

Briefing Memorandum
Contemporary Russian Politics and Historical Perceptions Issues

Hiroshi Yamazoe
Fellow, 5th Research Office
Research Department

Recent Russian politics has seen many policies and statements related to historical perception issues. The issues that the Russian government is deeply involved in can be roughly divided into two major points. The first one concerns, the Soviet Union's oppression of its own people, particularly in regard to how to assess the Stalin era. The second topic is about the victory of the Soviet people in World War II. The Russian government has reacted sharply to political activities, seen mainly in former Soviet states in Europe, expressing skepticism on the positive assessment of the Soviet victory. Both points refer mainly to events under the Stalin era and they are indeed interrelated, but appreciation of the Soviet Union's victory does not necessarily equate with approval of the Stalinist system. In fact, as the official position the current Russian government continues to celebrate the Soviet victory over the Nazi Germany, whereas it criticizes the Stalin's oppression of the Soviet people. This paper will address these two points of debate in order.

The History of the Great Purge and the Contemporary Democratization Issue

Stalinism, particularly the Great Purge of the 1930s, oppressed many victims among the Soviet people. A major point of debate for historical perception is whether to view this negatively or to evaluate it as part of the process of achieving the fruits of industrialization. The Communist Party Stalin constructed a security system centered on the Committee for State Security (KGB) and did away with aggressive and cruel purges. Nor the Russian Federation does affirm the Stalin era's Great Purge. The disclosure of documents and the publication of history books in order to investigate Stalin era oppression continue with little suppression.

Since Dmitry Medvedev became President, the official position to criticize the suppression of human rights by Soviet security organs has grown clearer. In September 2008, the President visited Magadan, a city on the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk, and laid flowers for victims of forced labor. In February 2011, at the unveiling of a monument to former President Boris Yeltsin, Medvedev said appreciatively that Yeltsin opened the way to democratization. In March, at a ceremony to commemorate the great reforms of the Tsar Alexander II, Medvedev expressed his appreciation for the reforms for a freer society including the emancipation of serfs. The President often states that national development does not justify oppression of the people.

Such statements regarding history reinforce the direction of Medvedev's policies as he calls for a

Western-oriented modernization. In the past, Foreign Ministers such as Yevgeny Primakov and Igor Ivanov also referred to the diplomacy directed by Alexander Gorchakov, Foreign Minister under the Tsar Alexander II, to talk about present-day diplomacy.

There are also topics on human rights related to other countries. Regarding the Katyn Forest massacre, in which a Stalinist-era security organ (NKVD) massacred a large number of Polish military officers in 1940, the Russian government clearly criticized the NKVD. On April 7, 2010, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin attended a ceremony to mourn the victims of the Katyn Forest incident. Prime Minister Putin called the killings by the Soviet Union a crime. When an aircraft crash killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski on April 10 on his way to another presidential-level ceremony at Katyn Forest, Russia responded with great courtesy. As a background, several years earlier, their relations were strained as Russia pursued a policy of asserting its power, and Poland responded with an anti-Russian attitude. In recent years, however, the relations have improved under a new Prime Minister Tusk of Poland and Russia's improving relations with the West (including Poland) as it pursues economic modernization. The Medvedev Administration's messages emphasizing human rights have also played a part. However, while there are signs of progress regarding the disclosure of public documents related to the Katyn Forest incident and investigating the cause of the plane crash, there are still some issues remaining.

Affirmation of the Great Patriotic War and the Russian Federation's Basic Stance

The second major theme is the Soviet Union's war effort during World War II. Although the war is also called World War II in Russia, it is most often called "the Great Patriotic War." Victory Day on May 9 is a major national holiday.

Official declarations of the Russian government and statements by influential historians make claims such as the following. The Fascists were the enemy of all humanity. When Hitler's Germany suddenly attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Soviet people stood up and fought the Great Patriotic War. Since Britain, France, and the other Western powers had compromised with Hitler, Stalin had no choice but to do the same and use the time to prepare for war until confrontation. After the war broke out, the Soviet Union did not surrender even though it lost 20 million people, more than any of the Allies, enduring fierce battles such as those in Stalingrad and Leningrad. The Soviet Army, having overcome the German Army on the Eastern Front in its largest battles, then freed the nations of Eastern Europe from fascism and formed the United Nations, helping support peaceful order since the end of the war to the present day. No movement to rewrite history and harm the basis of today's order can be tolerated. As long as the German and Italian governments support the contemporary order and do not try to justify fascism, Russia will not view them as enemies.

This Russian view from the perspective of historical interpretation has received such criticisms as follows. World War II began in September 1939 with the invasion of Poland. At that time, the

Soviet Union invaded Poland based on a secret non-aggression pact with the Nazi Germany and annexed the three Baltic states and Bessarabia (now the Republic of Moldova). At that time and in the process of counterattacking during the final stages of World War II, the Soviet Union indeed expelled Nazi Germany, but replaced it with the Communist Party rules, forcing through dictatorships and surveillance states. Soviet victims during World War II included many deaths caused by political crackdowns, ethnic persecutions, and famine caused by policies originating in Moscow. The Russian government opposes this opinion.

The Russian view of the "Great Patriotic War" described above plays a role in reinforcing the Russian state and people since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. First, it forms a basis for justifying the adjustments of borders and the accompanying relocation of peoples in Russia (including the Kaliningrad enclave), Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Germany, and other states as results of World War II settlements. Second, it emphasizes the significance of the solidarity of the Soviet nations centering on Moscow and protects the position of ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation. Third, it provides grounds to assert to other countries the affirmative role that Russia plays in the current world order through its permanent membership on the UN Security Council and so on.

However, the second point stands out as a point of contention. The three Baltic states and Moldova lost their independence during World War II, so it is difficult for them to affirm the role of the Soviet Union. In the three Baltic states, there are laws suppressing extremist groups that use Nazi or Communist symbols and denying full citizenship to people who speak only Russian, creating ongoing friction with Russia. In Estonia, the relocation of a statue of Soviet soldiers (it was to be moved to a cemetery due to urban renewal) led to a resistance movement by an ethnic Russian organization, and deaths of some people involved. In Moldova as well, domestic politics sometimes lead to criticism of the "Soviet occupation." In Ukraine, particularly in the context of former President Viktor Yushchenko's anti-Russian policies, some people often asserted that Moscow intentionally caused the wartime famine in Ukraine in order to suppress the Ukrainian people. The Russian stance is to remonstrate that these were tragedies of all the Soviet people and to refuse to accept that Moscow or Russians persecuted other ethnicities.

In May 2009, Medvedev established the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. The purposes of the commission are to investigate historical interpretations that diminish Russia's international prestige, propose countermeasures, and coordinate with relevant government agencies. The commission's Chair is Sergey Naryshkin, the Chief of the Presidential Administration. In addition to historians and officials from agencies related to education and culture, the members include high officials from the Foreign Ministry, the General Staff, the Federal Security Service, and the Foreign Intelligence Service. It can imply their policy interests and the handling of archives that they oversee.

Although there have been no noteworthy reports on direct actions by the commission, President Medvedev has recently been making statements regarding history during international talks. Joint statements at summits with Israel, Norway, Slovakia, and so on have condemned attempts to justify Nazism. In addition, in 2010 on the 65th anniversary of the end of the war, Russia invited for the first time in a parade troops from the UK, France, Poland, the USA, and other countries that fought Nazi Germany. This appears to be a new attempt to obtain agreement from other countries on Russia's historical position in order to help maintain its international status.

History and Politics related to East Asia

In 1982, when the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union were in dispute on many political and ideological issues, a collection of research papers on history related to Chinese claims about territory and borders called *The Documents Refute: Resisting the Falsification of the History of Russian-Chinese Relations* was published in the Soviet Union. It extensively quoted the then-closed archives of the Foreign Ministry, and even today it is very valuable for examining hard-to-access materials.

Today, China and Russia have a strategic partnership. In September 2010 in Lushunkou (Port Arthur), they issued a joint statement on World War II, which included their opposition to falsifying history to justify aggressors. In the Russian context, this is another example to confirm shared awareness of the World War II alliance when Russia fought Germany's far Eastern ally Japan. China has long argued that "History should be correctly understood." The two countries confirmed the stances that they have both held for a long time. In fact, local Chinese residents suffered during the Russo-Japanese War and the Soviet operations in Manchuria, so there are limits to how united their stances can be. Regarding territorial issues with Japan, China and Russia have not yet made statements directly supporting each other's positions, but if the political situation grows more complex, it is possible. In any case, Russia currently believes it has a firm claim to the Kurile Islands, and intends to carry out development and armament without the support of other nations.

When Chief of the Presidential Administration Naryshkin visited Japan in July 2011, he called for a wide range of Japan-Russia cooperation and the creation of a joint Japan-Russia history commission within the year. According to reports, Russia would be represented Anatoly Turkonov, the President of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, who is an expert on Korean issues and has also served on a commission on Polish history. If the joint commission is formed, the typical Russian argument on the territorial issue is, "Under international law, the Kurile Islands belong to the Soviet Union/Russia," so the Japanese side will need personnel who can firmly argue Japan's claim from the viewpoint of international law. In addition, in light of the positions on historical perception and politics in Russia, while pointing to the Japanese soldiers held in Stalin's concentration camps in Siberia could be tolerated, but attempts to downgrade the Soviet Union's

overall morality in the war would bring vehement disagreement. Nevertheless, the Russian side thinks the problem is the disagreement on the causes and results of the war, so that could become a point of debate. The Russian side still has many misunderstandings regarding basic facts about Japan, though accurate facts are increasingly understood among Russian experts. I would be beneficial for the Japanese side to steadily make its own arguments on necessary points of international law, politics, and diplomatic history while keeping Russia's political position in mind.

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The purpose of this paper is to respond to reader interest in security issues while promoting better understanding of NIDS. A "briefing," of course, is a background explanation. Our hope is that this paper will help readers to better understand the complex security issues. Note that the views expressed in this paper do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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Planning and Management Division

The National Institute for Defense Studies

Dedicated lines: 8-67-6522, 6588

Telephone: 03-3713-5912

Fax: 03-3713-6149

NIDS website: <http://www.nids.go.jp>