the 90’s decade, a growth in the power of asymmetric, ethnically based federalism meant that Russian territorial sovereignty was increasingly compromised. As Richard Sakwa (2008 p. 887) writes: “By the end of Yeltsin’s term…Russia was beginning to become not only a multinational state, but also a multi-state state, with numerous proto-state formations making sovereignty claims vis-à-vis Moscow”. The fragmentation of political authority meant that some federal districts began to resemble ‘fiefdoms’, the governors of which sold their support for political and economic rewards (Petrov and Slider 2005; Shevel 2011, p. 184). The threat of this separation was twofold - not only did it represent segmentation of political authority, but in a state of hundreds of ethnicities and nationalities, Russia could not afford ethnically separatist regions. Putin therefore sought to re-establish the authority of the state through the establishment of super districts, led by the Presidents plenipotentiary representatives and reaffirming Moscow’s supremacy over the regions (Laruelle 2009, p. 19)

The war in Chechnya further added the threat of disintegration of the Russian state. Chechen incursion into Dagestan had fuelled the fear that Chechen separatists would spread up the Volga and provoke further secessionist movements, a fear that Vladimir Putin had voiced (Putin 2000c). The threat of the dissolution of the Russian state due to creeping Chechen separatism was the reasoning behind the second Chechen war (Sakwa 2004). It was a situation where “the active public support for our actions in the Caucasus is due not only to a sense of hurt national identity but also to a vague feeling…that the state has become weak. And it ought to be strong” (Putin quoted in Sakwa 2004., p. 171). Putin had already stated in his Manifesto that Russia’s future was to be decided in Chechnya (Putin 1999). The threat of territorial overtake within the Caucasus from the Chechen region were therefore symptomatic of the serious concerns over Russian territorial sovereignty and security that plagued the
wider political discourse at the turn of the millennium. Chechen incursions into Moscow during the horrific Moscow Theatre Siege (2002) as well as the hostage take in Beslan (2004) further contributed to these fears.

In this environment, consolidation of the state was of primary importance for Putin and was to be aided by the establishment of common goals and values through which Russians could establish a unifying political myth. Morale of the country was at a significant low after the ravages of the previous decade. According to VCIOM surveys, between the beginning and the end of the year 1991, affiliation with the phrases “we are worse than everyone else” or “we bring only negative things to the world” climbed from 7 percent to 57 percent In 2002 a sociological survey asked what aspects of life in contemporary Russia gave citizens a sense of pride. Almost half of respondents had no answer whilst a fifth said nothing made them feel proud (Gudkov quoted in Laruelle 2009 p. 154). The goal of unifying Russian people around common values became as important in the aim of state consolidation as economic growth.

The Kremlin’s stance reflected the aim of this consolidation rather than the representation of a particular political inclination (Slade 2005). When asked what political direction the President held, many respondents were unable to place him on the left, centre or right of the political spectrum (White and McAllister 2003, p.385). As Putin states in his Manifesto: “Russia has reached its limit for political and socio-economic upheavals, cataclysms and radical reforms…Be under communist, national-patriotic or radical-liberal slogans, our country, our people, will not withstand a new radical break up” (Putin 1999). The need for unity is presented as vital for the functioning of the Russian state. Putin argues that “the absence of civil accord and unity is one of the reasons why our reforms are so slow and painful…most of the strength is spent on political squabbling” (Putin 1999).
THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL MYTH

The factors which lend themselves to providing and maintaining legitimacy for states have been discussed from a multitude of perspectives and theoretical frameworks, including those of efficiency (Lipset 1963) as well as material satisfaction (Przeworski 1988). However, a key driver in the obtainment of legitimacy is the political myth offered by the ruling group to the mass populace. Unifying narratives are vital for the social cohesion of states and it is exactly this unifying narrative that was missing from the Russian state at the turn of the Millennium.

The constructivist school of nationalism puts forward the argument that elites and states actively construct national identity around unifying historical events and ideas (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1990). In order to establish social solidarity and political action, elites focus on the creation of a myth of a timeless and ancient entity, giving it a semblance of tradition and historical continuity. An important aspect in this process is the use of national symbols, commemorative practices and other methods of the formalization and ritualisation of national identity. Of primary importance is their ability to reflect continuity with a ‘suitable’ historic past and to tie the significance of this past with the present in order to “engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society” (Lipset, 1963, p.135; Sherlock 2007; Hobsbawm 1990; Lewis 1987). This creation of collective memory leads to greater unification and continuity, real or imagined, with previous values, regimes or systems.

In order to do so, historical reference points must be identified that can be drawn upon to unify disparate groups within society, to create a ‘community of values’ (Parekh 1995). According to Astrid Sahm (1999, p.649), it is mostly the responsibility of the elites to identify
such unifying historical references or symbols and to combine both continuity and renewal in such a way as to lead to maximum acceptance of these references. Political myth therefore draws upon a variety of markers and signifiers in order to create principles of common, collective identity with which people can identify. According to Taras Kuzio, this idea of ‘the People’ requires forging through nationhood and should not be assumed to be already ‘in place’ (Kuzio 2002 p. 30-31).

Two points of importance to consider include the fact that the mass population, or people to whom the political myth is presented, have a role to play in either accepting or rejecting this myth. Therefore, the myth that is created must be linked not only to a suitable past (Hobsbawm 1992 p. 1) but also to values that are perceived to be reflected within the wider community, or at least values for which support can be realistically generated. People therefore must be able to identify and connect with the cornerstones of any national narrative for it to be consolidating. The state must show that the goals and values it espouses have some congruence with those held by the states citizens. Sherlock argues that, amongst other factors, such as the failure to satisfy basic needs, the failure of citizens to connect to the values espoused by the regime lead to erosion in the regimes legitimacy, seen in the Yeltsin decade (Sherlock 2007, p 4-8).

The second point to consider here is that whilst some theorists argue myth making can be completely artificial, cynical and fabricated (Cassirer 1963) others argue that whilst myths are advanced with a specific goal, most mythmakers within the elite do have belief in the appropriateness or virtue of the myth being espoused (Selznick 1957, pp. 280-283). This serves to unify the elite within themselves and to further solidify the link between elites and the population. Attachment to political myths is therefore not simply an issue of indoctrination, but also a reflection of the belief systems of the elite as well as the shared values of the regime and the public (Sherlock 2007 p.7).
In order to establish legitimacy of his rule and of the new Russian state, the Putin presidency emphasized the use of political myths and symbols. The goal of the Kremlin was to establish a Russian historical narrative that would act as a unifying element for society, to fill the ideological void of the 1990’s and establish Russia as a country in its own right, rather than the remnants of the USSR. This is discussed below.

THE VALUES OF THE NEW RUSSIAN NATIONAL NARRATIVE

The Kremlin’s nation building during this period was above all driven by pragmatism. Rather than the creation of the state according to ideological principles (such as Yeltsin’s attempt at a democratic state), state policies in the immediate post-2000 period were designed to create unity rather than divisiveness by specifically avoiding contentious topics. Yuri Levada classified this characteristic in Putin as having a “mirror in which everyone, communist or democrat, sees what he wants to see and what he hopes for” (Kommersant 2000). The consolidation of the state and the determination of state sovereignty were to be achieved through a reversal of the factors which were perceived to have led to the weakened state to begin with – the loosening of state strength, the loss of national pride and the lack of ‘community’.

Putin sought to make a clean break from Communist times, which he argued had led to stagnation, and instead worked to emphasize Russia’s potential role on the global sphere in both politics and economics (Putin 1999). Whilst not framing the Communist period as being wholly negative, therefore avoiding the pitfalls of his predecessor, he argues that the ‘Bolshevik experiment’ led the country down a ‘blind alley…far away from mainstream civilization’. He emphasized balance – that whilst it would “be a mistake not to see the
unquestionable achievements of those times…it would be an even bigger mistake not to realize the outrageous price our country and its people had to pay” (Putin 1999). His message was simple and pragmatic – from now on, economic and other reforms would be done in an orderly manner with the presence of a strong state to guide and maintain such processes. Putin emphasized Russia’s unique history and culture and the need to follow its own rules, abandoning development imposed by external forces (Putin 1999).

Putin’s nation building focused on specific characteristics and values which were presented as inherent or ‘natural’ for Russian people and which work to establish national unity and consensus. According to the Manifesto, these ‘traditional values’ include patriotism, belief in a ‘Russkaya derzhava’, statism, as well as social solidarity. Importantly, unlike Yeltsin’s construction of Russia, Putin’s Russia is not new. Putin does not base his national narrative on what are arguably ‘foreign’ values to the Russian psyche – democracy and the rallying around civic values. Whether these values are in fact foreign to Russia is arguable but for this discussion, irrelevant. What is important to note is that for the national identity being constructed, the values emphasized by Putin’s presidency must have been in congruence with those held by the states citizens, which they were. Not only is Putin’s popularity reflective of this, but sociological surveys conducted on values commonly return results which show high favourability towards ideas such as “khozian” (master, manager) over values commonly seen as democratic (Romanovich 2004). Values emphasized by the Putin presidency were presented as being ‘traditional’ and inherent within Russian culture and history rather than being enforced in a time of political change, especially by Western promotion (Laruelle 2009 p. 15). Public order was seen as more important than democratic ideals and unification of the country was perceived by citizens to be best achieved by rallying around the values of stability and law and order (White and McAllister 2003, p. 384). As Putin argues in the Manifesto: “I suppose that the new Russian Idea will come about as an alloy or an organic
unification of universal general humanitarian values with traditional Russian values which have stood the test of the times, including the test of the turbulent 20th century” (Putin 1999).

Patriotism serves to be one of the pillars for social unity and is emphasized in the Manifesto as being one of the ‘traditional values’ within Russian society. In November 2003, Putin argued that “Large scale changes have taken place in an ideological vacuum. One ideology was lost and nothing new was suggested to replace it….patriotism in the most positive sense of this world should be the backbone of this ideology” (Sakwa 2004 p. 163; Gazeta.ru 2003). Although Putin later argued against the implementation of a single state ideology, he nevertheless promoted the idea of developing a social consensus on values familiar to Russian society.

Recognizing that the Russian state contains between 100 and 150 different ethnicities (Sakwa 2008 p.162; Shevel 2011, p.181) and the need to maintain social cohesion amongst all such groups, the Kremlin emphasized its patriotism on what are arguably ‘civic’ cornerstones. Side stepping issues of ethnicity, Putin instead focused on patriotism as “a feeling of pride in ones country, its history and accomplishments. It is the striving to make one’s country better, richer, stronger and happier”, especially pointing out that “when these sentiments are free from the taint of nationalist conceit and imperial ambitions, there is nothing reprehensible or bigoted about them” (Putin 1999). With the rise of xenophobic sentiments across the nation (SOVA 2009; Sevortian 2009; Pain 2007), Putin emphasized social unity to avoid divisions on ethnic lines. As a multiethnic state with four main religions (Sakwa 2008), Russia simply could not avoid further rifts in its social fabric.

The narrative of Russian statism is prominent in Putin’s thinking. The presence of a strong state within Russian life is framed as normal and rooted within history: “Our state and its institutes and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the
country and its people….for Russians a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of” (Putin 1999). Putin attempted to renew the states legitimacy as an underlying principle for group construction (Slade 2005) and contrasted the social dislocation which occurred in the absence of strong, central authority during the decade prior. Putin’s emphasis on statism falls into narratives that argue Russia has a history of authoritative states and knows no other political regime (Isaev 2006; See also Reisinger et al 1994). The emphasis on ‘gosudarstvennost’ (statehood)’ had the trappings of both pragmatism and a legitimization of growing authoritarianism (Hanson 2011).

However, Phillip Selznick points to the fact that in the creation of myths with specific goals, most mythmakers within the elite do have belief in the appropriateness or virtue of the myth being espoused (Selznick 1957). Putin’s emphasis on statism therefore must be looked at in the context of the memories of the 1990’s. A weak and impotent state was perceived to be one of the causes of the dire situation within which Russia found itself at the beginning of the 2000’s. Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2000 shows his belief that a strong state is vital in protecting society from both external aggressors as well as internal instability. “Only a strong…an effective state and a democratic state is capable of protecting civil, political and economic freedoms, capable of creating conditions for people to lead happy lives and for our country to flourish” (Putin 2000a). The Presidents move to regain power from segmented republics and regions was a move often criticized as an authoritarian grasp for power. But these actions were motivated by the idea that Russian state sovereignty was challenged as regions “took as much sovereignty as they could swallow”, often based on ethnic and titular rights (Shevel 2011, p. 2011; Sakwa 2008; White and McAllister 2003; Tretyakov 2001).

Putin’s recentralization emphasized two components about his views on statehood – that a strong, central state is primal in the maintenance of Russian national unity and that this state (and patriotism) would remain based on civic ideals rather than ethnic definitions.
If patriotism was to be the unifying factor of Russian civil society and the element which gave Russia a ‘common moral compass’ (Putin 2007a) then Russian “cultural traditions and common historic memory” (Putin 2000a) were to be the driving force of patriotism. The President envisaged that no period should be excluded from the historical Russian narrative (Putin 2007a). Creating this historical continuity gives a breadth and depth of history to the Russian nation, appropriating achievements and great historical figures to give signifiers for patriotism and forming a base from which people may gain their pride. For example, Putin has lauded the achievements of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin (of Nicholas II), a symbol of prerevolutionary capitalism and agrarian reform. The Kremlin has sought to draw parallels between the two figures, reinforcing Putin’s leadership as a natural continuation in Russian history. Putin stated that: “A true patriot and a wise politician, he understood that various forms of radicalism and standing in one place are equally dangerous to the country” (Aratunyan 2011). Putin had also emphasized figures such as Peter the Great, whose portrait graced his office’s wall (AFP 2011). Aleksandr Stieglitz, the 19th century philanthropist and state official, had been revived through official discourse as the ‘ideal type’ for Russian officials, with Stieglitz having a strong stance against corruption (Oxford Analytica 2007). Meanwhile, the chief minister to Peter the Great, Fedor Golovin, has been praised by Putin’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for his expansion of Russian international influence (Oxford Analytica 2007). This establishment of a unified collective memory with previous regimes, events and periods in history works to develop the political myth of a unified Russian nation and reconciles Russian citizens.

Unlike Yeltsin, Putin’s approach was to directly place Soviet memory within the broader Russian historical narrative rather than dismiss it. It was neither an evil empire nor a utopia – instead it was a period which cost Russian economic and political development but also a period which had its achievements (Putin 1999; 2000a; 2000b). As Putin (2000b) stated: “If
we agree that the symbols of earlier epochs, including the Soviet era, cannot be used, we would have to admit that a whole generation of our fellow citizens, our mothers and fathers, have lived useless and meaningless lives, that they have lived in vain.” The multiple ‘concurrent versions of history’, especially prevalent in the 1990’s where each political group attempted to elevate a historical period above all others, were seen as a ‘sign of national crisis’ writes Andrei Isaev, a member of the presidential United Russia party (Isaev 2006), something which the Kremlin actively sought to avoid.

The following section aims to briefly address the symbolic aspects of the Kremlin’s nation building agenda. As Putin himself argued in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2000, “the development of society is unthinkable without agreement on common goals. And these goals are not just material ones. Spiritual and moral goals are no less important. The unity of Russia is strengthened by the patriotism inherent in our people, by cultural traditions and common historic memory” (Putin 2000a). Putin sought to emphasize the historical wealth of the nation which would be achieved especially through the consolidation of various historical symbols, commemorative dates and events. Most of these adoptions occurred in the earlier years of Putin’s presidency, when the need for consolidation was most acute.

CREATION OF RUSSIAN NATIONHOOD: ESTABLISHING THE SYMBOLS OF THE RUSSIAN STATE

Russia’s position as a state reconfiguring its post-Soviet identity meant that aspects of nation building such as commemoration, symbols and monuments are not just mere adjuncts to the nation but an essential component of the nation building process (Turner 2006 p.208). National symbols such as the coat of arms, the national anthem and the flag play a crucial role through the visual formalization and ritualisation of the nation (Kolstø 2006). As Eric
Hobsbawm (1992, p.2) argues, the invention of traditions is often in response to novel situations and take “the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi obligatory repetition”. Anthony Smith sees symbols as indispensible to social solidarity, legitimization of institutions and political authority, and the inculcation of beliefs and conventions of behaviour (Smith 2001, p. 521).

The goal of social unification was reflected in Putin’s thinking, when in a 2000 statement on the Bills on State Symbols he argued for the incorporation of both the positive and negative pages of Russian history into memory, arguing against historical exclusion, especially in regards to the Soviet period – “Remember how cheerfully and loudly we used to sing the lines that we will ‘raze everything to the ground and then build our own new world, where he who was nothing will be everything’? You know how it all ended” (Putin 2000b) In December 2000, the bill on State Symbols helped to establish a new compromise on the three major eras in Russian history – Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet, a legalization of symbols that had not been achieved under the Yeltsin regime due to political and ideological divides.

The tri-colour flag was confirmed as the flag of the Russian Federation, having previously been used during the provisional government in 1917. Whilst it had been adopted as the de facto flag in the Yeltsin administration, no formal parliamentary adoption had occurred (Kolstø 2006). The national emblem also united two previous regimes – having the red flag background as representation of the Soviet era whilst the double headed eagle remained in the centre, representing Imperial Russia. After successive complaints, first by Spartak (in 1998) then finally by Russian athletes during the Sydney Olympic games, that the Glinka anthem led to “a loss of morale and a dip in form”, the highly unpopular and wordless anthem was replaced by the music of the Soviet anthem and received a positive response (of notable exception were of course liberal political forces) (Kolstø 2006; Zolotov 2000; Frolova-Walker 2004). In a sociological study at the time, only 15 per cent of respondents said they
were happy with the existing anthem whilst 49 per cent said they would prefer the Soviet melody (Kovalyev and Yablokova 2000). The poet Sergei Mikhailkov, who authored the original lyrics under Stalin as well as the modified lyrics during de-Stalinisation, was invited to pen the lyrics for the post-Soviet anthem. Appealing to Mikhailkov for the third time reinforced the continuity which Putin sought to establish (Laruelle 2009, p. 156). Also in 2000, the ‘red banner’ of the Soviet army was reintroduced as the flag of the Russian armed forces. In 2003, it was further redesigned to include the double headed eagle of Tsarism and the four five pointed stars that Trotsky had proposed. The slogan of the Russian army was adopted from that of the Tsarist armies of the 18th century – “Motherland, Duty, Honor” (RFE/RL 2003).

Continuing the emphasis on Russia as a ‘Russian’ nation with its own rich history rather than simply the remnants of the USSR, the Kremlin turned its eyes towards the establishment of commemorative dates. The reliance on commemorating Russia’s ancient and Tsarist history moved the country away from relying on Soviet dates, which had dominated the calendar for so long. 12th of June, previously known under Yeltsin as ‘Russian Independence Day’ but renamed ‘Russia Day’ in 1997 after continuing public contempt (Forest and Johnson 2002) was revived again under Putin. In 2003 there was an active attempt by the Kremlin to create this holiday into an extensive, public celebration including a march of thousands of students and pupils. The trend of the Kremlin’s active support and commemoration of this holiday has continued into latter years (Laruelle 2009).

A clear break with the Soviet Union was been the abolition of ‘Revolution Day’, celebrated on November 7th. This was one of the major Soviet holidays, symbolizing Soviet power and the memory of the October Revolution and had been changed to ‘Peace and Reconciliation Day’ under Yeltsin. In 2004 it was renamed to People’s Unity Day and is now celebrated on November 4th. The day serves to commemorate the events of November 1612 marking the
liberation of Moscow from Polish-Lithuanian control (Yassman 2005). This victory brought an end to the ‘Time of Troubles’ (1598 – 1613) which is considered to be one of the worst periods in Russia’s history and marks its near disappearance. The creation of this new commemoration therefore marks a double symbolism – the preceding peril to the Russian nation followed by heralding of ‘saviors’ of the nation – the first Romanov, Mikhail III, and the Vladimir Putin’s leadership after the 90’s upheaval (Oxford Analytica 2007). The celebration of November 4th also contains references to other aspects of Russian history – the icon of Our Lady of Kazan was celebrated on the same date until 1917 whilst Peter the Great was enthroned as Emperor following his victory in the Great Northern War. Therefore the date manages to combine elements of Orthodoxy, Russian imperial past and the peril overcome by the nation (Laruelle 2009 p.160). In 2000, at a Russian émigré cemetery in Paris, Putin stated that “we are all children of Russia” and that it was time to reunite (Oxford Analytica 2007).

Also of importance was the elimination of the Constitution Day (12th of December) which marked Russia’s adoption of its first constitution in 1993. Whilst liberal and democratic forces perceived this as an attack on 1990’s liberalism, the Constitution Day celebration was never popular within Russia. In a survey undertaken in 2002, respondents were asked to rank commemorative holidays in order of importance. Constitution Day ranked last, with no single person ranking it as the most important holiday. Already having little or no significance and illustrating “the weakness associated with civic democratic national identity”, Putin’s scrap of the date caused neither outrage nor came as a surprise (Forest and Johnson 2002, p. 542). Opinions on the 1991 Putsch (arguably the most symbolic event for Russian democracy as yet in the country) have also highlighted the disenchantment Russians felt for the ‘democracy’ hailed in by the 90’s decade – in 2011, for the first time in twenty years, a majority of 39 percent of Russians found that the ’91 Putsch was a ‘tragedy’ having
‘disastrous consequences for the nation’ whilst 35 per cent believed it was simply a ‘period of conflict between the elites of the country’. Over the past two decades, it has been the latter answer given by the majority, with 53 per cent believing this in 1994. The putsch as a ‘Victory for democracy’ was only supported by, on average 10 per cent of the population (Makedonov 2011; Levada 2011).

The creation or re-establishment of multiple days of commemoration based around the military theme further works to emphasize Russia as a nation in its own right, with dates that focus on Russia as an exclusive territory and nationhood rather than as a remainder of the Soviet Union. May 9th, marking Soviet victory of Nazism, remains one of the most well known and celebrated days in addition to other commemorative dates in reference to the Great Patriotic War - namely the Battle of Kursk and the Battle of Stalingrad. Other celebrations include the victory of Alexander Nevski over the Teutonic knights in 1242 and the Battle of Kulikovo in 1830 (Laruelle 2009 p.158). A new day, ‘Heroes of the Fatherland Day’ was adopted in 2007 and is celebrated on the 9th of December.

The focus on military themes throughout these commemorative dates also has a more practical application than simply symbolism. Throughout the 1990’s, the Russian military fell into rapid decline along with the rest of society – it had gained a negative image from the mire of Afghanistan, the failures of Chechnya as well as its corruption, dated equipment and the controversial dedovshina (hazing) practices that led to considerably declining retention rates (Daucé and Sieca-Kozlowski 2006; Barany 2007). This was coupled with Boris Yeltsin’s drastic reduction of the military budget where from the years 1992 till 1999, 62 per cent of the budget was slashed. The nominal figure was even less due to the Finance Ministry’s failure to pay out the military obligations of the budget, meaning, for example, that in 1998 the actual amount received by the military was only 55 per cent of planned allocations (Taylor 2011, p. 52)
Vladimir Putin sought to reverse this decline. The military commemorative celebrations were part of a wider policy to emphasize the positive role of the military within the Russian state and went hand in hand with Putin’s attempts to revive the demoralized and weakened defence force. From 2000 to 2007, Putin more than doubled the spending on national defence and commemorative dates were not the only methods in which praise and importance werelavished upon the military – new military doctrines were developed in 2002 and 2007, the Russian space program was relaunched and even ‘Patriotic Education Programs’ were enacted, all aimed at emphasizing the military’s importance (Taylor 2011, pp 52-54). Rapoport 2009a; 2009b; Laruelle 2009 p. 176; Sperling 2003; Blum 2006). Under the Putin presidency, military representatives enjoyed increased political influence, with greater representation of official leaders graduating from military academies and filling up civilian posts as well as, on average, greater tenure under Putin compared to Yeltsin. The noticeable increase gave rise to the term ‘silovki’, denoting the presence of power ministry officers throughout the government (Taylor 2011; Kryshtanovskaya 2002).

And whilst the military is often treated with suspicion by many within Russian society due to the aforementioned institutional weaknesses, there is also a broad cultural acceptance of the importance of the army based on the glories of the Soviet past as well as the large military industrial complex, which spans over two million employees plus their families (Laruelle 2009, p. 177; Sperling 2003). The need to revive the prestige of the Russian military is therefore central in the process of commemoration and the choices of new symbols. As Putin himself said “No Army, no Russia” and if the army is a metaphor for the nation than the weakness of the nation was on display for everyone to observe, an unacceptable situation in an already unstable state (ITAR-TASS 2006).
Putin’s ability to combine various historical symbols as symbols of the state through their codification into law was something that Yeltsin had not been able to do. The adoption of symbols during the 1990’s period was never agreed upon and only enacted under Presidential decree as the Parliament failed to agree. The formal and legal adoption at the turn of the new millennium also signaled the heralding of a new era in Russia’s history – through the adoption of formal and historically unifying state symbols Putin sent out a double message. First, the ‘transitional’ nature of the Yeltsin regime was dispensed with under Putin’s presidency. The Russian state was established and had the appropriate symbols (as well as the national narrative to go with it). The compromise on symbol inclusion sought to do away with the divisive politics of the Yeltsin period, fearing further political destabilization and fracturing of Russian nationhood. Second, the adoption of symbols from the major eras in Russia’s history developed the narrative of cultural and historical richness, establishing the well from which citizens could draw their patriotism.
The following chapter builds upon the aims of national consolidation analyzed in Chapter Two. It identifies the role of the image of the Soviet Union within this wider policy of ‘pragmatism’. It does this by focusing especially on the way the discourse of the Great Patriotic War is managed by the Kremlin. It analyses the impact of Putin’s policies and how his successor, Dmitri Medvedev, has worked to move away from the emphasis on stability into a more critical awareness of Soviet history, a shift deemed ‘surprising’ by some critics. The thesis argues that Medvedev’s policy changes are to be expected, working on the more consolidated social base established by Putin and at the same time seeking to maintain the emphasis on pragmatism.

It aims to show that whilst the Kremlin has relied heavily on memories of the Soviet Union, and especially the victory of the War, as a method for unification via patriotism and pride, there has not been a rehabilitation of either the Soviet image or of Joseph Stalin. It makes concluding notes on the implications of this for future Russian development.
As discussed in Chapter Two, Putin’s approach to the Soviet Union was critical yet practical. Putin’s background in the KGB did not outweigh his work for the liberal Mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak and the fact that he had seen the failings of the Soviet system first hand meant he had no desire to return to it (Sakwa 2008, p 881). Instead, he envisaged a modern Russia competing with the advanced economies of Europe and the West, driven by ‘every day’ domestic politics and stability (Slade 2005). As Putin himself stated in 2005: “People in Russia say that those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart...[Yet] those who want to bring it back have no brain” (Putin quoted in Oushakine 2009, p. 79).

The inclusion of the Soviet memory into the makeup of modern Russian also sought to balance out the events of the 1990’s, when the Soviet Union was attacked with the hopes of erasure by the Yeltsin administration. This goal was illustrated by Putin in his State Symbols speech of 2000: “We have already lived through a period of history when we rewrote everything...we can act in the same way today...but then we would certainly fit the description of ‘Ivans who do not remember their kin’” (Putin 2000b). The attack on the Soviet image during Yeltsin period was ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ and garnered criticism even from the most staunch of liberals – Nina Khrushcheva (the great-granddaughter of Khrushchev) wrote that “Russians were in such a hurry to get rid of the negative burdens of the Soviet regime that they got rid of everything positive, too” (Khrushcheva 2006).

For Putin, such abandonment of the old regime was not possible. His integration of the Soviet image into Kremlin policy aimed above all to incorporate the Soviet era back into Russian
history – to normalize the existence of this period for the Russian citizen – and to rekindle some of the pride felt for the achievements of this era. But it is questionable whether such an irreconcilable rift – between those that want to erase the Soviet Union and those who still felt some admiration for the era - is ever to be mended, especially by the often incongruent narratives Putin adopted. The longevity of this paradoxical continuity is therefore uncertain and carries implications which are addressed in this Chapter.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WAR AS A DRIVER OF SOCIAL CONSENSUS

If a unifying event in post-Soviet Russia is to be found then it is surely to be found in the celebration of Victory of the Second World War, known to Russians as the Great Patriotic War. Today the war plays an important part in Russian society– its sheer scale means the war touched almost every household in the country and many veterans are still alive to give personal recounts of combat. The extensive human cost borne, as well as the pride in stopping the spread of fascism where other nations could not, has meant that the war is a strong driver of social consensus. The majority of surveys, whether completed in the 1990’s or in the first decade of 2000 show that around 80 percent of respondents believe the victory to be the event in national history. The War’s popularity has also grown in accordance with some surveys – in 1996, in response to the question “What makes you personally most proud in our history?” 44 percent answered the victory of the war, a relative majority at the time. In 2007, the response was 87 per cent (Gudkov 2005, p.4).

In the Kremlin’s pursuit of reclaiming Russian status as a great ‘derzhava’, the war proves to be invaluable. Having emerged from the Yeltsin period without any clear values that could
act to provide social cohesion, the victory of the War was used as one of the only unifying cohesive markers, providing the narrative of glory and defining self-sacrifice of the Russian people. Whilst other historic events are ‘non-consensual’ or non-unifying and lack emotional engagement, the Great Patriotic War manages to act as a universal source of pride. It normalises the Soviet Union as part of Russian history, something pursued actively by the Putin presidency, and the emphasis on victory avoids and sidelines the more controversial issues of Stalinist repressions. The myth of the War had already originated in the 1960’s, where the victory of the war replaced the actual memory of war, giving a more uplifting narrative of the birth of a Soviet people in the moment of war (Hosking 2006; Wolfe in Lebow et al 2006). According to Nikolai Petrov from the Moscow Carnegie Centre: “There is absolutely nothing else in the whole of Russian history that can be used to unite the nation” (Oliphant 2009).

The Kremlin has been increasingly emphasizing the importance of the victory with elaborate May 9th celebrations played out annually on the Red Square (Bogomolov 2011). One of the most prominent celebrations was in 2005 with the 60th celebration of the war. The extent was unprecedented – over 9.1 million people had participated in the activities by 8pm. Moscow was decorated with 50 000 flags, 200 light garlands and celebrations extended from the parade and evening shows to feature other various events throughout Moscow. The state owned ‘Channel One’, screened only V-Day celebration programs (Hutchings and Rulyova 2009, p. 139). Given the desire of the Kremlin to boost Russia’s international image, cultivate political and cultural unity and foster patriotism, the treatment of the celebrations should not come as a surprise.

Pro-Kremlin and pro-United Russia youth groups such as Nashi feature a multitude of patriotic activities for the remembrance of the War, including regular meetings with veterans,
competitions for the creation of films about the victory and the holding of an annual Summer camp, where new members can participate in basic military style training amidst other social activities (Feifer 2007; Laruelle 2011 p. 243; Nashi Online 2011). Nashi also highlights the political universality of the war - its online domain name is .su for Soviet Union yet Nashi staunchly support Putin and Medvedev, both far from Communist presidents. The Kremlin has also implemented three phases of ‘Patriotic Education’ programs, from 2001 – 2005, 2006 – 2010 and 2010-2015. The programs focus on the lack of patriotic feeling within the state, claiming that patriotism has been slowly turned into nationalism and lament the lack of loyalty to the ‘Motherland’ as seen in youth reluctance to serve for the military. All three programs focus on increasing patriotic feelings amongst all strata of the population, but especially the military patriotism amongst youth. They do so through focusing on collaboration with veterans, museum exhibitions and other events designed to develop respect for the culture and historical past of Russia and to its traditions of military service (Gosudarstvenaya Programma 2001; 2005; 2010 Konseptsiya 2003).

The attention to the War inevitably draws the image of Stalin into focus, the leader of the Soviet Union at the time. The ‘rehabilitation’ of Stalin has been an accusation leveled regularly at the Kremlin, especially during Putin’s presidency, in lieu of the peculiar popularity which Stalin’s image maintains within Russian society (Mendelson and Gerber 2005; 2006). In 2000 he was named the ‘best Russian leader of the twentieth century’ whilst in 2005 56 percent of people aged 16 to 29 believed he did ‘more good than harm’ whilst 51 percent of respondents thought this overall. A minority (43 percent) thought that Stalin was a cruel tyrant (47 per cent disagreed) even though 70 percent of respondents agreed that he had imprisoned and tortured millions of people (Gudkov in Dubin 2007, p. 348).

In lieu of the close association of the victory of the war with Stalin, Putin’s presidency has been careful in its use of and approach to the Stalin image. It has aimed to both acknowledge
Stalin’s crimes whilst simultaneously tapping into Soviet nostalgia and the pride held by many Russian citizens for the ‘achievements’ of his regime. Outright support for Stalin has been rare and has always been done under the pretext of recognizing the achievements of the Soviet period in the historical narrative. In 2000, the Kremlin authorized the Central Bank of Russia to issue 500 commemorative silver coins with Stalin’s image for the anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. In 2004 Putin authorized the change of the name ‘Stalingrad’ from ‘Volgograd’ on a plaque commemorating the battle near the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow (BBC 2004). The change was enacted in the run up to the 60th anniversary of the war, the decree stating that it was done by “taking into account the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad… giving due respect to the heroism of the defenders of Stalingrad, and with the goal of preserving the history of the Russian state” (RFE/RL 2004).

The victory of the War continues the emphasis on Russian self identity as being characterized by self-sacrifice and endurance, drawing parallels with the survival of the 90’s decade. According to sociological surveys undertaken by Lev Gudkov, an absolute majority of those questioned believe that ‘Russians display their national character and mental qualities at the fullest in times of crisis, trial and war….under extreme conditions of catastrophe and adversity’ rather than times of happiness of calm. 77 percent shared this conviction, highlighting the level to which the victory of the war creates and plays into the norm of Russian self identity (Gudkov 2005, p. 10). Furthermore, the Russian role is brought to the fore, downplaying both allies and fellow Soviet compatriots (Laruelle 2011). The myth-making which has surrounded the event has emphasized the victory and glory of the Soviet military forces, arguably reinforcing through the political myth of Russian greatness the importance of the military within Russian society and the self-sacrificing nature of the Russian people.
As discussed previously, the war’s popularity as a driving force of social consensus is unmatched. Lev Gudkov points to the fact that in 1988, 70 per cent of Russians said that the Great Patriotic War was the defining moment of the Russian state. In 2010, that figure had risen to 90 per cent (Kolesnichenko 2010). Such pride arguably reinforces the Kremlin narrative of Russia as a great power, having achieved such victory in its history. But the emphasis on the War as the cornerstone of Russian society produces consequences as to how this period is remembered in Russian history. Elevated to the status of being ‘sacred’ (Membery 2011) has meant that at best, criticism of the War from elite levels has been rarely heard. And whilst the Kremlin has buffered its praise for the war with some limitations - like the restrictions placed on the use of Stalin’s image during War celebrations in 2010 or the Kremlin’s disapproval of renaming the city Volgograd to Stalingrad - the importance of the war for Russian identity has meant that criticism of the victory has been divisive. The harassment by pro-Presidential youth group Nashi of the journalist Alexander Podrabinck for anti-Soviet writings or the arrest of Mikhail Suprun for investigating the fate of Soviet Germans and soldiers in the Arkhangelsk gulags has been example of this (Harding 2009; Lukyanov 2010; Laruelle 2011 p. 243-244). Discussion of whether the Soviet Army liberated or dominated Eastern Europe after the war is also not often conducted in the most objective of manner on the elite level considering the importance the victory holds for contemporary Russian identity (Torbakov 2011; Kolesnichenko 2010; Laurelle 2011; Andrieu 2011; Miller 2009).
HAS THE KREMLIN SOUGHT TO GLORIFY THE SOVIET IMAGE?

Perhaps more than anything, it has been the Kremlin’s approach to the victory that has led to accusations of neo-Sovietism and Soviet rehabilitation, with the reinstatement of the Soviet anthem melody and military flag used as evidence of this (Andrieu 2011; Beichman 2005). Mendelson and Gerber have argued that the cultivation of ‘nostalgia for the Soviet Union’ has been one of the building blocks of Putin’s national concept, using as evidence Putin’s remark that “the collapse of the soviet union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century” as well as apparent ‘ambivalence’ of Russian citizens towards the figure of Joseph Stalin (Mendelson and Gerber 2008, p.132). The Putin ‘propaganda machine’ was apparently responsible for the overall positive acceptance of Stalin within Russian society (Mendelson and Gerber 2006; 2008). With the fear that drawing upon the Soviet period in the creation of this national narrative would lead to its glorification, it is interesting to note that opinion polls indicate that not only do Russians have a complex relationship with the victory of the War but that almost the opposite of the ‘glorification’ of the Soviet Union has occurred.

The Kremlin’s attempts to invigorate the Soviet memory, excluding the ever increasing pomp of the annual May 9 parade, have not been systemic or thorough. In fact, Putin’s treatment of this period has been as contradictory as the rest of his attempts at state consolidation. For example, arguments which point to the erection of Stalin monuments throughout the country fail to note that it is not necessarily the Kremlin that instigates such measures. Moscow’s mayor Yury Luzhkov’s decision to place banners of Stalin’s image around the city for the May 9, 65th War commemorations led to outright disapproval from the Kremlin as well as demonstrations from human rights activists (RIA Novosti 2010a; RIA Novosti 2010b). No
Kremlin support was shown for the establishment of a Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt monument by council ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea to commemorate the Yalta conference on the 60th anniversary of the War (RIA Novosti 2005; Kasianenko 2005). In most cases, open support for the creation of Stalinist monuments has predictably come from Communist political members or Communist supporters (RIA Novosti 2010c; Trend 2008; Zakc.ru 2010). Citizens associated with the major parties of Just Russia, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and Communist Party of the Russian Federation were significantly more likely to disagree with the instigation of new de-Stalinisation programs than their United Russia counterparts, the Presidential party (VCIOM 2010b). Even the Patriotic Education programs are symbolic in nature, the 2006 – 2010 being allocated only 17.5 million dollars for its five year entirety (Rapoport 2009a; 2009b; The Russia Journal 2005). According to a VCIOM survey, 62 percent of the population had never heard of the 2006- 2010 Program whilst 28 percent answered that they ‘think they remember hearing something about it’ (VCIOM 2007). All in all, only 6 percent answered that they concretely knew something about the program.

THE FILIPOV AFFAIR

In 2002 and 2003, Putin showed support for veterans requests to clear Russian textbooks of criticism in regards to the Second World War (Putin 2003a), requesting the Russian Academy of Sciences to examine school history books and bemoaning the focus on the black pages of Russian history to the detriment of more uplifting narratives (Putin 2007b). Putin’s endorsement of the The History of Russia 1945 – 2007: A Teacher’s Handbook by Aleksandr Vasil’evich Filipov et al, which has been criticized for painting the Soviet Union and the War
in a positive light and ignoring Stalinist atrocities, has led to accusations of the Kremlin seeking to influence the Russian historical narrative (Aron 2008; Chudakova 2007; Ostrovsky 2008; Rybina 2007; Finn 2007).

However, analysis of the book points to greater complexity, the first of which is that the starting date of the book is 1945 and not the 1930’s, limiting the ability to focus on Stalin’s worst purges. Analysis of the content shows a significant amount of attention is paid to Stalinist repressions even if the Gulag is mentioned only once (Solonari 2009, p. 836). Filipov’s treatment of Stalin has caused criticism – he is presented as a contradictory figure that did both good and bad – “a hero for some and an evil for others” (Filipov 2007 p. 81; Andrieu 2011). The handbook states that: “Stalin is considered one of the most successful leaders of the USSR” and goes on to list the achievements of his leadership – the expansion of the Russian empire, the victory of the war, economic and cultural modernisation as well as mass education (Filipov quoted in Solonari 2009; Shul’ga 2009).

But this attitude to Stalin is hardly unique to the Kremlin and can hardly be claimed to be incited by it. Russians have a complicated relationship to Stalin, especially due to his leadership of the Union throughout the War. Most Russians believe that his leadership at the time cannot be disassociated from the victory – in a sociological poll, the majority of Russians answered that it was neither the people nor Stalin who were responsible for the victory, but that the state and the people together achieved success and cannot be separated (VCIOM 2008). Because of this, Russian citizens have and may continue for some time to hold contradictory views about Stalin and the USSR irrespective of the Kremlin’s actions. The belief that, under Stalin, the Soviet Union experienced extensive modernisation need not negate the belief that he was a tyrant. In 2007, the same year as the Filipov books debut, 72 per cent of respondents to a Levada Centre poll answered that the Stalinist terror consisted of “political crimes that could not be justified” (Levinson 2011). And whilst Stalin is treated as
such by Filipov, Soviet resisters are also given prominence, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Boris Pasternak (Benn 2010, p.175; Solonari 2009, p. 838). In fact, the overwhelming tone of the book is strongly anti-Communist (Benn p. 174). The book also has several words of caution against President Putin: “The concentration of power in the hands of the President….has its reverse side…This dependence of the life of the state on one individual can undoubtedly become a risk factor for Russia” and therefore “the development of democracy should reduce the role of individual politicians and increase the role of institutions” (Benn 2010, p. 176).

The issue here is not as much with the actual content of the Filipov book in regards to the Soviet Union as its focus on exonerating the concept of ‘Sovereign Democracy’ a theme associated with Putin’s leadership and developed by the Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov. Sovereign democracy in itself is meant to imply a ‘top-down’ democratic system in which outside forces do not intervene or influence the domestic running of the state and has been criticized as an idea which validates a lack of questioning of the Russian political system (Lipman 2006). The Filipov text authors themselves are what is known as politologhi – political and ideological ‘spin doctors’, closely aligned with the Kremlin (Solonari 2009). As Solonari comments, “The saccharine treatment of Putin’s rule is bad in itself, but it also casts a long shadow over the rest of the book my imparting to it a meaning that it otherwise would not have had…it achieves an ideological closure and emplots the whole narrative” (Solonari 2009, p. 839). The worry that the Kremlin has attempted to restore the Soviet Union or present a positive image of Stalin is somewhat exaggerated. The more worrying aspect then is

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1 Interesting to note is that Dmitri Medvedev himself criticized the idea during his term as a Prime Minister, pointing out that the two concepts seemed incongruent with each other: “If you take the word ‘democracy’ and start attaching qualifiers to it that would seem a little odd. It would lead one to think that we’re talking about some other, non-traditional type of democracy.” (Foreign Policy Watch 2010; Expert 2006)
the attempt to integrate Putin’s leadership and the concept of sovereign democracy as the final stage of political development into the Russian historical narrative. The concept is not presented as an idea spawned from a political party but rather an objective description of the Russian political regime (Miller 2010, p. 20). This takes the handbook out of the domain of dubious historical plurality and into historical narrative influenced by the state.

However, history books that are slanted towards state policy are by no means an anomaly for Western democracies let alone for Russia (Miller 2010). Furthermore to suggest that the Filipov handbook is the only available historical material for secondary schools would also be incorrect. A wide range of textbooks dealing with Soviet history fill the shelves of bookstores and the Filipov handbook is only one of these (Babich 2008; Miller 2010; Lipman 2009b). There is significant plurality (assuredly, some of doubtful quality) in secondary textbooks, ranging from Nikita Zagladin’s *The History of the Fatherland. The 20th Century*, which, whilst heavily emphasizing the importance of patriotism, places heavy criticism on the human cost of the Soviet period and emphasizes the superiority of Western models of development, including that of the U.S (Sherlock 2007 p.174). The liberal narrative is also seen in the presence of Alexander Chubaryan, the head of the World History Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Chubaryan himself has produced a recent and highly acclaimed textbook, extensively criticizing Vladimir Lenin, refusing to celebrate the victory of the Great Patriotic War or condone any other Soviet achievements based on the human cost of the ‘experiment’ (Babich 2008; Sherlock 2007). Along with Chubaryan, acclaimed historians such as Oleg Khlevniuk have publically presented scathing reports and lectures on the Stalinist and Soviet times whilst the Russian Institute for History still maintains plentiful liberal voices amongst its midst (Brent 2009; Babich 2008). Also interesting to note is that alongside Putin’s comments for more inspirational history books he has also strongly backed
the decision of the Ministry of Education and Science mandating the compulsory assignment of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in schools (Putin 2003; Ministry of Education and Science 2009; Lipman 2009b), displaying the seemingly contradictory range of his policies.

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**THE COMPLEXITY OF SOVIET NOSTALGIA**

Support for the Victory reflects the complicated way the Russia nation relates to the Soviet past. Whilst it remains one of the most celebrated holidays, the level of knowledge in regards to the war has paradoxically declined over the past decade, suggesting that the date is used more and more as a crutch for unification once a year out of the practical need of citizens for pride and dignity than ideological identification with the Soviet times. Surveys conducted in 2010 by VCIOM show only a minority of respondents know the correct dates of the battles of Stalingrad and Leningrad, perhaps the two most famous battles of the war for the Russians (35 and 34 per cent respectively) whilst only 49 per cent answered correctly that it was Joseph Stalin who was the Commander in Chief of the Soviet Army during the war (VCIOM 2010c). The younger the generation, the less the historical knowledge is displayed, with 88 per cent having difficulty correctly identifying at least one ‘famous’ person that had suffered under the Stalinist purges in 2007 (VCIOM 2008).

According to VCIOM, the indifference towards Stalin has increased from 13 percent in 2001 to 28 per cent in 2009 (VCIOM 2009). Lev Gudkov has also mapped a public decline in enthusiasm for Stalin, from 17 to 47 per cent from 2002 to 2010 (Malpas 2010). Overall, Russians held a positive view of Stalin (37 per cent as opposed to negative views 24) although much of this has been due to an overrepresentation of older generations more likely to feel respect for Stalin than those younger (Sherlock 2011).
Not only do the 18-24 year age group show the greatest level of support for perestroika amongst all ages, but they are also the least likely to be interested in the Soviet era (VCIOM 2010a; Sherlock 2011). 38 per cent of the younger generations registered indifference to Stalin, 10 per cent higher than the national result (VCIOM 2009).

Any support for Stalin is complicated by two factors – first, as already mentioned, the overrepresentation of support amongst older sections of the population and their concentration in the niche nationalist or communist political parties. The second influence is arguably the conflation of the Soviet victory in the War and Stalin’s leadership at the time (Gudkov 2005; Khapaeva 2009; Torbakov 2011 p, 219). Since 1998, the consistently most agreed with statement has been “No matter what vices Stalin had or mistakes he made, the most important thing is that he made our people victorious in WW2”, fluctuating around 35 percent. Interestingly, in 2009, for the first time this statement was matched in popularity by the statement: “Stalin was a cruel tyrant guilty of destruction of millions of innocent people”. In the face of concern that Putin’s Kremlin has glorified Stalin, the popularity of the latter choice has never been higher, growing from 28 per cent since 1998.

It appears therefore that the focus of the early Putin presidency on maintaining social consensus and the avoidance of divisive topics seems to have helped produce ambivalence, indifference and even perhaps a growing dislike rather than support for the figure of Joseph Stalin (Sherlock 2011 p.101). Nor has a revival in Soviet nostalgia or glorification occurred – according to data from the Levada centre the regret for the collapse of the Soviet Union was at 75 per cent in 2000, declining since this peak and averaging at around 60 per cent since then (Levada 2009; 2010c). In 2010, 55 per cent expressed regret at the collapse of the Soviet Union, but this statistic is complicated by the fact that whilst 83 per cent of the elderly expressed regret, only 17 per cent of youth did so (Levada 2010c). More and more, Russian
youth (as well as society in general) appear less interested in both idolizations of the Soviet era as well as its blacker pages. In 2005, in response to the question ‘What era would you like to live in, if you had the opportunity to do so?’ the two most popular answers were ‘In the Brezhnev period’ (31 per cent) and ‘In contemporary Russia’ (39 per cent). In 2006, the support for the Brezhnev period had dropped off to 26 per cent whilst the support for ‘In contemporary Russia’ had increased to 52. The younger generation (18 – 34) are the driving force of the change, with 76 per cent of 18 – 24 year olds preferring contemporary Russia to the 31 per cent of 60 or older or the 43 per cent of those above 45 (VCIOM 2008).

Sergei Shelin points to the fact that over the past six or so years, “Something has convinced the people that the Soviet Union can never be again”. He argues that whilst Putin’s ‘geopolitical catastrophe’ comment hit the nostalgia mark in the late 2004 and 2005 year, Russian people have expressed less and less interest and nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

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“Maybe it was the Russo-Georgian war…the zigzags of Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Belorussian relations. Or maybe it was the economic crisis, which has liquidated all illusions all together. Or maybe it was everything at once. But this fact is clear…today, the dramatic emotional responses associated with these answers, whatever they may be, no longer exist…Could it have been avoided, couldn’t it been avoided; Do I regret the collapse or do I not regret the collapse? – Either way, this is already history” (Shelin 2010).
Over time, the ‘well of Soviet nostalgia’ has ‘dried up’ (Lukyanov 2010). References to the greatness of the Russian victory in the war only throws into sharp contrast the sad state of affairs in the Russian military today. Emphasis on patriotism and the love of one’s country and its history worked in the volatile environment of the early 2000’s. But in the later years of the decade, bolstered by a growing economy and somewhat established on its feet, the evocation of Soviet patriotism now appears empty. Even those Russian citizens who lived under the Soviet period, the driving force of previous nostalgia, have begun to lose interest (Shelin 2010; VCIOM 2008).

THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE: CONSOLIDATION BUT NOT UNIFICATION

The war has remained an empty crutch for Russian society because, as Lev Gudkov states: “Today there is nothing to be proud of, and for the national consciousness this is painful…People say – A massive and rich nation but we live in such poverty and squalor” (Gudkov in Kolesnichenko 2010). The weaknesses of Putin’s nation consolidating agenda are highlighted by this statement. Whilst there has been an overwhelming focus on incorporating the achievements from all historical eras, the Soviet period remains the most emotionally vested and immediate in Russian memory. As discussed in Chapter One, the identity of Russian people was closely associated with the birth of ‘Soviet’ people, making unification around Tsarist or post-Soviet symbols harder to enact.

Putin’s presidency has not had much better luck than Yeltsin with advocating the importance of new post-Soviet commemorative days, such as the 4th of November. The growth of the knowledge of this date has also been noticeable – in 2005, 8 per cent had answered the question of “What celebration is commemorated on the 4th of November” correctly whilst in
2010 36 per cent did so (29 percent answered incorrectly in 2010 as opposed to 51 in 2005) (Levada 2010a). But whilst knowledge of the day has been growing, its importance on the calendar is still extremely low. In a survey by the Levada centre on which dates were most important, the overwhelming majority answered New Years day whilst May 9th oscillated between second and third place over the past 12 years, competing with ones birthday. The day of the Defenders of the Fatherland (23rd February) was the only other significant post-Soviet state declared date. 12th of June, Constitution Day and the 4th of November were only chosen by 3 per cent and 1 per cent accordingly (Levada 2010b).

The emphasis on transcendence of divisions was not able to provide a truly unifying identity to the Russian nation, made more evident by increasing indifference to Soviet history as Russia moves away from the trauma of the 90’s period and into the later decade. The Kremlin’s reluctance to deal with divisive issues of the Soviet past, especially during the earlier years of Putin’s presidency, has meant that extensive social and historical contradictions remain. This “mixed salad approach” (Chubais quoted in Hanson 2011, p. 39) of mismatched symbols has been increasingly ridiculed for its schizophrenic approach to national identity (Zolotov 2011). The emphasis on the positives from each historical period creates contradictions – for example, whilst the achievements of the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War are lauded, Putin also attended the burial of the White Army’s General Denikin who fought against the Bolsheviks. But this is symptomatic of the fact that Putin never sought to establish a formal, state patriotic ideology. His national narrative was not so much a coherent narrative as the pragmatic establishment of Russian historical unity through the commemoration of ‘great’ historical figures and events as well as a patchwork of values.

The values that Putin chose were hardly political, with the exception of his emphasis on statism, although this in itself had practical application to strengthen the weakened governing bodies at the turn of the millennium. ‘Patriotism’ is also a relatively a-political value in
Russia (Laruelle ed. 2009 p.4-5, pp. 13-49), not to mention that this was not only a vague concept (‘a love for one’s country’) but again done for pragmatic reasons, especially to strengthen the weakened military and mobilize Russian citizenry. Patriotism as a value remained popular but theoretical rather than practical in nature. In late 2006, 93 percent of Russians agreed that schools and colleges should engage in increasing the patriotic education of youth (Rapoport 2009a). However, despite this, only 3 to 4 percent of Russians had actually participated in activities which were seen to promote patriotic education (attending history museums or visiting patriotically themed festivals) whilst 86 per cent admitted that neither they nor their families had ever participated (VCIOM 2007).

This avoidance of divisions has been characteristic of the pragmatism displayed by Vladimir Putin during his rule. In the eyes of the Kremlin, Putin’s primary function has been consolidation and social stabilization - the establishment of social order, citizen unification and increased economic standards to consolidate Russian nationhood. Putin’s achievement was not only in the restoration of the state but also in engendering it with a sense of legitimacy. Buttressed by the much better performing economy as well as a general rise in living standards, the social fabric of Russian society does not appear to be on the brink of collapse as it did at the turn of the millennium. Both the generational and temporal distance of modern Russia from the Soviet days has given ‘distance’ to the topic, allowing “certain devaluation of national sanctities which would still be worth cultivating, but not longer worth the spilling of one’s own blood and the blood of others” (Jedlicki 1999, p. 230). Avoidance and the ‘forgetting’ of divisive topics allows for the consolidation of national cohesion and self-image (Renan 1990). By not undertaking ‘policies of remembrance’ in the immediate post-Soviet society, Putin managed to hold onto social unity even if his policies often resulted in contradictory historical narratives. But the methods that had been required to achieve this – undermining political pluralism for the purposes of social unification as well as avoidance of
the darker historical pages—meant that Putin’s system would have to be further consolidated. In this sense, Putin was a transitional leader and “the system that he built was inherently…contradictory, with numerous internal institutional and policy ambiguities that would ultimately have to find long term resolution” (Sakwa 2008, p. 884).

**INCREASED CONFRONTATION – THE SOVIET UNION UNDER THE MEDVEDEV PRESIDENCY**

If Putin’s presidency was characterized by the avoidance of tackling controversial periods of Soviet history, then the presidency of his successor Dmitri Medvedev (2008 – 2011) is arguably characterized by an increase in the elite driven analysis of the Soviet past. The ‘cooling of emotions’ under Putin’s consolidation process and temporal distance has allowed for Dmitri Medvedev to approach issues of Soviet history in a more, at least symbolically, confrontational manner.

Medvedev’s presidential mandate has focused on modernization of the Russian economy and political system amidst which he has heralded in a changing attitude towards the Soviet period. Whilst Putin’s presidency focused on avoiding divisive discussions on the Stalin period, especially throughout his first mandate (2000-2004) due to the need to maintain stability, Medvedev has taken on a more direct and critical approach towards Soviet history which the more established Russian context allows him to do. On the 30th of October of 2009, the Russian day for the Commemoration of Victims of Soviet Repression the President posted a speech on his video blog. Titled “Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories”, it compromised one of the first elite driven and open post-Soviet criticisms of the Stalinist period and the positive association of Stalin with the victory of the
Great Patriotic War. Medvedev discussed the inexcusable nature of “one of the greatest tragedies in the history of Russia” emphasizing that Soviet excesses were not limited to the late 30’s but were enacted over the whole twenty years of the Stalin period, something never previously acknowledged by Putin. Medvedev argues that “we can still hear that these numerous losses were justified by certain supreme government goals. I am convinced that no goals of national development, nor national successes or ambitions can be achieved through human woe and losses. Nothing can be put higher than the value of human life. There is no justification for the purges” (Medvedev 2009b).

Medvedev’s critical stance on Stalinism was also evident in his ban on the image of Stalin and Stalinist themes in the 2010 celebration of May 9th. He stated that “there is no excuse for Stalinism and there will be no rehabilitation of Stalinism, and consequently, there will be no placards with the image of Joseph Stalin or other Stalinist symbolism in Russia” (Medvedev 2010). In an interview with the Russian newspaper Izvestia shortly before the celebrations, Medvedev stated that “If we are talking about the official state view of him [Stalin], about what our leaders think of him since the emergence of a new Russian nation in recent years, then the verdict is clear: Stalin committed a vast array of crimes against his own people” (Izvestia 2010). Emphasizing the need for Russia to face Stalin’s crimes, Medvedev acknowledged in the same interview the need to declassify documents from the Soviet period – “Enough time has gone by now – 65 years, and people must know the truth about the war, the truth about events of that period”.

The effect of temporal distance can be seen in the difference between Putin’s actions from the beginning to the end of his presidency. Heavily emphasizing patriotism and consolidation in the earlier years, this rhetoric declined and was supplemented by Putin’s visit to Butovo, a site of Soviet era repressions in 2007 (Smolchenko 2007) whilst in April of 2010, the responsibility of Soviet forces in the Katyn massacre was finally recognized by Russia with
an official Polish-Russian ceremony at Katyn, with Putin in attendance. On November the 26th, the Russian parliament released a formal statement affirming that “The Katyn crime was committed on direct order by Stalin and other Soviet leaders” (Russia Today 2010; Lipman 2010; Bidder 2010) In keeping with this theme, the movie *Katyn* was shown twice in one week on one of the major state channels, an unparalleled move considering the movie was all but barred in Russia previously. The Katyn archival files were made public by the President with files also handed over to Polish investigators (RIA Novosti 2011; Lipman 2010).

In early 2011, Medvedev met with Mikhail Fedotov, the head of the President’s Council on Human Rights and Society to discuss issues of human rights in Russia, amongst them the establishment of Program for de-Stalinisation (Council 2011). Arseny Roginsky, the chair of the board on the Memorial Society, dedicated to recording and commemorating the victims of the Soviet regime, spoke to the President on the establishment of a monument to commemorate victims of the Soviet regime (in Moscow), creation of a database for victims of political terror and the loosening of restrictions placed on accessing archival information (Council 2011). The council meeting was unprecedented in the twenty one years of post-Soviet Russian history. Medvedev had himself already voiced his support for historical centers dealing with the atrocities of the Soviet period (Medvedev 2010). Even the ‘sacred’ War celebrations of May 9th were celebrated with a softening change in the year 2010. Medvedev’s speech was devoid of patriotic statements that had been a feature of Putin’s addresses whilst foreign military units from former allied nations such as the United States, Poland and France also participated in the parade. This decline of “Russian nationalism framed in a distinctly Soviet setting” prompted Andrei Zolotov to write: “Although it is impossible in our memories and commemorations of World War II to fully escape Soviet symbolism, Russia dealt pretty well with this last Victory Day anniversary (2010). It has been an important, coming of age experience for our old nation, and our new one” (Zolotov 2010).
However, Medvedev’s creation of the ‘Commission Against Attempts of Falsification of Russian History’ (Commission) has been used as evidence that the President has continued his predecessors’ emphasis on the victory of the war as a center point of Russian identity. However, creation of the Commission comes as a response to the increased politicization of history within neighbouring states. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, ex Soviet states have had to face their own struggles for national narratives. But the formation of such histories in nations such as Latvia, Estonia and even Georgia or the Ukraine has seen that Russia has largely found itself on the defensive (Torbakov 2011). The narratives have had a common theme of victimisation under Soviet occupation, synonymously applying the term Soviet and Russian and therefore possessing an overwhelmingly anti-Russian character – Estonia released a 2003 “White Paper on losses borne by the Estonian people by the occupation forces” which served as the basis of a largely anti-Russian propaganda campaign. Requests for Russia to “pay compensation for the damage inflicted by the occupation” were also made (Dyukov 2009). The Latvian release of the pseudo documentary “The Soviet Story” was also criticized for being anti-Russian and concern has been raised as to the countries “non-citizen” status of ethnic Russians, who are deprived of the right to vote and other basic political freedoms (Dyukov 2009; Russia Today 2011). Estonia and Latvia, as well as Moldova, Poland, Georgia and the Ukraine have set up some version of an ‘Institute of National Remembrance”, all of which are funded from their respective state budgets, for the purposes of historical remembrance. Their neutrality, as expected, has been questionable (Dyukov 2009; Miller 2010). Many of these actions have predictably been seen as political maneuvering – such as the Moldovan Presidents attempt to establish a ‘Soviet Occupation Day’ at a time when his popularity rating was at a meager 2 percent (Russia Today 2010). As Aleksandr Chubaryan has noted, “In Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States,
there is a problem of politicisation of historical knowledge, which adds to the creation of hostile images and represents some countries as Others\(^2\)" (Granik et al 2009).

Unlike the worrisome predictions that the Commission will lead to state imposed historical metanarratives of the glory of the Soviet Union (Andrieu 2011; Blomfield 2009; Frolov 2009) the role of the Commission appears to be more symbolic than actual and focused on the external rather than domestic. Worried about the growing enmity from neighbouring nations, the impact upon Russian prestige as well as defensive over its nationhood, the Kremlin responded to the increased historical politicization with its own version of the Institute of Remembrance. Whilst not the most appropriate response, neither the Commission nor President Medvedev appear to be concerned with re-writing history or imposing a single interpretation upon Russian historical discussion. As historian Aleksandr Chubaryan stated, “divergent opinions and different points of view are part of the normal development of science” and that the battle of the Commission is against the development of ‘Othering’ by ex-Soviet neighbours. The head of the Committee, Sergey Naryshkin, has defended the Commission by recalling that it had no censorship role nor did it exist to judge academic works or function as a research facility (Oliphant 2009; Laruelle 2011 p. 236). More so, a review of the Commissions activities reveals a lack of real ‘power’ – its activities focus on analysis of attempted falsifications and the ‘exploration of possible strategies’ which could prevent this (Commission 2009). In the three years of its existence, “the Commission has not made much of a show of its activism” (Laruelle 2011 p.236) and its restricted powers suggest that it remains a symbolic response to a growing problem of historical politicization

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\(^2\) A Russian study of 200 school textbooks from ex-Soviet states comes up with saddening results – “except for Belarus and (to a lesser degree) Armenia, all the remaining countries have moved to present the rising generation with a nationalistic view of history, based on myths about the antiquity of one’s own people, about the high cultural mission of its ancestors and about ‘the cursed enemy’: the Russians”. The authors warn that “If these tendencies continue…in the consciousness of the peoples of the former USSR will be formed an image of Russia as an evil empire which for centuries destroyed, oppressed and exploited them” (Torbakov 2011, p. 213).
CONCLUSION

Medvedev’s critical stance towards Stalinism and the blacker pages of Soviet history has been described as a “surprising shift” by observers, especially in relation to his predecessor, who preferred to avoid such topics (Lipman 2010; Sherlock 2011; The Telegraph 2010). But this change in policy should not be surprising – Putin’s presidency had allowed for the ground from which Medvedev was able to work. Putin’s avoidance of divisive topics as well as the positive economic growth during most of the 2000 decade has resulted in some semblance of social cohesion amongst Russian society and the distancing of the emotional connection of citizens towards the Soviet memory. This environment has allowed President Dmitry Medvedev to make less ambiguous criticisms of the Soviet period but, simultaneously, the focus on pragmatic policy remains. The treatment of Medvedev’s leadership by observers has highlighted the lack of understanding about this pragmatism – critics either focus on his Falsification Commission as evidence of pro-Stalinism (Andrieu 2011; Orekh 2009) or ignore this completely and praise his liberal focus (Sherlock 2011). But these two factors are part of the same process. The Kremlin seeks to maintain social unity at all times and Putin’s leadership has paved the way for increased social cohesion amongst Russian society, allowing more leeway for greater critical analysis of Russian history under President Medvedev.
This work began by emphasizing that analysis of the place of Soviet memory in the post-Soviet Russian Federation had been dictated by the definition of Russia as a transitional state. The framework of the transitional paradigm has meant events in Russia have been immediately classified as moving the country towards or away from democracy. Furthermore, transitional justice theorists have come to worrying conclusions about the lack of condemnation or assessment of the Soviet past and its continued presence in the Russian Federation, concluding that “so long as the symbols and institutions of Soviet repression are still flourishing in Russia, the prospects for democracy will be dim” (Kramer 2001 p.5).

The goal of this work has been to above all contextualize the Russian post-Soviet experience in order to move away from the transition paradigm and illustrate that the Russian experience with Soviet memory has been one of pragmatism. Chapter One showed that Russian and Soviet conceptions of nationhood were closely intertwined and that the collapse of the USSR heralded in an identity crisis for the state. It analyzed how the economic, social and political upheavals of the 90’s decade resulted in a growing nostalgia for the Soviet days. The Chapter illustrated Yeltsin’s failed search for a national identity and the growing backlash of attempted erasure of the Soviet period from the historical narrative.

Chapter Two showed that due to the weakened and demoralized position in which Russia found itself at the turn of the millennium, the Putin presidency prioritized state consolidation above all else, doing so through increased centralization of authority and the creation of a unified historical narrative. Putin avoided divisive political dialogues and sought to bridge gaps between pro- and anti-Soviet forces by incorporating the Soviet image along with other achievements from the Russian past. Putin’s capture of the breadth of Russian history
allowed him to consolidate the state, counter intuitively, on apolitical reasons and appease multiple strata’s of the population. Putin established the Russian Federation as a nation in its own right rather than ‘a rump USSR’ (Sakwa 2004; 2008). His lack of ideology only served to increase his popularity in a populace ‘which remained intensely cynical about politics (Hanson 2011, p. 38).

Chapter Three demonstrated that the incorporation of Soviet symbols was not a sign of Soviet rehabilitation but simply a counter to the excessive attempts at erasure of the 1990’s and the societal divisions that resulted. Outright support for the figure of Stalin has been rare whilst support for the Soviet image overall was concentrated in the earlier parts of the 2000 decade, when the need for consolidation was greatest. President Medvedev’s increased criticism of Stalin’s repressions reflects a society better able to handle investigations into the atrocities of its past.

However, the emphasis on transcendence of divisions was not able to provide a truly unifying national identity to the Russian nation. The political myth Putin sought to establish by the incorporation of Tsarist and other Russian historical symbols did not strongly resonate with the populace. Chapter Three demonstrated that this became more evident as Russia moved away from the trauma of the 90’s period and into the later decade. Putin’s leadership was transitional – it avoided the rifts between political sides and sought to incorporate historical symbols in a mutually exclusive narrative. The maintenance of tacit unity has not been followed by the establishment of a clear sense of national identity. Where once the stars on the Kremlin allowed the shell-shocked Russian population to feel that their past was not going to be erased in the space of ten years, the same stars now beg the eternal question of ‘What is Russia?’.
Medvedev’s focus on the widespread repressions and his attempt to disengage Stalin from the victory of the War has been a promising sign of critical dialogue. However, much will depend on the ability of the Russian state to strengthen Russian post-Soviet achievements and develop alternative sources of pride. Whilst the rifts between those that hanker for the Soviet times and those that want to condemn the era may never be breached, Russia must concentrate upon moving towards establishing a constructive path to development. The Soviet period has been an integral part of Russian history and to erase it from the historical narrative would be detrimental to the self-identity of the nation. But now the time has come for Russia to face its history’s blackest pages as well as its best. Doing so will promote the development of a mature and knowledgeable society, ready to move on into the future without the burden of its past.
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