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Soviet history, Russian memories and Putin's practices

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The "right" of the strongest

Latvia would seem to have nothing to do with the Magnitsky affair. However, certain disagreements between this European Union country and the current Russian government show just how much the latter's interpretation of Soviet history reveals its relationship to its past and also to its neighbours and its citizens. In August 1939, Stalin's USSR signed a pact with Hitler's Germany that included a secret agreement: the two countries would divide part of Central Europe between themselves, including the Baltic States, which at the time were independent. On 5 October 1939, the USSR therefore forced the presence of 30,000 soldiers on Latvia, which it accepted because the balance of power was so clearly unequal. Then, on 16 June 1940, the USSR demanded that an "unlimited" number of its troops be able to enter Latvia, whose government again submitted, fearing that a refusal would lead to a massacre. On 17 June 1940, the Soviet army crossed over the border and was accompanied by Andrei Vyshinsky, the state prosecutor who had played a key role in the great trials of the 1930s. The process culminating in the transformation of independent Latvia into a Soviet republic was underway, and it involved rigged elections, arrests and deportations.

Latvians consider that was an "occupation" of their territory by the USSR,

which seems to be the opinion of the majority of Western historians. However, current Russian leaders have refused to use the term “occupation”, preferring to talk about “annexation”. Thus, a book published in 2011 states that “the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia” is that “the term ‘occupation’ cannot be used to legally define the situation in the Baltic States between 1939 and 1940,” in particular because these countries had consented to the entry of Soviet troops into their territories.¹ Similarly, in April 2012, Vladimir Medinski, who was appointed Minister of Culture in Russia one month later, stated that there was no “occupation” in 1940 since there had not been a war.² However, by doggedly refusing to speak about an “occupation” by Stalin’s USSR, the current official position of Russia is to de facto defend the “right” of the stronger party, and that this right prevails over international law and the right of “small” nations to self-determination. A similar attitude is displayed in its interpretation of the Soviet purges.

The Soviet authorities used tremendous violence in order to silence its own people: first the red terror, then the crushing by force of the workers’ uprisings of 1918 and the peasant revolts in 1921, famines, arrests, deportations, summary executions, rigged trials, and purges. After Stalin’s death, the authorities became “vegetarian”, to use the phrase coined by poet Anna Akhmatova; since the general population had been muzzled, it was now possible to focus only on the dissidents who dared to openly denounce the problems in the USSR.

The Stalinist purges were briefly condemned under Khrushchev. When the issue was again raised under perestroika, free speech, which had so long been stifled, burst into life: who didn’t have a relative or friend who had been arrested, deported or shot? So a country sick of the violence it had suffered at the hands of the State and in which it had to a certain extent collaborated, tried to find healing in exploring its trauma and condemning the “right” of the strong. However, this flurry also evaporated very quickly. Then, a new direction was taken and the authorities no longer firmly condemn the Stalinist purges. This has been shown, on the one hand, by the recent attacks against Memorial, an association formed in 1989 which continuously explores the history of Soviet repression and, on the other hand, by certain history textbooks commissioned by the presidential authorities and supported by them.

1 Vladimir Simindej, “Tematika vtoroj mirovoj vojny v sovremennoj Lavtii”, in Natalija Naročnickaja (red.), *Politika protiv istorii*. Delo partizana Kononova, Moskva, “Veče”, 2011, p. 70.

2 “Doletajte do samogo Solnca”, *Čas*, 18 April 2012, p. 5.

Justifying violence exercised by the State

In 2007, a book for teachers was published in Russia: “Contemporary History of Russia 1945–2006”³. While it mentions the repressions, it does not go into detail and, most importantly, it gives them meaning, logic and justification: they were the only means of achieving a positive goal and responding to aggression. The impression given by this text is that Stalin was a great leader in the long-standing Russian tradition of using repression and a decision-making process entirely concentrated in the hands of the State. A textbook for schoolchildren soon followed, emphasising the effectiveness of the transformations achieved by Stalin.⁴ It does not seem to matter that, some tens of pages further along, it is stated that between 1949 and 1953, cereal crops and productivity were barely greater than in 1909–1913⁵

In autumn 2009, a new textbook written by the same team came out, dealing with the period from 1900 to 1945.⁶ Right from the contents page, one idea comes through: the 1930s were the years of “industrial modernisation”. Not of repression. The repressions are described quite fully, with, however, a reminder of Stalin’s catchphrase: “We are 50 to 100 years behind the avant-garde countries. We have to catch up in ten years. Either we will succeed or we will be smothered.” It was therefore necessary to encourage the people to make great efforts, which would have been “impossible without pressure from the authorities, and indeed repressions or the threat thereof”. The end therefore justified the means. The repressions initially targeted “those who openly rejected the decision for rapid industrialisation or who doubted whether this decision was correct”, and, later, party members who “did not agree with the policies applied, were not satisfied with Stalin himself and considered it vital to remove him from power”. Historically, this is false. However, for the authors of the textbook, these methods made it possible to modernise the army and navy and to achieve “enormous technical and economical changes”. Despite the fact that “many major sectors of the economy (...) and the regions of the North and Far East developed thanks to the use of forced labour”. The textbook does admit that “according to moral values shared by all people, deaths and broken lives of human beings cannot be justified”. However,

3 Alexander Filippov, *Novejšaja istorija Rossii 1945–2006 gg. Kniga dlja učitelja*, Moskva, “Prosvetešenie”, 2007, p. 494

4 Anatoly Utkin, Alexander Filippov, Sergei Alekseev i dr., pod red. A.A. Danilova i dr., *Istorija Rossii. 1945–2008. 11 klass*, Moskva, “Prosvetešenie”, 2009 (3rd edition), p. 368.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 81

6 Alexander Danilov, Alexander Barsenkov, Mixail Gorinov i dr., *Istorija Rossii. 1900–1945. 11 klass*, Moskva, “Prosvetešenie”, 2009, p. 447.

immediately afterwards, in a smaller font but in bold, it quotes Molotov: “We should be grateful for 1937, because we did not have a ‘fifth column’ during the war”. The idea therefore comes through that the repressions were awful but enabled victory over Nazi Germany, which again is historically false.

However, this justification of the purges provides a better understanding of the attitude of the Russian authorities in the Magnitsky affair, and this appears explicitly in the programme “Historical Process”, which was broadcast in Russia on 11 August 2011 and deals with two issues: first, the Stalinist repressions and second, the Magnitsky affair.⁷ The historian and journalist Nikolai Svanidze states that, from the beginning:

“In Russia, Stalinist practices have never been condemned, neither legally nor morally. What is not condemned is allowed. This is what became clear in the Magnitski affair.”

However, in response, the politician Sergey Kurginyan, greatly supported by the current authorities, asserts excessively and aggressively that too much attention is being paid to the Stalinist purges and that similar repressions have taken place elsewhere, notably in American prisons.

A feudal and post-modern power

The Soviet repressions had other consequences. As a result, millions of Russians were sent with criminals to camps during the 20th century. One only has to reread the “Recits de Kolyma” by Varlam Chalamov to understand that criminals only recognise the law of the strongest and that their influence on life in camps was “total and unlimited”. Alongside them a prisoner would learn “flattery, lies and greater and lesser cowardice” while the “chief [enjoyed] virtually unlimited power over the prisoners”.⁸ When the doors to the camps were flung open, “gang culture” – a culture where the life of a human being is worthless – infiltrated society. Was it a long time ago? Would everything be different? No.

A recent film by filmmaker Balabanov, “Jmourki (Blind Man’s Bluff)”, shows just how the Tarantino-style gangsters of the 1990s have, in the

7 Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnGi3kG2oMg>.

8 Varlam Chalamov, “Croix-Rouge” [Red Cross], *Récits de la Kolyma. Quai de l'enfer* [Stories from Kolyma, Platform to Hell], Le Livre de poche, pp. 98-101.

space of ten years, become respected leaders with positions in the State administration. This is not just in films and in the Far East of Russia, some people have noticed the same developments: “In the 1990s we called them “bandits”. Today, they are our leaders since these “bandits” have become mayors or governors. A witness stated: “Before, disputes were settled with weapons. Now, the FSB [Federal Security Service] and the state prosecutors take care of matters”. He was not trying to describe an evolution towards a state of law, but the continuation of certain types of domination and methods under different labels.⁹ The closeness between laws, businessmen, the police and representatives of the State is the norm.

In this respect as well, the concept of power is not the same in Russia and in the West. Journalist Daniel Vernet therefore argues that in the West, the State is a group of institutions that safeguards the exercise of rights, duties and freedoms. It is a neutral arbitrator, in charge of distinguishing the public interest from an environment of private interests. In Russia, on the other hand, and this was already the case prior to 1917, the State is an instrument of coercion to which its subjects owe reverence and submission.¹⁰ The Russian State does not, however, only punish. It also gives, and is often extremely generous towards those it considers to be “one of its own”. Historian Tamara Kondratieva thus demonstrates that the Bolsheviks re-established the practices of the 16th century: distributing food and privileges in proportion to the importance and quality of services rendered to the authority in power.¹¹ So this means that in today’s Russia, civil servants, just like in the 16th and 17th centuries,¹² have the right of “*kormit’sja ot del*” – “to feed off the animal” ... and sociologist Olga Kryshтанovskaya confirms that it is the authorities in power at various levels who authorise themselves to become rich and remain rich.¹³

President Putin claims that Russia is a democracy. No, it is not. Grigory Yavlinsky from the Yabloko party, quoted in the most recent book of Anna Politkovskaya, conceded that several parties are “officially” represented in the Duma, but he immediately adds that: “What we have is a pseudo-multiparty Parliament, pseudo-elections, pseudo-justice and pseudo-independent

⁹ *Libération*, 4 April 2007, pp. 34-35.

¹⁰ Daniel Vernet, “Le désordre règne à Moscou” [“Unrest reigns in Moscow”], *Le Monde*, 18 October 2006.

¹¹ Tamara Kondratieva, *Gouverner et nourrir [Governing and Providing Food]. “Du pouvoir en Russie” (XVI-XX^e siècles)* [Power in Russia (-16th-20th Centuries)] Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2002, p. 274.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58

¹³ Olga Kryshтанovskaya, *Anatomija rossijskoj èlity*, Moskva, Zaxarov, 2004, p. 291.

media...”.¹⁴ Boris Gryzlov, then President of the Duma, involuntarily agreed with him in 2007, when he highlighted the fact that the Duma – the Russian parliament – “is not the right place in which to talk politics...” Since then, the situation has only worsened.

“Feeding off the animal” (“*kormit’sja ot del*”)...

Does an individual have any rights in this post-Soviet, feudal and post-modern system? Written laws do grant such rights in theory, but this too is illusory, and to understand this it is sufficient to look at how Putin’s authorities de facto prohibit the right to demonstrate which is enshrined by the Constitution. It is also because the law is not a reliable support in Russia and that corruption – one of the ways of “feeding off the beast” – is so widespread. Of course this is not a recent phenomenon, but while it seemed to reach new heights under Yeltsin, it has increased even more under Putin. Between 2002 and 2005, according to a study by the World Bank, it increased by 50 percent in Russia, whereas in most other countries in the post-Soviet region it decreased, and it represents some hundreds of billions of dollars. In 2012, Russia was 133rd (out of 183 countries), in a list of “perceived levels of corruption in the public sector”, with the least corrupt country being in first place.¹⁵ In this list, it came 90th (out of 146 countries) in 2004¹⁶, and 82nd (out of 99 countries) in 1999.

This corruption – which can include embezzlement and theft – affects most of society. Those who benefit from it (and who are also victims of it), use their positions as civil servants, police officers, doctors, teachers – even gynaecologists, as Putin said in February 2008 – to acquire material benefits in secret. Today, these practices are even more widespread in the business world where money circulates widely. A book published in France quotes a commercial director who confided that he has to constantly “deal with extortion” by various bodies: “court authorities, traffic police, tax inspectors, health inspectors, the fire brigade,” but also “banks [and] all bodies in charge of issuing certificates and patents”.¹⁷ The head of Ikea Russia explained that his firm was “completely at the mercy of local chiefs”.¹⁸ Sometimes on rare occasions, some are arrested for having helped themselves to too much...

14 Anna Politkovskaya, *Douloureuse Russie. Journal d'une femme en colère* [Sad Russia, Diary of an Angry Woman], Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 2006, p. 41.

15 <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results/>

16 http://archive.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2004

17 Igor Kliamkin, Lev Timofeev, *La Russie de l'ombre* [The shady side of Russia], Paris, Presses de la Cité, 2003, p. 245.

18 *Libération*, 15 December 2004.

However, this does not discourage many people and, according to the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, many young Russians today still feel that being a civil servant “is a kind of property that may be converted into money”. “They are firmly convinced that within one or two years of entering into civil service, income from shady sources will remove all need to pay attention to their official salary...”¹⁹ The main point is to profit from your position.

And the Magnitsky affair?

In this context, the imprisonment and death of Sergei Magnitsky appear not as sad outcomes of unhappy circumstances but rather as revelatory of the whole system. Unfortunately, this is confirmed by the refusal of the Russian State to investigate the thefts and embezzlements that this lawyer denounced and which were committed by civil servants from the police force and tax authorities who were “feeding off the beast”. Moreover, according to World Economic Forum data, Russia is in 133rd place out of 144 countries for “the level of protection of private property”, the No. 1 rank being the country where property is most effectively protected.²⁰ And if de facto private ownership does not exist in Russia, this is because, again, the “right” of the strongest prevails. The strongest is he who, at a given level, has the most effective protection from the “keepers of order” and the local representatives of State authority.

Now, Russian society has been taken hostage by this system, despite the fact that it also participates in it. It is Russian society that is the victim of the abuses exercised by civil servants, that suffers from violations of the Constitution by the authorities, that cannot trust the courts, that does not benefit from schools, hospitals and roads which should be built with revenue from taxes. The ever-increasing number of demonstrations in Russia, particularly since December 2011, shows the desire of Russian society to change the rules of the game. Indeed, their slogans are very often centred on honesty: during the winter of 2011–2012, they sought honest and democratic elections, and a Facebook page providing information on the demonstration of 6 May 2013 calls for an “Honest Russia”.²¹ Now, many of these committed Russian citizens are confronting their past and asserting their refusal to relive “1937”, a summary and symbol of the worst repressions.

19 “Ne zarplatoj edinoj”, *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 1 August 2006.

20 *Telegraf* (Latvia), 13 March 2013, p. 11.

21 <https://www.facebook.com/events/561636243867605/>.

The Russian government, however, has only responded to these legitimate demands with physical violence and freedom-killing laws. A speaker at the London School of Economics on 1 May 2013, Vladislav Sourkov, the long-time “intellectual adviser” of Vladimir Putin, thus asserts with visible satisfaction that “the system has conquered the opposition” and is delighted that this system that he is part of has “at last shown its toughness, long-awaited toughness” against the “extremists”.²² Once again, this amounts to belief in the effectiveness of force, rejecting the dialogue and negotiation that an increasing share of the Russian population is calling for.

As a spectator, the European Union is faced again with a dilemma which is in no way new: should it support the Russian authorities, its gas and strength, or send a strong message of solidarity to Russian society? So, it is truly on the basis of values, and not on steel and coal, that Europe was built at the end of the Second World War after the assassination of millions of civilians. Can a system based on the total rejection of the repetition of Nazi camps, have an actual, constructive dialogue with another system that regards the Stalinist camps only as a price to be paid and a secondary phenomenon? Can Europe not clearly reassert the ethical standards that are its own and that it shares with millions of Russians? Since it is itself undergoing a crisis of confidence among certain social groups about its economic, bureaucratic and even political decisions, is this not all the more reason to act? Is this not the moment for it to recall and defend the original project: unambiguously defending the rights and individuals and societies?

This article began with a detour through Latvia. Let us finish with another “detour” which, curiously, leads us back to the first one. In April 2013, Alexander Dugin, the official disseminator of Eurasian ideology which is very fashionable in Russian power circles, claims that he has at last found a national idea for Russia. Not to build roads, hospitals and schools. Not to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. No – to take over Europe and make it a Russian protectorate!²³ This is not a joke and not just provocation... it is the reassertion of the “right” of the strongest. While we wait for a reaction.

²² <http://m.newsru.com/russia/02may2013/surkoff.html>.

²³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDV57Mwsayk>.