

Call for papers: The Presence of the Past in Putin's Russia

Special issue for journal *Le Mouvement Social*.

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Le Mouvement Social (<http://www.lemouvementsocial.net>) is a French front-ranking peer-reviewed academic journal on social history, published by [La Découverte](#); current issues are available through [Project Muse](#) and the [Cairn portal](#); older issues are available through [Jstor](#) and [Gallica](#) (The French National Library's digital library).

It publishes original research in French, with abstracts in English. Any accepted paper written in Russian or English will be translated into French at the journal editorial board's expense.

This special issue aims to highlight the establishment of a new authoritarian regime in Putin's Russia, focusing on the various ways that the historical past serves the legitimisation of political power. Is the regime's historical narrative effective in influencing Russian society? Both oblivion and hypermnnesia seem to have become tools for this authoritarianism, thus preventing the formation of widely-supported protest movements.

While presenting itself as a post-Soviet entity, Putin's Russia does not claim to be restoring the past, nor is it actually acting this way. By relying alternatively on the prerevolutionary and the Soviet past, it celebrates the former Empire, the Soviet superpower and, at the same time, different forms of protest and cultures of dissent that were embodied in dissident movements and "Russia Abroad". Many experiences of the past are therefore conflated into what is seemingly a single memory of a patrimonialised past, which is supposed to help unite and not divide post-Soviet Russian society. This mobilised past is usually a recent one, experienced by a significant part of the living population, or going back no more than one or two generations. As the American anthropologist Serguei Oushakine has convincingly argued, this proximity does not rely solely on a mythical narrative of the past.¹ It also plays massively on affects and reconstructs more or less artificial private memories, in an obvious continuity with Soviet engineering of collective memories. But that reconciliation of the formerly divided memories is now mostly on the political agenda. Conversely, key moments of the past are silenced, regardless of their proximity with the present, be it the criminalisation of survival strategies, with millions of people sent to the Gulag (from the 1930s onward), or the mass Perestroika demonstrations demanding greater democracy (less than three decades ago). Some memories are

1S. A. Oushakine, "'We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy': Retrofitting the Past in Russia", *The Russian Review*, 2007, 66/3, pp451-482. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9434.2007.00453.x

missing, while others, more in tune, will obliterate some aspects of the past since they can downplay the pressure of the present, as illustrated by the recruitment of volunteers, burdened by debts and unemployment, for the Ukrainian front.

While state-sponsored agencies are obviously working to build a clearly politically-oriented narrative of the past, other actors tend to challenge the position of these agencies in the new public sphere, using partly the tools and discourse inherited from late Soviet dissident activists and critical members of the Soviet intelligentsia. The success of writers such as Svetlana Alexievich or Lyudmila Ulitskaya, while reflecting different parts of the former Soviet society, is rooted in the same distrust in official discourse and the same belief in the authenticity of the “true voices” of ordinary people. The everlasting debate as to which genre they belong to (is it literature, journalism, oral history?) clearly reflects the concept of the “historical truth” in post-Soviet Russian society, where archival sources play a secondary role, both because they are allegedly out of reach and because they are presumed to contain lies and therefore to be unusable as official discourse. After a burst of interest in the late 1980s and 1990s, when top-secret documents were excavated from formerly closed state archives, the professional exercise of writing history based on written sources is far from the high popularity professional historians specialised in contemporary issues have gained in Western societies since the 1970s. The editorial position of such literature, as well as the scientific publication of sensitive archival materials, far from providing bestsellers in contemporary Russia, might be seriously undermined.

The purpose of this special issue is not to describe obvious instrumentalisation of the past from above, nor to observe exclusively how this fabricated past is absorbed by society. Instead, it aims to describe the more complex interplay between various social actors, generations and scales of time, exploring a whole range of past experiences and channels of memories, as well as phenomena of oblivion and hypermnnesia in various social milieus. We also wish to explore the key factor of the geographical scale, for example the way social identities can fuse – and disappear – with local and regional identities, for instance workers, or former workers in Novochoerkassk. By shifting away from a clear-cut vision of adherence versus contestation of the Soviet past that should lead to a clear-cut adherence versus contestation of Putin’s regime, papers should investigate the current blurring of the lines in their connection with various channels of memories of the past, considered in the long term. It should help to map places where collective remembrance of the past challenges the Moscow-centred one.

This special issue has emerged from a roundtable (with contributions on performance art, homosexual identity, Orthodox liturgical music, radioactive pollution, independent publishers, and images of Grozny at war as reflected in local communities). We are currently looking for additional papers, with an emphasis on regional identities, labour experience and material culture, non-elite social groups, as well as ethnically non-Russian and non-Orthodox populations. Current research on rural populations, especially former members of collective farms, so called ethnic minorities such as Roma, or locally-based enterprises of history writing and patrimonialization would be appreciated.

We welcome submissions from historians, sociologists, anthropologists or any other social scientists whose research reflects the present and is historically grounded. We especially encourage proposals focused on the reinterpretation of the Soviet, revolutionary and, probably, pre-revolutionary past. While contemporary Russia defines the geopolitical framework of this special issue, any contribution that would cross borders in the present as in the past will be considered especially relevant.

Abstracts (300 words), including a short description of sources, in French, Russian or English, as well as short CVs with a possible list of previous publications, should be sent to russianpast.lms@gmail.com before 1 June 2016. Selected authors will be contacted by 1 July 2016. Full articles will be due by 1 October 2016.

The proposed texts will undergo a double peer-review process before publishing. Maximum length: 50,000 characters (footnotes included). The issue will be published in 2017.