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Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and What Did It Achieve? A Reassessment

PÅL KOLSTØ

IN April/May 2009, three important initiatives were taken in Moscow to control public presentation of Russian history: two bills were prepared for the Duma that would criminalize 'the rehabilitation of Nazism'; shortly afterwards, President Dmitrii Medvedev established a new commission, mandated to 'counteract attempts to falsify history to the detriment of the interests of Russia'. Its main tasks would be to 'summarize and analyse information about falsifications of historical facts and events that are intended to belittle the international prestige of the Russian Federation'. The Presidential Commission was to meet no less than twice a year; it should prepare reports to the President and coordinate the activities of state organs at the federal and regional levels, and also make recommendations about suitable reactions to attempts at such falsification.¹

In this article I examine why President Medvedev felt it necessary to establish such a commission, how it was composed and functioned, and what it achieved. While the Duma bills and the commission have usually been treated as three initiatives that pulled in the same direction, I argue that the Duma bills, on the one hand, and the Presidential Commission, on the other, were fundamentally at odds with each other. In my interpretation, the commission was intended not to promote but to *obstruct* the passing of the new law.

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¹ See 'Prezident prosledit, chtoby istoriia ne obidela Rossiui', *Polit.ru*, 19 May 2009. See <<http://www.polit.ru/article/2009/05/19/komissia/>> for the full text of the decree [accessed 27 February 2019].

The politics of history writing before Medvedev

In the Soviet Union, history writing was kept under tight political control. This was most flagrantly the case during Stalin's rule, when *The History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks) Short course* (1938) acquired status as a catechism. Everyone, from leading party members to school children, had to memorize large sections of this text. Also after the death of Stalin, there were tight restrictions on what could be written about, and how. Therefore, when perestroika brought the chance for greater intellectual freedom, a deluge of historical reinterpretations of controversial events in Soviet history emerged. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev himself opened up the floodgates by declaring that there were numerous blank spots (*belye piatna*) in Soviet history that would have to be filled.² Historians avidly took up the challenge, even moving the limits of the permissible far beyond what Gorbachev had envisaged.³

The El'tsin era marked a heyday for academic freedom and historical research in Russia. Archives were opened; diversity in viewpoints was tolerated.⁴ Many competing history textbooks were produced, and schools were free to choose whichever they preferred. Later, however, during Putin's two first presidencies, attempts were made to rein in what was increasingly seen as an intolerably anarchic situation, and to present a more sanitized, cohesive and less self-critical version of the past. In 2007–08, a new series of history textbooks appeared, edited by Alexander Filippov and Alexander Danilov.⁵ Filippov's *A Teacher's Guide* acquired particular notoriety for its whitewashing of the Stalin regime. According to Kristian Gjerde, 'it is beyond dispute that the textbooks were the result of a political order', even if the Kremlin did not admit to its central role in their preparation.⁶ Commentators have pointed out that *A Teacher's Guide* was printed in no less than 250,000 copies, and no publisher would take the risk of producing so many copies without prior assurances from the authorities

² *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 22 June 1988; R. W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution*, Basingstoke, 1989, pp. 130–31.

³ Pål Kolstø, *På vei mot av-leninisering? Sovjetisk historierevisjon under Gorbatsjov. Forsvarsstudier*, Oslo, 1989, p. 4.

⁴ Aleksei Miller, 'Politika pamiati v Rossii: god razrushennykh nadezhd', *Politika*, 75, 2014, 4, pp. 49–57.

⁵ David Brandenburger, 'A New Short Course? A. V. Filippov and the Russian State's Search for a "Usable Past"', *Kritika*, 10, 2009, 4, pp. 825–33; Kristian Gjerde, 'The Use of History in Russia 2000–2011: The Kremlin and the Search for Consensus', *East European Politics*, 31, 2015, 2, pp. 149–69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

that good sales were basically guaranteed.⁷ Some feared that a new kind of *Short Course* was in the offing.⁸

The same year as Filippov and Danilov's textbooks were published, a serious conflict broke out between Russia and Estonia over the interpretation of crucial events in the Second World War. In April 2007, the Estonian authorities decided to move the Soviet-era monument marking 'the liberation of Tallinn' from its downtown location to a military graveyard on the outskirts of the Estonian capital. The decision unleashed violent protests from Russian youth — both locals and activists coming in from Russia — during which one young Russian was killed. Most Estonians reject the Soviet narrative that their country was 'liberated' by the Red Army: quite the contrary, they regard its 1944 re-entry in the wake of the German withdrawal as a new occupation. However, Russians in both Estonia and Russia saw the removal of the statue as an insult to Russian national dignity and an attempt to brand the Russian population in Estonia as 'occupiers'.⁹ President Putin regarded the behaviour of the Estonian authorities as 'an attempt to revise the past'.¹⁰

Medvedev takes over in the Kremlin

When Medvedev assumed the presidency in 2008, he inherited a tradition of politicized history writing. In his decree establishing the history commission the next year, there was no indication as to what attempts to falsify parts of Russian and Soviet history were being made most often, or most gravely. However, circumstances suggested that the main underlying objective was to preserve the sacred memory of Soviet victory in the Second World War — the Great Patriotic War, as the Soviet involvement in this war is known in Russia.¹¹ The fact that it was promulgated on 15 May, less than one week after the Victory Day celebrations on 9 May, was hardly fortuitous. On the eve of Victory Day, Medvedev had asserted in his video blog: 'we increasingly often come up against what are now called historical

⁷ Johannes Due Enstad, 'Putinistisk historiepolitikk: Oppussing av fortiden i Putins Russland', *Nordisk Østforum*, 25, 2011, 4, pp. 321–44.

⁸ Brandenburger, 'A New *Short Course*'.

⁹ Karsten Brüggemann, and Andres Kasekamp, 'The Politics of History and the "War of Monuments" in Estonia', *Nationalities Papers*, 36, 2008, 3, pp. 425–48.

¹⁰ 'Putin dal sovet Anglii', *Vzgliad*, 25 July 2007 <<https://vz.ru/politics/2007/7/25/96480.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹¹ On the cult of the victory in the Second World War in Russia, see Pål Kolstø, 'Symbol of the War — But Which One? The St George Ribbon in Russian Nation-Building', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 94, 2016, 4, pp. 660–701.

falsifications.' Further, he noted, such attempts were becoming 'more cruel, evil, and aggressive'.¹²

In February 2009, three months before Medvedev's decree was published, the Russian Minister of Emergency Situations, Sergei Shoigu, in a meeting with war veterans in Volgograd had proposed that it should be made a criminal offence to deny the victory of the USSR in the Second World War.¹³ The minister's proposal was severely criticized and also ridiculed by independent politicians as well as by scholars. Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov declared that the Russian Penal Code was already so confused and overloaded that there was no need to add any purely ideological articles to it. Historians might evaluate the relative contribution of various countries to this common victory differently — but that was a matter for academic disputes and symposia, and not for procurators, Ryzhkov maintained.¹⁴ Other commentators pointed out that denying the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War would not only be counterfactual but ludicrous: in fact, no sane person had ever made such a claim.¹⁵ Treatment of such ideas belonged to psychiatry rather than to jurisprudence.¹⁶

However, Shoigu was supported by Iurii Chaika, the powerful Russian Prosecutor General, and also by the Public Chamber, the quasi-parliament established at Putin's behest in 2005. A Chamber spokesperson declared that they were prepared to take an active role in the preparation of such a new law.¹⁷ Two legal initiatives were then taken by Duma members from the pro-Putin United Russia Party — one on 20 April 2009, on drafting a new law to penalize 'rehabilitation of Nazism'; the other two weeks later, on 6 May 2009, on introducing new paragraphs in the Russian Penal Code, stipulating punishments for such offences.¹⁸

The two laws have been interpreted as rival and as parallel initiatives. While both were presented by members of the United Russia Party, the

¹² 'Medvedev obratilsia k internet-soobshchestvu', *NTV*, 8 May 2009 <<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/159991/>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹³ Sergei Gruzdev, 'Shoigu: Za otritsanie pobedy SSSR nado sazhat', *Grani*, 24 February 2009 <<http://graniru.org/Politics/Russia/m.147907.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹⁴ Gruzdev, 'Shoigu: Za otritsanie'; Il'ia Mil'shtein, 'Otritsatelei zasudiat', *Grani*, 26 February 2009 <<https://grani-ru-org.appspot.com/Politics/Russia/m.147989.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹⁵ 'Medvedev reshil borot'sia "fal'sifikatsiei istorii"', *BBC*, 19 May 2009 <http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2009/05/090519_medvedev_history.shtml> [accessed 2 March 2019].

¹⁶ Sof'ia Bolotina, 'Duraki zakony pishut', *Grani*, 26 February 2009 <<http://graniru.org/Politics/Russia/m.148002.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹⁷ 'Chaika: Za otritsanie pobedy SSSR v VOV nado sazhat', *Grani*, 25 February 2009 <<https://grani-ru-org.appspot.com/Politics/Russia/m.147964.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

¹⁸ Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 259–75.

main architect of the first bill, Konstantin Zatulin, Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee on the Affairs of the Commonwealth of Independent States, was a hard-hitting nationalist with a special focus on what he perceived as anti-Russian politics in the states of the former Soviet Union. The purview of his draft law was limited to Russia's 'near abroad': revisionist history writing and glorification of Nazism elsewhere was of no concern to Russian lawmakers. Zatulin mentioned Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia as being among the states in focus.¹⁹ The most concrete proposal in his bill concerned the establishment of a 'civil tribunal' — one third of its membership to be appointed by the President, one third by the Duma and one third by the Public Chamber. This tribunal should monitor instances of rehabilitation of Nazism in the 'near abroad' and introduce programmes to combat them.²⁰ The bill did not contain any provisions for the criminal prosecution of perpetrators, but such provisions were included in the second bill. It stipulated fines of up to 300,000 rubles or three years' imprisonment for such crimes.²¹ If passed, the law could make it highly perilous for heads of certain states to travel to Russia.²²

We can only speculate as to why the United Russia Party decided to present not one but two bills in rapid succession. Nikolay Kopusov has indicated that the two initiatives might have been coordinated, but also that the second bill was intended to 'steal the thunder' from the first: the Russian authorities, he surmises, strongly disliked the idea of a civil tribunal, 'a political body that would not be entirely under their control and could include radical nationalists whom they did not want to benefit from the position of leaders of a patriotic campaign'.²³ That may explain why this law was never put to the vote in the Duma.

¹⁹ 'Medvedev reshil'.

²⁰ The full text of the draft law was published in *Regnum*, 'PROEKT: Federal'nyi zakon "O protivodeistvii reabilitatsii v novykh nezavisimykh gosudarstvakh na territorii byvshego Soiuza SSR natsizma, natsistskikh prestupnikov i ikh posobnikov"', *Regnum*, 20 April 2009 <<https://regnum.ru/news17.html>>. For a thorough analysis, see Kopusov, *Memory Laws*, pp. 259–75.

²¹ 'Medvedev reshil'.

²² Adrian Blomfield, 'Russia threatens to bar Europeans who deny Red Army "liberated" them', *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2009 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/5350777/Russia-threatens-to-bar-Europeans-who-deny-Red-Army-liberated-them.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019]; Isabelle de Keghel and Aleksandr Kaplunovskii, 'Na puti k "predskazuemomu" proshlomu? Kommentarii k sozdaniiu Komissii po protivodeistviu popytкам fal'sifikatsii istorii v Rossii', *Ab Imperio*, 3, 2009, pp. 365–87 (pp. 367–68).

²³ Kopusov, *Memory Laws*, pp. 266–67. The initial plan might also have been to adopt two laws: a long one containing definitions of relevant concepts and a shorter law modifying the Penal Code.

The initiative group behind 'the Zatulin bill' consisted largely of persons who did not belong to the 'inner core' of the United Russia Party, but among the signatories of the second bill could be found some of the party's most influential leaders.²⁴ Thus, this law proposal had solid political backing, and was expected to sail through the Duma in record time. A member of the initiative group, Boris Gryzlov, who was also Speaker of the State Duma and Chairman of the United Russia Party, had previously maintained that introducing such a law would have maximum effect if it were adopted prior to the Victory Day celebrations on 9 May.²⁵

This bill was submitted to the Duma on 6 May, with a first reading slated for 3 June 2009.²⁶ However, the bill never came up for debate. It is harder to explain why this bill was killed than with the case of the first one. Aleksei Miller argues that it 'got stuck at various stages of the legislative process',²⁷ without explaining how or why that happened. Nikolay Kuposov offers several tentative reasons for the failure of the second bill. Firstly, public opinion on the issue was divided — but that cannot have been decisive, as popular attitudes had been shown to be clearly in favour of the bill. According to an opinion poll reported by the BBC Russian Service, 60 per cent of the Russian population supported the idea of making denial of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War a criminal offence, while only 26 per cent were opposed.²⁸ Secondly, the bill was met by sharp reactions from the democratic opposition in Russia as well as by professional historians, both domestically and abroad. The American Historical Association and a group of Italian historians sent official protests to President Medvedev. And finally, the Russian government rejected the draft law on the grounds that its wording was imprecise. However, as Kuposov himself admits, 'neither the public protests nor the government's negative response can in itself explain the failure of the United Russia bill'.²⁹ We must look for additional explanations.

²⁴ Svetlana Samoiloa, 'Ushcherb istorii', *Politcom*, 25 May 2009 <<http://politcom.ru/8205.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019]. The draft bill was signed by Viacheslav Volodin, Boris Gryzlov, Andrei Vorob'ev, Nikolai Kovalev, Pavel Krashennnikov, Oleg Morozov, Vladimir Pekhtin, Vladimir Pligin, Irina Iarovaia and Valerii Riazanskii.

²⁵ 'Vvedenie ugolovnoi otvetstvennosti za otritsanie Pobedy nakanune 9 maia dast maksimal'nyi effekt – Gryzlov', *Regnum*, 10 March 2009 <<https://regnum.ru/news/1135030.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

²⁶ Pavel Felgengauer, 'Medvedev Forms a Commission to Protect Russian History', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6, 2009, 98 <<https://jamestown.org/program/medvedev-forms-a-commission-to-protect-russian-history/>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

²⁷ Miller, 'Politika', p. 54.

²⁸ 'Medvedev reshil'.

²⁹ Kuposov, *Memory Laws*, pp. 269–71.

Widely diverging assessments of the commission

What we do know is that Dmitrii Medvedev established the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History on 15 May, only nine days after the United Russia bill had been submitted to the Duma. The President's initiative has been widely regarded as a follow-up on Shoigu's suggestion.³⁰ A commentary on the BBC Russian service opined, 'Medvedev's decree complements the initiative of the Duma members';³¹ Ivan Kurilla has maintained that the bill was withdrawn because President Medvedev's commission had made it 'obsolete'.³² However, the mandate of the Presidential Commission contained nothing about preparing any new legislation, so it is not clear how the commission could replace the bill or in any way make it redundant. I propose an alternative interpretation which appears possible and indeed more plausible: The establishment of the history commission may be seen as an attempt to *forestall* legislation that had the potential of harming Russia's 'international prestige' more than any historical falsifications could.

If the commission was not intended to deal with legal issues, then just how did it see its work? According to its chairman — none other than Medvedev's Chief of Staff, Sergei Naryshkin — it should first and foremost facilitate the work of Russian historians: 'The commission shall of course not be any kind of supervisory organ and not force them to draw any time-serving conclusions from their research.'³³ Another member of the commission, political analyst and Kremlin loyalist Sergei Markov, explained that the main task of the commission was to 'create conditions for historians, including material conditions, which will make it possible for them to work normally, and interpret history truthfully'.³⁴

To professional Russian historians, this sounded quite encouraging. On 21 May, the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) drew the conclusion

³⁰ See, for instance, Mikhail Moshkin, 'Kto staroe pomianet: Prezident Medvedev prinial istoricheskoe reshenie', *Vremia novostei*, 20 May 2009 <<http://www.vremya.ru/print/229467.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019]; Blomfield, 'Russia Threatens'.

³¹ 'Medvedev reshil'.

³² Ivan Kurilla, 'The implications of Russia's law against the rehabilitation of Nazism', *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo 331, August 2014, p. 1 <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm331_Kurilla_August2014_o.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2019].

³³ 'Naryshkin: istoricheskaiia komissiiia ne budet prinuzhdat' istorikov', *Gazeta.ru*, 31 May 2009 <https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2009/05/31/n_1367492.shtml> [accessed 27 February 2019].

³⁴ 'SMI: komissiiia po bor'be s fal'sifikatsiei istorii sama mozhet prevratit'sia v instrument fal'sifikatsii', *LiveJournal*, 21 May 2009 <<https://kamen-jahr.livejournal.com/185852.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

that the task of the commission was to 'depoliticize historical research'.³⁵ However, commentators in Russia and abroad took a more sceptical view of the commission and its mandate. Russian veteran dissident and historian Roy Medvedev dismissed the decree as a 'fatuous bureaucratic paper', seeing the commission as 'unnecessary and even harmful' to the development of historical science and for the popularization of its achievements.³⁶ A group of no less than 224 members of the Russian intelligentsia published a collective protest against both the presidential commission and the Duma bill. They were concerned that these might lead to a witch hunt against Russian citizens as well as foreigners.³⁷

Several commentators asked why the commission should be concerned only with falsifications that were 'detrimental' to the interests of Russia. 'Does that mean that it shall not interfere with falsifications that are "favourable" [to Russia]?'³⁸ The business newspaper *Kommersant* interviewed a journalist who maintained that:

judging by the name of the commission, falsification of history in the interests [of the country] is acceptable, and — knowing the opinions of some of the members of the commission — even necessary. So okay, they will once again prove that our attacking Finland in 1939 was the right thing. And the Balts' voluntary entrance into the USSR as well as the socialization of Eastern Europe were necessitated by historical circumstances [*velenie vremeni*].³⁹

American historian Nanci Adler's reading of the impetus behind the commission was the exact opposite of RAS's: instead of being an attempt to depoliticize history in Russia, it was intended to politicize it.⁴⁰ This understanding was shared by Lithuanian historian Stanislovas Stasiulis, who indicated that, rather than combating the falsification of history, the commission might well end up not only abetting but even promoting such

³⁵ 'Eksperty: u komissii po protivodeistviu fal'sifikatsii istorii budet mnogo raboty', *Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk*, 21 May 2009 <http://www.ras.ru/news/shownews.aspx?id=92ec0991-e540-4b2d-8554-9ccbf6d8eb7&_Language=ru> [accessed 19 March 2019].

³⁶ 'Istoriia vse sterpit?', *Kommersant*, 20 May 2009 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1172794>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

³⁷ "'V demokraticheskom obshchestve svoboda istorii – eto svoboda vsekh'", *Polit.ru*, 1 June 2009 <<http://polit.ru/article/2009/06/01/let/>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

³⁸ 'Posledniaia instantsiia: Dmitrii Medvedev sozdal komissiu po bor'be s fal'sifikatsiei istorii', *Lenta.ru*, 20 May, 2009 <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2009/05/20/war1/>> [accessed 27 February 2019]; de Keghel and Kaplunovskii, 'Na puti', pp. 367–68.

³⁹ 'Istoriia vse sterpit?'.

⁴⁰ Nanci Adler, 'Reconciliation with — or Rehabilitation of — the Soviet Past?', *Memory Studies*, 5, 2012, 3, pp. 327–38 (p. 335).

falsifications.⁴¹ Stasiulis pointed out, inter alia, that Col. Sergei Kovalev, a historian at the Russian Institute of Military History, had recently published an article on the website of the Russian Ministry of Defence in which he blamed *Poland* for having caused the outbreak of the Second World War. In his article, Kovalev reminded readers that before invading Poland, Hitler had demanded some territorial concessions from that country, including the city of Danzig and the Polish Corridor. In Kovalev's view, these demands 'could hardly be regarded as groundless', and if Poland had accepted them, the tragedy of the war could have been averted. Some commentators wondered whether this kind of highly dubious history writing would fall within the purview of the commission.⁴² Given the imprimatur of Russian officialdom, texts such as Kovalev's article might arguably do more harm to Russia's international prestige than any deliberate attempts to denigrate the Soviet war effort.

British historian Robert Service, the author of a highly acclaimed biography of Stalin, told the BBC Russian Service that in his view the establishment of the history commission showed that 'President Medvedev, following in the footsteps of his predecessor Vladimir Putin, wants to control history. He wants to control the past in order to control the present. This is the classical scenario of George Orwell'.⁴³ Service, then, characterized both the current and the previous Russian presidents as leaders with totalitarian aspirations. This was a harsh judgment indeed — and, as it was pronounced in July 2009, only two months after the history commission was established, we can at least conclude that Service was not willing to give Medvedev the benefit of the doubt.

Norwegian historian Johannes Due Enstad sees the use of the word 'falsification' in the title of the commission as 'reflecting the fact that Russian political culture still carries a burden of Soviet and Stalinist thinking and perception patterns'.⁴⁴ German historian Isabelle de Keghel has pointed out that the word 'falsification' was reminiscent of the formula of 'bourgeois falsifications of history' employed by Soviet historians until

⁴¹ Stanislovas Stasiulis, 'Rossiia ozabotilas' fal'sifikatsiei istorii', *Ru.Delfi*, 20 July 2009 <<http://ru.delfi.lt/opinions/comments/rossiya-ozabotilas-falsifikaciej-istorii.d?id=23186872>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁴² Stasiulis, 'Rossiia ozabotilas'; 'OSCE: Soviet Union "As Guilty as the Nazis for World War II"', *Politics Forum*, 26 July 2009 <<http://www.politicsforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=108312>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁴³ James Rogers, 'Kak Rossiia boretsia s "fal'sifikatsiei istorii"', *BBC*, 24 July 2009 <http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2009/07/090724_russia_history.shtml?print=1> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁴⁴ Enstad, 'Putinistisk historiepolitikk', p. 332.

perestroika: 'It is clear that the authors of the decree do not recognize the constructivist concept of historiography since it implicitly talks about "correct" and "false" interpretations of history.'⁴⁵

A member of the committee, Aleksandr Chubarian, Director of the Institute for World History, claims that he raised objections to the concept of 'falsification', and proposed that the commission should instead be called the 'Commission on Complicated [*slozhnykh*] Issues in Russian History'.⁴⁶ That, however, was not to be.

Who were 'the commissioners'?

A total of twenty-eight members were appointed to the history commission.⁴⁷ The chairman, as noted, was Medvedev's Chief of Staff, Sergei Naryshkin, a highly influential politician with a background in the KGB; his appointment seemed to signal that the commission would have strong political clout. Most of the other members were officials recruited from various ministries and directorates, such as the ministries of education and culture, the Russian archival administration, the directorates for youth policy, for media policy, and similar. Liberal commentators were particularly concerned about the fact that the Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Isaak Kalina, had been appointed Deputy Chairman of the new commission. Kalina was remembered as an active supporter of the campaign to get Aleksandr Filippov's notorious textbooks — with their undisguised praise of Joseph Stalin — introduced in Russian schools two years earlier.⁴⁸ The appointment of Ivan Demidov as Commission Secretary was also highly provocative. Demidov came from the presidential administration's Department for Domestic Policies and had in the past been one of the leaders of the 'Young Guard' (Molodaia Gvardiia), an unruly youth organization affiliated with the United Russia Party. Demidov's appointment proved so controversial that he was removed from his position as Commission Secretary in March the following year and demoted to regular membership.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ de Keghel and Kaplunovskii, 'Na puti', p. 370.

⁴⁶ Interview with the author, 28 February 2019.

⁴⁷ For the full roll-call see 'Prezident prosledit'.

⁴⁸ Aleksei Levchenko, 'Komissii pravdy: Medvedev sozdal komissiiu po bor'be s fal'sifikatsiiami v istorii', *Gazeta.ru*, 19 May 2009 <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2009/05/19_a_2988155.shtml?incut2> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁴⁹ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22 ianvaria 2010 goda No. 97: 'O vnesenii izmenenii v sostav Komissii pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii po protivodeistviu popytkam fal'sifikatsii istorii v usherb interesam Rossii, utverzhdennyi Ukazom Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 15 maia 2009 g. N 549', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 30 March 2010 <<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/30520>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

The FSB, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the General Staff were also represented by top leaders. Military analyst Pavel Felgengauer found this particularly worrisome, and conjectured that among the tasks of the commission, preparing the ground for military action such as the August 2008 war against Georgia was ‘not excluded’⁵⁰

Surprisingly few members of the committee were professional historians — only four or five altogether. Aleksandr Chubarian, Director of the RAS Institute for General History, and Andrei Sakharov, Director of the Institute of Russian History at RAS, seem to have been included more for their administrative backgrounds than for any specific scholarly expertise. The low number of historians in the commission clearly showed that it was not intended to act as an umpire in any new *Historikerstreit*. This was also how the members themselves saw the commission. Chubarian explained that it ‘has no pretensions [to act] as a scholarly institution’ and will ‘deal with the process of coordinating [the work of historians]’ only.⁵¹

Some commission members held degrees in history but had long since abandoned research in favour of political careers. This was the case with both Natalia Narochnitskaia and Konstantin Zatulin. Former Duma member Narochnitskaia was now the president of a history think tank-cum-lobby group and had a reputation as a fierce pro-Kremlin nationalist. Zatulin, as noted, was the main author of the draft law to counteract rehabilitation of Nazism in the ‘near abroad’, and seemed to have joined the commission in order to gain an additional platform for promoting his foreign policy ideas.⁵² To the newspaper *Gazeta.ru* Zatulin stated that the commission ought to take up such issues as the glorification of ‘banderovites’ — admirers of Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian nationalist leader who had collaborated briefly with the Nazi Germans during the Second World War. In Zatulin’s view, it was not enough for Russia to counter perceived slanderous presentations of the USSR ‘with enlightenment measures’ only: he apparently wanted the commission to back up his legal initiative in the Duma.⁵³ However, any such hopes were dashed. The commission did not elaborate any legal initiatives of its own — as noted, that was not part of its mandate — and it did not help Zatulin to get his proposed bill to the Duma off the ground.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Felgengauer, ‘Medvedev Forms’.

⁵¹ ‘Istoriia vse sterpit?’.

⁵² Pavel Polian claims that Zatulin was in fact the initiator behind the Commission, but this is pure speculation. See Polian, ‘For Whom Did the Tsar Bell Toll?’, *Russian Social Science Review*, 52, 3, pp. 55–70 (p. 60).

⁵³ Levchenko, ‘Komissiiia pravdy’.

⁵⁴ Zatulin himself, however, in his annual report on his activities in 2009 maintained

Relatively little is known about the work of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History. Even if it was supposed to meet twice a year, there may have been only two meetings altogether. Aleksandr Chubarian remembers the number of meetings as two or three.⁵⁵ In any case, as far as I can see, minutes have been published only from two meetings.⁵⁶ Naryshkin opened the first session by emphasizing that 'the aim of the commission is not to rewrite history, and we will not function as an organ of censorship or supervision. We proceed first and foremost from the principle of freedom for the historical sciences'.⁵⁷

Commission members produced an impressive, albeit somewhat haphazard, catalogue of possible measures to counteract falsifications of history. Some suggested history conferences together with scholars from other countries and establishing prize competitions for young scholars; other ideas included posting history programmes on YouTube; raising the qualifications of history teachers in schools; creating a collection of video documentaries containing testimonies of participants in and eyewitnesses from the Great Patriotic War; improving the use of libraries, book publishing, mass media and cinema to promote knowledge about the war, and so on. Very little information is available about how the various suggestions were followed up, if at all. Indeed, discussions on how to implement any programme for preventing falsification of history were conspicuous by their absence.

Summing up the work of the commission, Andrei Sakharov indirectly admitted that in their deliberations members had strayed off in many directions and somehow lost focus: 'We started by talking about falsification of history to the detriment of the interests of Russia, but virtually our entire discussion has been devoted to something else, namely how to relate to the history of Russia in general.'⁵⁸

that his draft law was sent to the presidential administration, and 'is currently being coordinated' (*nakhoditsia na soglasovanii*) with the commission against falsification of history. 'O rabote deputata Gosudarstvennoi Dumy Rossii K.F. Zatulina v 2009 godu', 30 December 2009 <<https://zatulin.ru/o-rabote-deputata-gosudarstvennoj-dumy-rossii-k-f-zatulina-v-2009-godu/>> [accessed 2 March 2019].

⁵⁵ Interview with the author, 28 February 2019.

⁵⁶ 'Stenogramma zasedanii Komissii pri prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii po protivodeistviu popytkam falsifikatsii istorii v ushcherb interesam Rossii', 2010 <<http://histrf.ru/biblioteka/great-victory/great-victory-book/xiii-za-chiestnuiu-istoriiu>> [accessed 17 September 2017]. This document is no longer accessible on the internet, but a copy of it is in the author's possession.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Significantly, the promotion of any legal initiatives was absent from their debates. Instead, commission member V. G. Titov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, gave an overview of legal provisions in other countries that regulated and restricted presentations of history in the public sphere. For example, Titov explained, the Penal Code in the Turkish Republic specifies prison sentences of up to several years for defamation of the country. Furthermore, Germany, Austria, France and Italy all have legislation that stipulates legal responsibility for Holocaust denial and propaganda of Nazi ideology. 'In most cases', Titov added, however, 'these laws have a declarative character and have rarely led to convictions'.⁵⁹ Apparently, he did not regard legal measures as an effective means to combat historical falsifications.

In particular, Titov dwelt on how politicians in the United States habitually interfere with history writing. In the USA, he reported,

practically all organs of the executive powers are engaged in such activities. A noticeable role is played also by Congress, which often establishes special commissions to study specific historical circumstances and pronounce verdicts on them. A well-known example of this is the commission in the 1980s in the United States which studied the question of the Holodomor [the 1932–33 famine] in Ukraine.⁶⁰

Titov's choice of examples indicates that he felt Russia should not adopt this practice.

In any case, Medvedev's history commission was dissolved by a new presidential decree on 14 February 2012, a few weeks before the presidential elections that year. I have not come across any information about why its work was discontinued so quickly, but this was a time when Moscow was experiencing massive anti-regime demonstrations, with tens of thousands of angry people protesting against election fraud during the parliamentary elections in December the previous year.⁶¹ In response to these demonstrators Medvedev gave certain political concessions; and the dissolution of the history commission could arguably be seen as such, even if the demonstrators had not demanded it. That, however, must remain pure speculation. Another, probably more accurate, theory is that the commission was dissolved because its chairman, Sergei Naryshkin, had left

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See, for example, Mischa Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin's Russia*, Cambridge, 2017; Pål Kolstø, 'Marriage of Convenience? Collaboration between Nationalists and Liberals in the Russian Opposition, 2011–2012', *Russian Review*, 75, 2016, 3, pp. 645–63.

the presidential administration in order to take up a new position as Speaker of the State Duma.⁶² At any rate, we can conclude that the commission failed to function as a permanent watchdog for monitoring history writing in Russia and abroad, even if some of its members had argued for such an institutional system.⁶³

Commenting on the dissolution of the commission, Aleksandr Chubarian averred that it had 'achieved certain successes' and had 'completed its task'.⁶⁴ In an interview with this author, Chubarian focused on better access to historical archives by giving broader authority to the declassification commissions — something which he claims was achieved as a result of the work of the presidential commission.⁶⁵ Another commission member, Konstantin Zatulin, insisted that at the initiative of the commission several important documents had been published, elucidating among other things issues concerning the First and Second World Wars.⁶⁶ However, a third member, Nikolai Svanidze, gave a withering assessment: he claimed that the commission had consisted of people with such disparate views on how to relate to Russian history that if for no other reason it 'did not and could not have achieved anything'.⁶⁷

The history commission — instrument for falsification, or harbinger of a liberal thaw?

Writing in 2011, the Russian historian Aleksei Miller maintained that Medvedev's history commission represented 'the culmination of a historical policy that had gained momentum since 2003'.⁶⁸ It was in 2003 that Putin,

⁶² Roman Dobrokhoto, 'Kreml' prekratil bor'bu s fal'sifikatsiiami', *Republic*, 21 March 2012 <<https://republic.ru/posts/21636>> [accessed 4 March 2019].

⁶³ 'Stenogramma zasedanii', p. 27.

⁶⁴ 'Istoriia ne terpit soslagatel'nogo nakloneniia. 5 let Komissii po protivodeistviu fal'sifikatsii istorii', *Rosinformbiuro*, 19 May 2014 <<http://www.rosinform.ru/society/512524-istoriya-ne-terpit-soslagatel'nogo-nakloneniya-5-let-komissii-po-protivodeystviyu-falsifikatsii-istorii/>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁶⁵ Interview 28 February 2019. In another interview given immediately after the establishment of the Commission, Chubarian expressed himself differently. He had explained that the commission would 'analyse information in the mass media and in the historical literature where there are attempts to denigrate the international prestige of Russia. Among its tasks is also to elaborate ways and means to report real historical facts as well as to counteract interpretations of these facts in a politicizing spirit'. Elena Novoselova, 'Pravda o voine i mire: Kak gosudarstvo sobiraetsia borot'sia s fal'sifikatsiei istorii', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 20 May, 2009 <<https://rg.ru/2009/05/20/komissia.html>> [accessed 1 March 2019].

⁶⁶ Dobrokhoto, 'Kreml'.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Aleksei Miller, 'The Labyrinths of Historical Policy', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 June

in a meeting with historians at the Rumiantsev Library in Moscow, had warned that even if Soviet-era one-party control over history writing should be condemned, it was important not to end up on the other extreme: history books should not become platforms for new political and ideological struggles. While textbooks should present the historical facts, they should also 'educate young people in a spirit of pride in their country and her history'.⁶⁹ This meeting has been seen as a turning point in recent Russian history policy, away from *laissez-faire* attitudes under El'tsin, and towards stricter political control.⁷⁰

Aleksei Miller has characterized Medvedev's presidency, in contrast to the Putin era, as a period of new and somewhat mixed political signals.⁷¹ And indeed, the years 2009–12 did provide, surprisingly, many anti-authoritarian and self-critical utterances. On 30 October 2009, a few months after the history commission was established, Medvedev posted a video on his weblog with scathing criticism of Stalin and his regime of terror in the 1930s. In Russia, 30 October is the Remembrance Day of Victims of Political Repression, and the Russian President did not beat about the bush: 'Millions of people died as a result of terror and false accusations — millions. They were deprived of all rights, even the right to a decent human burial; for years their names were simply erased from history.'⁷² It was impossible to imagine the scale of terror which affected all the peoples of the country, Medvedev maintained. In contrast to Nikita Khrushchev, who in his major de-Stalinization speech in 1956 never deplored the forced collectivization of the peasants or the suffering they endured, the Russian president also denounced de-kulakization and explicitly rejected the claims put forward by some Russians that 'those innumerable victims were justified by some higher national purpose':

We pay a great deal of attention to the fight against the revisionist falsification of our history. Yet somehow I often feel that we are merely talking about falsification of the events of the Great Patriotic War. But it is

2011 <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Labyrinths-of-Historical-Policy-15240>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁶⁹ 'Putin protiv istorii', *Gazeta.ru*, 19 May 2009 <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2009/05/19_a_2988155.shtml?p=incut&number=1> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁷⁰ Miller, 'The Labyrinths'.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Dmitrii Medvedev, 'Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of Victories', 30 October 2009 <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48491>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

equally important not to sanction, under the guise of restoring historical justice, any justification of those who destroyed our people.⁷³

Most available evidence indicates that the history commission was established primarily in order to deal with falsifications of the history of the Second World War, and to condemn such activities conducted outside Russia. In the statement quoted above, however, Medvedev explicitly claimed that falsifications produced by Russians themselves concerning other parts of Russian history, such as Stalin's terror against his own population, should be recognized as an equally serious problem, if not a worse one. By using the term 'falsification' — the key word in the commission mandate — about revisionist history writing exonerating Stalin, Medvedev clearly indicated that the commission ought to be engaged also in combatting such activities.

In 2011, US scholar Thomas Sherlock took stock of the history politics of the Medvedev era. He concluded that, since taking over the presidency, Medvedev had striven to create a 'usable' past that promoted anti-Stalinism and challenged the anti-liberal historical narratives of Putin's two first presidencies.⁷⁴ In addition to the blog video of 30 October 2009 quoted above, Sherlock found evidence of this new trend in several of Medvedev's other texts and speeches, such as the 'Go Russia!' article from September 2009, in which he 'fired his first salvo against Stalinism'.⁷⁵ Sherlock also pointed out that in 2009 Medvedev had praised Gorbachev for his political courage during perestroika, and the Russian government had made excerpts from Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* required reading in high schools.⁷⁶ In 2010, Medvedev established a joint Latvian–Russian history commission to examine sore points in bilateral relations between the two countries.⁷⁷

Moreover, as Sherlock noted, at this time even Vladimir Putin seemed to have been infected by a new, candid anti-Stalinism, exemplified by his

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Thomas Sherlock, 'Confronting the Stalinist Past: The Politics of Memory in Russia', *Washington Quarterly*, 34, 2011, 2, pp. 93–109.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

⁷⁶ Iurii Lipatov, "'Arhipelag GULAG" Aleksandra Solzhenitsyna teper' budut izuchat' v shkole', *Pervyi kanal*, 26 October 2010 <https://www.itv.ru/news/2010-10-26/139638-arhipelag_gulag_aleksandra_solzhenitsyna_teper_budut_izuchat_v_shkole> [accessed 27 February 2019]. The addition of an abridged edition of *The Gulag Archipelago* to the Russian high school curriculum came about as a result of a telephone conversation between Solzhenitsyn's widow, Natalia Solzhenitsyna, and Vladimir Putin.

⁷⁷ Sherlock, 'Confronting', pp. 99–100.

speech at the solemn Polish-Russian ceremony in Katyn in April 2010, commemorating the 5,000 Polish officers who had been executed by the NKVD seventy years earlier. Also, in his annual Q & A call-in programme on Russian television in 2009, Putin went almost as far as Medvedev in condemning Stalin's crimes. While acknowledging 'the undeniably positive things' of the time, he went on to add that they 'were achieved at an unacceptable cost. Repressions took place and millions of our compatriots suffered [...]. It is an incontrovertible fact that we in this period were confronted not only with a cult of personality, but also with mass crimes against our own people.'⁷⁸

Summing up the history policy under President Medvedev, Thomas Sherlock regarded the commission against the falsification of history as a throwback to past practices from the new pluralistic climate.⁷⁹ In my interpretation, however, the establishment of this commission, and the way that it played out, did not necessarily contradict the many other initiatives that Sherlock has identified.

Equating Stalinism with Nazism

To explain why Medvedev established the history commission precisely in spring 2009, some authors hold that it should be seen as a preventive step aimed at pre-empting foreign criticism of the Soviet Union prior to the upcoming 70th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 2009.⁸⁰ Although there is only circumstantial evidence here, that this was part of the motivation cannot be excluded. On the other hand, the existence of the secret protocols of this pact had been acknowledged by the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, on the 50th anniversary of this fateful event,⁸¹ and no Russian leader has ever retracted that statement. Nevertheless, the issue remained extremely sensitive in Russia as well as in the affected countries — Poland, Moldova and the Baltic States. Under no circumstances would Russian officialdom accept that this pact made the Soviet Union an accomplice of Nazi Germany's war crimes, or that the country should have to share responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War. Prime Minister Putin made this explicitly clear in an article

⁷⁸ 'Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinym. Prodolzhenie', 3 December 2009 <<http://2009.moskva-putinu.ru>> [accessed 27 February 2019]. See also, Gjerde, 'The Use of History'.

⁷⁹ Sherlock, 'Confronting', p. 104.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, *ibid.*

⁸¹ 'Postanovlenie SND SSSR ot 24.12.1989 n 979-1 o politicheskoi i pravovoi otsenke sovetsko-germanskogo dogovora o nenapadenii ot 1939 goda, S'ezd Narodnykh Deputatov SSSR <https://www.lawmix.ru/docs_cccp/1241> [accessed 4 March 2019].

published in the Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, on 31 August 2009, on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the war.⁸² In his view, not only the Soviet-German nonaggression pact but *all* deals with the Nazi regime were morally unacceptable. Therefore, the 1938 Munich Accord between Nazi Germany, Great Britain and France should be condemned in no less unequivocal terms. Putin also asked how today's European politicians could close their eyes to the attempts of Western democracies at the time to direct Hitler's aggression eastwards, in order to avoid a war with Germany themselves.⁸³ In short, according to the Russian prime minister, the massive Western condemnation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was oozing with hypocrisy and double standards.

If Putin thought his interview might prevent European criticism of the Hitler-Stalin pact, however, he miscalculated. In July 2009, the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE passed an almost-unanimous (320 to 8) resolution condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in wording that — as interpreted in Moscow — equated Stalinism with Nazism.⁸⁴ In Russia, this was even perceived as if the parliamentarians had declared the Soviet Union to have been 'as guilty as the Nazis for the Second World War'.⁸⁵ The 2009 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly resolution, then, clearly fell within what the Presidential Commission would regard as falsification of history. It seems to have escaped the attention of not only the Russian critics of this resolution but also of most other commentators that, in the same statement, the OSCE parliamentarians also condemned the 'holding of public demonstrations glorifying the Nazi or Stalinist past'. In Latvia, veterans of the Latvian Legion that fought under the Waffen SS during the Second World War regularly march in the streets of Riga, each time incurring the wrath of Russian politicians and media. The OSCE parliamentarians therefore seem to have been trying to balance criticism of Russia with censuring Latvian leniency towards its SS veterans.

⁸² Vladimir Putin, "Stranitsy istorii – povod dlia vzaimnykh pretenzii ili osnova dlia primireniia i partnerstva? 'Stat'ia Predsedatelia Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. V. Putina v "Gazeta Vyborcha", *InoSMI*, 31 August, 2009 <<https://inosmi.ru/russia/20090831/252071.html>> [accessed 27 February].

⁸³ Vladimir Putin, "Stranitsy".

⁸⁴ Kyle James, 'OSCE Resolution Equating Stalinism with Nazism Enrages Russia', *Deutsche Welle*, 9 July 2009 <<http://www.dw.com/en/osce-resolution-equating-stalinism-with-nazism-enrages-russia/a-4468156>> [accessed 27 February].

⁸⁵ 'OSCE: Soviet Union'.

Putin's third presidency: Back to the start

If, as I have suggested, Medvedev's history commission can be regarded as an attempt to forestall the adoption of a law in the Russian Duma that would criminalize certain historical views, then the effect of this commission lasted only as long as Medvedev remained in the presidency. In June 2013, in the new and harsher climate after the massive anti-regime demonstrations in 2011/12, a new initiative was taken in the Duma to criminalize the rehabilitation of Nazism.⁸⁶ The new draft law not only used many of the same formulations as in the draft law that had been shelved in 2009, but was also presented by the same group of people: it was for all practical purposes a continuation of the same legislative initiative after a four-year hiatus.⁸⁷

This new round of legislative activity in the Duma was ostensibly triggered by two media scandals in which some liberals allegedly dragged the memory of the Great Patriotic War through the mud. In May 2013 the liberal politician Leonid Gozman in his LiveJournal blog commented upon a new Russian TV series featuring heroes from the wartime Soviet counterintelligence service 'SMERSH' (acronym for 'Death to the Spies'). Gozman saw no reason to lionize this organization which had conducted numerous extra-legal killings and behaved in ways which he deemed comparable to the heinous crimes of the German SS.⁸⁸

Half a year later, liberals were again in the crosshairs for their alleged antipatriotic attitudes. In an opinion poll conducted by the independent Internet-based TV station Dozhd' ('Rain') in January 2014, Dozhd' had asked its viewers whether they thought it would have been better to have surrendered Leningrad to the German invaders during the Second World War, rather than letting the city endure a 900-day siege that caused the deaths of nearly one million people.⁸⁹ Lawmaker Irina Iarovaia,

⁸⁶ Kurilla, 'The Implications', pp. 3–4.

⁸⁷ 'Zakon ob ugovovnoi otvetstvennosti za opravdanie natsizma. Dos'e', TASS, 28 April 2014 <<http://tass.ru/info/1152908>> [accessed 27 February].

⁸⁸ Leonid Gozman, 'Podvigu soldat SS posviashchaetsia...', 12 May 2013 <<https://leonid-gozman.livejournal.com/150225.html?thread=2817489>> [accessed 27 February 2019]. The scandal was complete when Ul'iana Skoibeda, a journalist in the yellow press newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, in an irate opinion piece expressed the view that the world would have been a better place if liberals like Gozman had been made into lampshades, an unmistakable reference to Gozman's Jewish background and the fate of Jews in Nazi annihilation camps, a statement which she later retracted. Ul'iana Skoibeda, 'Ja vseгда budu zashchishchat' nashu Pobedu, no za "abazhury" prinoshu izvineniia', *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 18 May 2013 <<https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26077/2982584/>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁸⁹ Masha Lipman, 'Asking the Wrong Question on Russian TV', *The New Yorker*, 5

chairperson of the Duma Committee on Security and the Fight Against Corruption, denounced the Dozhd' survey as 'a direct insult to the sacred memory of the war, and to all those who perished during the blockade'.⁹⁰ With its independent and critical journalism, Dozhd' had long been a thorn in the side of the authorities, and one might get the impression that the uproar which this opinion poll caused was mainly a pretext for stigmatizing the TV station as 'unpatriotic'.⁹¹ In any case, Iarovaia once again put forward a bill with new articles to the Penal Code, to make 'deliberately false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War' punishable by up to 300,000 rubles in fines or three years' incarceration. If this crime were carried out through misuse of public office or — as in the case of the Dozhd' survey — by means of the mass media, the upper penalty limit was raised to a fine of 500,000 rubles or five years' imprisonment. The bill would also criminalize 'denial of facts established by the international military tribunal in Nuremberg'.⁹² It was signed into law by President Putin on 5 May 2014.⁹³

Putin's return to power changed the general climate under which Russian historians were operating and restricted the scope for independent opinion. In February 2013, Putin had declared the need for new standardized history textbooks 'that do not allow for more than one interpretation'.⁹⁴ In March 2014, Andrei Zubov, a professor of history at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, was fired from his position. The circumstances around this dismissal were murky, to say the least: officially, Zubov was charged with 'amoral behaviour', but in all likelihood the real reason was

February 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/asking-the-wrong-question-on-russian-tv>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹⁰ 'Iarovaia: zakon o zaprete reabilitatsii natsizma nuzhno priinat' kak mozhno skoree', TASS, 31 January 2014 <<http://tass.ru/politika/928250>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹¹ Miller, 'Politika', p. 52; Justyna Prus, 'Russia's Use of History as a Political Weapon', Polish Institute of International Affairs Policy Paper 12 (114) May 2015, <<https://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-114>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹² 'Putin podpisał zakon ob ugovolnoi otvetstvennosti za opravdanie natsizma', *Lenta.ru*, 5 May, 2014 <<https://lenta.ru/news/2014/05/05/antinazilaw/>> [accessed 27 February 2019]; Kurilla, 'The implications', p. 4.

⁹³ 'Podpisan zakon, napravlennyi na protivodeistvie popytkam poshiagatel'stv na istoricheskuiu pamiat' v otnoshenii sobytii Vtoroi mirovoi voiny', 5 May 2014 <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20912>> [accessed 27 February 2019]. For the full text of the law, see 'Federal'nyi zakon ot 5 maia 2014 g. N 128-FZ 'O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossiiskoi Federatsii', *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 7 May 2014 <<https://rg.ru/2014/05/07/reabilitacia-dok.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹⁴ 'Putin: Nuzhny novye edinye uchebniki po istorii bez dvojnogo tolkovaniia', *RIA novosti*, 19 February 2013 <<https://ria.ru/20130219/923705535.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

an article in which he compared the Russian annexation of Crimea that year to the Austrian *Anschluss* in 1938.⁹⁵ Zubov himself claimed that his superiors who fired him clearly felt embarrassed about what they were doing and were acting on orders ‘from above’.⁹⁶

The law against rehabilitation of Nazism has been employed at least once: against a blogger in Perm, Vladimir Luzgin, for reposting an article in the online social media network VKontakte in which it was claimed that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had collaborated on the attack on Poland in September 1939 and thereby unleashed the Second World War.⁹⁷

Conclusions

Dmitrii Medvedev has often been dismissed as a mere ‘his master’s voice’, a placeholder to keep the presidential seat warm until Putin could return in 2012. In retrospect, we can find much evidence in support of that view, but it was certainly not the way Medvedev himself saw his role. He had his own ideas and agenda which he presented in speeches and video blogs, occasionally also in action. A case in point was his instruction to the Russian Foreign Ministry not to veto the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSC Res. 1973) that triggered the bombardment of Muammar Gaddafi’s forces in Libya in March 2011. This decision was publicly criticized by his own Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, and Medvedev, unprecedentedly, hit back at this criticism.⁹⁸

Medvedev’s decision to establish the history commission two years earlier can be interpreted as an attempt to chart his own political course in defiance of other political actors in Russia — this time not the Prime Minister, but the United Russia faction in the Duma. Ivan Kurilla has pointed out that the commission ‘ended up on the road to nowhere’,⁹⁹ but that, in my view, may well be precisely the reason why it was created. The commission’s mandate as formulated in the presidential decree said

⁹⁵ Miller, ‘Politika’, p. 52.

⁹⁶ Elena Vlasenko, ‘Andrei Zubov: Menia uvolili po prikazu sverkhu’, *Grani.ru*, 24 March 2014 <<http://graniru.org/Society/Law/m.227066.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹⁷ Luzgin was given a 200,000 ruble fine. He refused to pay and fled the country. In the Czech Republic he applied for political asylum but was denied. ‘Chekhiiia otkazala v ubezhishche osuzhdennomu za “reabilitatsiiu natsizma”’, *RFE/RL*, 15 May 2018 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/29228596.html>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹⁸ Frank Weir, ‘Medvedev Slams Putin’s “Inexcusable” Libya “Crusade” Comments’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 March 2011 <<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0322/Medvedev-slams-Putin-s-inexcusable-Libya-crusade-comments>> [accessed 27 February 2019].

⁹⁹ Kurilla, ‘The Implications’, p. 5.

nothing about preparing any new legislation, so it may be regarded as an attempt to kill the legislative initiative taken in the Duma. Such a law would not only be difficult to enforce — as Pavel Polian has argued, the draft law ‘could never pass muster in terms of international law’¹⁰⁰ — but it could also complicate Russia’s relations with several countries, not only in the ‘near’ but also in the ‘far’ abroad. To be sure, Medvedev’s harsh rhetoric against Georgia during the August 2008 war shows that he had few scruples about using strong-arm tactics against Russia’s neighbours on occasion, but he also cultivated an image as a soft-liner and a pragmatist.

Interviewed by this author in 2019, commission member Aleksandr Chubarian confirmed that no legislative initiatives were discussed in the commission, neither the initiative prepared by the Zatulin group nor any other. Asked whether the commission should be regarded as a follow-up or a competitor to the two Duma bills, he stated that he had no information on that, one way or the other. And indeed, it would have been surprising if he or any other regular members of the commission had such information. Only those who were privy to discussions in the Presidential administration would be in a position to answer that question.

If my interpretation is correct, Medvedev’s move was initially successful: the attempt to criminalize rehabilitation of Nazism in the territory of the former Soviet Union was in fact stalled. As with so many other of Medvedev’s initiatives, however, this policy line was reversed when he had to hand the presidency back to his mentor in May 2012.

Virtually everyone who has discussed the history commission in connection with the legal initiatives in the Duma in 2009 has treated them as if they were of one piece.¹⁰¹ However, Russian commentator Svetlana Samoilova has distinguished between two currents in Russian history politics, which she calls ‘pragmatic’ and ‘hawkish’. The 2009 attempt to criminalize the rehabilitation of Nazism was in her view decidedly hawkish, while the establishment of the presidential commission, ‘even if it has been assessed as a conservative decision, nevertheless fits into the logic of the pragmatic approach’. By establishing the commission, Medvedev reoriented the focus away from law towards the historical sciences and ‘managed to broaden the patriotic component of his image while standing aloof from marginal initiatives in this sphere’.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Polian, ‘For Whom’, p. 60.

¹⁰¹ See, for instance Blomfield, ‘Russia Threatens’; ‘V demokraticeskom obshchestve’.

¹⁰² Samoilova, ‘Ushcherb istorii’.

Medvedev was not only trained as a jurist — he had also practised as a professor of law, and seems to have been aware of the intricacies that the passing of such legislation might entail. If my interpretation is correct, Medvedev's strategy to prevent the adoption of this law was in some ways ingenious, but hardly unique. More than a hundred years ago the Danish writer Vilhelm Bergsøe wrote a pithy aphorism: 'one day, when the devil wanted to make sure that nothing would happen, he established the world's first committee.'¹⁰³ Perhaps Medvedev had learned a trick or two from Bergsøe's devil.

¹⁰³ 'En dag da Satan fikk i sinn, / at intet måtte skje, / da satte han i verden inn / den første komité.' Vilhelm Bergsøe (1835–1911).