The communist past in post-communist Russia

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Analysing the process of reconciliation with the Communist past in Russia during the decade from the fall of Communism to the turn of the century, Alexei Miller finds that many of the most painful problems have not been touched on and it would be optimistic to say that Russia has to a fair degree extricated itself from communism in this respect. However, one should not forget, that, viewed from the point of its beginning, it has been an extraordinary process.

Leo Tolstoi begins his Anna Karenina with the observation that all happy families are happy in a similar way, while all unhappy families are unhappy in some particular way. This is also true about states and nations, and Russia’s communist past is definitely very particular:

- as opposed to other Eastern European countries the Soviet regime was not established under direct foreign pressure;
- it was born in a profound revolutionary crisis with an unprecedented scale of mass violence;
- it lasted for more than 70 years;
- the regime did not suffer a decisive military defeat, as in Germany, Japan or Italy;
- the initial reformist action was produced by the regime’s establishment;
- the collapse of the regime coincided with the collapse of the Empire;
- for the majority of the population the following years brought deep disenchantment both in the economic and political sphere.

Some of these features are unique in themselves, but their unique combination is particularly important for understanding the Russian strategies in dealing with the past fifteen years. I shall try to approach the subject from two different perspectives. In a chronological approach, I will offer a very general description of particular periods in political development and of their influence on the strategies in dealing with the past. Then I will analyse in more detail the current situation in some of those areas where society and state address the problem of communist past.

In the second half of the 1980’s, when the political initiative was still in the hands of a
part of the communist establishment, the strategy of Gorbachev’s group was to replace
the old iconostasis of communist saints with a new one, with N. Bukharin and S. Kirov
in the centre. It was a continuation of the policies of the early Khrushchev era which
aimed at saving the idea of the “socialist choice of our fathers”, as Gorbachev liked to
say, with the help of the communist “martyrs”, who were supposed to represent “the
human face” of communism, victimised by Stalin and other traitors of “the noble ideas of
the communist revolution”. Books by some leftist western authors, like S. Kohen, proved
to be helpful in pursuing this goal. This trend dominated public discourse about
communist experience till 1989, when atmosphere drastically changed after the first
congress of People’s Deputies, held in May and transmitted live on TV.

The discourses that emerged at that time were not new either- they existed in oral or, as
Russians call it, “kitchen” tradition since the 1960’s. Xenophobic nationalists tried to
externalise the responsibility, blaming first of all the Jews, but also the Latvians, Poles,
German General Staff and other “alien forces” for the victims and losses of Russian
people under communist rule. The most sophisticated conceptualisation of this discourse
was presented by the famous mathematician and dissident Igor Shafarevich in his essay
“Russophobia” published in the monthly “Nash Sovremennik”. [1] Some ideologists of this
sort, like Alexander Prohanov, the chief editor of newspaper Zavtra (“Tomorrow”), soon
came to terms with communists on the common ground of chauvinism. This trend was
always present during the 1990’s, always remaining rather marginal in public discourse
however. This is true also of the last two years in spite of the obvious renaissance of
nationalist mood.

The discourse about the totalitarian nature of the communist rule dominated public
opinion in the late 1980’s. Initially it was mainly based on novels by Orwell and Zamiatin
rather than academic concepts. The first public academic conference on totalitarianism
took place in Moscow in 1989. Within the next 4-5 years almost all the major works of
“totalitarian” classics, including R. Pipes, R. Conquest and M. Malia, were translated into
Russian and widely read.

From 1989 till 1991 the defensive socialist discourse gradually retreated in rivalry with
the discourse on totalitarianism. Dramatic change came with the defeat of the coup in
August 1991 – the anticommmunist discourse became dominant and official. The reformist
communist discourse almost disappeared, leaving orthodox communists as the main rival
of the new power.

During the first half of the 1990’s - with particular intensification in 1993 – the official
anticommunism of Yeltsin presented communist revenge as the immediate danger. For
the last time, anticommunism and the danger of a restoration of the old regime that it
evoked was the main ideological tool during the presidential campaign of 1996. The
Russian historian Mikhail Gefter once remarked in the late 1980’s that “Stalin died
yesterday”. It was in the second half of 1990’s that a significant number of people started
to think and act as if Stalin had died at least the day before yesterday. The opposition of
anticommunists and communists gradually loses the key role in the political and
ideological struggle. The end of the Yeltsin era pushed this process further. This
development could have both a negative and a positive influence on the evolution of
attitudes to the problem of a communist past. But the emergence of an intellectual space
is definitely positive; attempts to understand are no longer totally subordinated to the
logic of immediate political needs, and – I dare say with all my respect to the latter – to the emotions of victims.

To sum up: From 1985-1989 the public sphere was still dominated by reformist communists; from 1989-1991 the official position was challenged by xenophobic nationalism and a discourse about the totalitarian nature of communism; in 1991 the anticommunist discourse became official; and it gradually lost significance in the second half of the 1990’s.

Let us turn now to the analysis of the current situation in some particular areas where society and state address the problem of the communist past. The problem of dealing with the communist experience is manifold. Among the most important tasks are:

– executing justice,
– preventing a comeback,
– finding a place for these events in the national historic narrative and in symbolic representation,
– coming to terms with “alien” victims both on state and individual level,
– understanding and proper scientific analysis.

Each of these issues deserves an article of its own. I will try to present a kind of general overview and to suggest some explanation of why things went this particular way.

The first problem is legal action. It was very selective and nonsequential. Only few positive actions were undertaken. I refer here the rehabilitation of some people who were unjustly convicted under the communist regime and the adoption of a legal status for the prisoners of the gulags equal to the status of the survivors of Nazi concentration camps which made these people eligible for some very limited material privileges and for compensation for the illegally confiscated property. The action of rehabilitation met serious difficulties in dealing with the cases of those victims of terror who had earlier served as executioners. In the majority of cases these people were convicted and killed not for their real crimes but on false accusations. However, contemporary courts refused to rehabilitate some of them, acting primarily on political, not judicial grounds. The most recent example is the rejection of the Collegium of the Supreme Court in May 2000 to rehabilitate Lavrentij Berija, who was accused, among other things, of being a British and, if I remember correctly, a Japanese spy.

Justice as punishment was not executed – none of the perpetrators were brought to court. This cannot be explained away by referring to the old age of the few living Stalinist executioners. Many far younger people participated in torturing the dissidents of the Brezhnev era in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. When evaluating these developments, one should keep in mind that in all post-communist countries, even in the re-united Germany, the number of those convicted for the crimes of special services under the communist regime was very limited. Russian authorities failed to create even a single symbolic case of this sort – but that is already about politics and not about justice which did not take place anywhere.
However, politics should matter particularly in this respect. The “lustration” law was not adopted. Only a limited action of verification of the high ranked KGB officers was undertaken in 1991-1992. Some well known human rights activists, including S. A. Kovalev, participated in the commission. But the results were negligible. Secret services were a danger to democracy everywhere, but in the Russian case very little had been done to limit the danger and no effective public control over these structures was created. In fact the opposite process took place, when retired KGB officers penetrated the overwhelming majority of businesses and NGO’s. Public opinion does not consider KGB descent to be a negative factor. An Interview with Anatolij Chubajs in the weekly Itogi (#13, 30.03.2000) could serve as a good example of the common attitude to the election of Putin:

AC: He (Putin) says that for him the Stalin cult was something little known and of little importance at that time – (1970’s), while for me that part of history of our country was of decisive importance for understanding what has happened and what is happening to us.
Q: Are not you confused by this difference? (Earlier Chubais speaks about his trust in Putin and support of him)
AC: No. No! It does not confuse me because one basic thing brings us together – responsibility for the country. From a very different point of departure we came to the same point today.

But I would dare to say that the election of V. Putin is not the most telling example. For me, the most striking episode was the decision of Media-Most (the holding of the most important and pro-western independent media in the country, including now famous NTV-channel) to hire General Filipp Bobkov, who served for many years as the head of the infamous 5 section of the KGB, which dealt with dissent within the country.

The outstanding role of the people from the secret services in post-Soviet life was inevitable, but the fact that public opinion gradually was prepared not only to accept it but also to approve of it, is the most obvious and the most dangerous failure in dealing with the communist past in Russia. To a large extent, it is the result of the total corruption in politics and business that the Russians experienced during the 1990’s. One of the topical issues of Russian current political agenda is the question to what extent the desire for order will paralyse the vigilance of public opinion in this respect. [2]

An unfortunate attempt to create a symbolic legal act was undertaken in 1991-1992, when President Yeltsin applied to Constitutional court demanding to outlaw the Communist Party. The total failure of accusation was commonly explained by poor preparation and low qualification of Yeltsin’s representatives. In fact the whole concept of accusation was judicial nonsense - it was oriented at the trial of ideology. It was impossible to put anyone on trial, even the members of the Politburo, as President Yeltsin himself had been a candidate member of this body. The appeals to put communism on trial, to organise “a new Nuremberg process of communism” are sometimes renewed - not only in Russia, but also in the West [3]. Resting on very poor judicial ground, such suggestions are in the majority of cases an element of the current political process. [4] At the same time, I would like to stress most strongly that this statement has nothing to do with denying the possibility and necessity of moral condemnation.
The coup in 1991 brought about a dramatic change, particularly on the **symbolic level**. In one day, the country changed its colours from red to tricolour. Some infamous monuments were destroyed. However, it very soon became clear that public opinion and political establishment were unable to reach a consensus about the symbolic issues. The Parliament, dominated by communists, had not officially approved of the national anthem and of the coat of arms. Yeltsin was never strong enough to close Lenin’s Mausoleum – the main communist symbol. Yet, after 1991, he never entered the official tribune of Soviet leadership on top of the Mausoleum, preferring to watch the parades on the Red Square from a provisional tribune instead.

The same tactic was used for other Lenin monuments and memorial places, which survived in many cities. They were excluded from official ceremonies and tourist programmes. When passing the Kazan University on an excursion last summer I was surprised that the guide did not mention the fact that Lenin had studied there. When asked, the elderly lady explained, that “We now have new excursion plans. Before, we used to stop here for at least half an hour to tell all the stories about Lenin’s student years”. Even in Ulianovsk, which as a whole was transformed into Lenin’s memorial city during the Soviet time, excursions are now taken to the ruins of the 19 century noble estate of the Decembrist Ivashev and to a cloister under construction, but not to the huge Lenin-museum that dominates the city, and which is actually worth seeing as a very representative monument of the Soviet era. The result was a marginalisation of Soviet symbols, which remain valid for an irremediable 20-25% of population. The only exception is Victory day on May 9 – it remains the main patriotic holiday.

Only recently did Putin manage a compromise with the newly elected Parliament on State symbols, adopting the old Muscovite coat-of-arms (double-headed eagle), the Russian flag from the Imperial period, the tricolour, and – to the deep regret of intellectuals and much satisfaction of some 70% of the population – the Soviet anthem with new words. He explained the move, saying that every period of Russian history had “black” pages, but all of them should be represented in State symbols.

At the same time, the new state proved to be incapable of creating new symbols of commemorating victims of the Soviet regime and of reconciliation. Several monuments to the victims erected in the 1990’s were not incorporated into any official or widely recognised public ceremonies. The burial of the Romanov family also became a subject for quarrels rather than a symbol. The president hesitated to take part until the very last moment, while the patriarch refused to appear.

The celebration of the October revolution of 1917 was officially transformed into a day of reconciliation and consent. The lack of solemn actions and ceremonies on this occasion was striking. Even in 1999, the question about the official status of November 7 produced the following answers: 35% believed it is still the anniversary of the Great October Revolution; 14% were aware of the day’s true official status; 5% considered this day to be a day of memory of the victims of revolution, somehow corresponding to the official interpretation, while 43% were unable to answer the question. Those 43% constitute the most representative group in society, which at the moment is living with the painful feeling of being deprived of positive symbols.

Another important aspect of the problem is connected to **international relations**. It
should be mentioned, that due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union many events acquired “international” status only in 1991. The general position of the Russian government is to refuse to take responsibility for the deeds of the Soviet regime on the ground that the Russians were also victims. At the same time, the government does not deny the fact of wrongdoing and does condemn it. If the other side is interested in normalisation, there is sufficient ground for reconciliation. We see it in the case of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland – with the mentioned limitations of those interested in normalisation and rapprochement. Documents on Katyn, the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968 were made public, the respective governments were provided with the copies. Many books, occasional articles and TV documentaries presented the true stories to Russian public. But on the government level, such recognition of wrongdoing was perceived as an act, not as a process. For example, none of the Russian highest officials ever took part in the annual commemorations of the Katyn victims with the Poles. Such participation was made dependent on the current state of political relations, meaning that this act was not perceived as an act of penitence. However, the appearance of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I. Ivanov, at the Powazki memorial of the victims of Katyn during his visit to Warsaw in November 2000 shows some positive changes in this respect.

The situation becomes much more complicated with the former Soviet republics. The responsibility of the Soviet regime for the democide in Kazakhstan and Ukraine has not been denied, but the interpretation of these events as a genocide organised by the Russian centre against the subordinated ethnic groups is rejected. The unique feature of the Russians among other nations of Eastern and East-Central Europe was until recently the absence of the motive of ethnic victimisation in their way of thinking. Russians always perceived themselves as the victims of the State, but they did not interpret this State as ethnically alien. Having to deal with the mentality of small and historically endangered nations, Russian public opinion was poorly prepared to understand the emotions of its neighbours. At the same time we should also remember that such emotions and mentality, produced by traumatic experiences of Russian neighbours are rarely balanced and free of phobias.

A particular case are the relations with the Baltic republics. The Congress of the People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union that started in May 1989 brought the turning point in the official position on the Hitler-Stalin Pact. A commission was established under A. Jakovlev, secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, to investigate the Pact. Although the secret protocols were yet to be “found”, the 2 Congress of Peoples Deputies passed a declaration admitting the existence of these secret protocols and condemning and denouncing them, on December 24 1989. [6] However, it was only on 29 October 1992, after the dissolution of the USSR, that the originals of the Secret protocols were finally made public in Moscow. Although recognising the illegal character of the secret protocols, the Russian Federation does not acknowledge the occupation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union. As indicated in a letter by the Russian deputy foreign minister, A. Avdejev, to the vice speaker of the State Duma, S. Baburin, from December 1997, “the disputes around the armed invasion of the Baltic territories and the following occupation of them do not have sufficient ground, since the administrative functions were carried out by national actors.” [7] Refusing to pronounce the very word “occupation” was most probably caused by the unregulated status of citizenship for those former Soviet citizens who moved to the Baltic republics after the second world war. Exact
evaluation of these people as occupants is used as an argument to deny their right for citizenship by some politicians in Latvia and Estonia. This situation proves once again that reaching some mutually acceptable agreement about the evaluation of the past becomes the function of good relations between given countries at present and not vice versa.

The problem of personal compensations to foreign victims was never seriously addressed. Taking into account material conditions of population in Russia and the failure of the state to deliver in the domain of its basic social obligations the government would not find any understanding of such action even if it tried to do so.

Let us finally turn to **historiography**. The general evaluation of the last decade should be positive, particularly if we take into consideration the desperate material conditions of scientists in general and of historians in particular during that time in Russia. One area of most outstanding achievement is the publication of sources. A huge number of documents from secret Soviet archives were published in special volumes and in journals. Several programs are now being implemented in co-operation with western scholars (financially supported by Western sources) for the publication of documents and archive catalogues, and for putting the documents on microfilms to make the more easily accessible. At the same time, access to several collections, including the presidential archive, remains very limited and selective. In the past two years, archive officials have more often tended to make arbitrary decisions about access of researchers to particular documents. It is impossible to evaluate, to what extent such practice is the result of some general instructions and to what extent it is a part of traditional habit of Russian officials to privatise controlled resources. Both are present and a law regulating the access to archive materials is badly needed.

The development in the domain of concepts and methodology was also rather intensive and fruitful, particularly if we remember how much the scheme of “The Short Course of the History of VKP (b)” (also in a form of its mirror opposition in oral tradition) dominated in late 1980’s. Since the early 1990’s, the concept of totalitarianism has served as a new methodological ground for the majority of Russian historians. Until now it remains dominant in textbooks and in teaching even at high schools. Due to a strong anticomunist moral message of the concept, this situation should be considered as the lesser evil keeping in mind low qualifications of the teaching staff.

However, as early as the mid-nineties did more and more researchers start to feel dissatisfied vis-a-vis the heuristic potential of the concept of totalitarianism. In the professional milieu the “social” turn of “revisionists” and their attention to research in archives received a positive response. In the second half of the 1990’s, numerous articles and books by Russian authors showed the ability to formulate independently the research agenda and to produce original theoretical concepts. [8] The role of the masses in the events of 1917-1930’s became the main topic of research, the attempt to evaluate the number of victims based on new archive sources, the analysis of decision-making process at the top of the Soviet hierarchy, which often showed the reactive nature of the particular moves. Equally important were the attempts to broaden the comparative contexts, involving not only the Nazi regime, but also different revolutions and religious movements.
It is quite obvious that such an agenda became very sensitive both in political and moral aspects. It is true that some attempts at historicisation were inspired by the wish to cast aside the problem of moral responsibility. At the same time, attempts by some authors, strongly devoted to the concept of totalitarianism, to condemn all the “revisionists” as those who look for justification of the communist crimes, were resolutely rejected by the professional milieu. [9] In fact, revisionist interpretations – I mean the “honest” sort – pose much more painful and difficult problems of moral responsibility as far as they, unlike “totalitarians”, refuse to blame solely the Communist regime for what happened in the Soviet period.

The historians’ trajectory during the last decade can be symbolically illustrated by two famous films. Pokajanije (“Penitence”) by Tengiz Abuladze marked the beginning of and addressed the issue at a romantic level, concentrating on the figure of the dictator. It was a huge success and had very broad audience. Alexei German in his recent film Khrustalev, mashinu! treats the subject in a deeply different way – he speaks about “ordinary” people and their participation, he speaks about criminals in a prison-wagon, who torture other prisoners and about a gang of teenagers in the street, who represent the authentic and spontaneous aggression and cruelty. He thus rejects to blame only the regime and asks to what extend that part of the population was producing the nightmare. Stalin and Berija appear here as old, weak and ugly little beings. That is not an attempt to avoid the question of responsibility, but a way of making it more general, complex but also demanding. Though a masterpiece, this film never left the so-called club cinemas and was seen by a limited social group – fully corresponding to the intentions of the director. The reaction of the ordinary Russian public was duplicated by the jury at Cannes – they awarded Abuladze’s film, but failed to appreciate the complicated language of Alexei German.

The problem of the communist past gradually loses its central role in the broad public discourse, and becomes a subject of deeper and more complicated reflection of the intellectuals. Products of this reflection (books, films) are oriented towards the elite. This work is, hopefully, the beginning of an accumulation of a new quality of understanding of the communist past, which might later find some mechanism of transmission to mass consciousness.

In conclusion, I would like to risk two statements. In all the discussed spheres, the achievement of dealing with the problem of the communist past is only partial, many of the most painful problems have not been touched on and it would be optimistic to say that Russia has to a fair degree extricated itself from communism in this respect. Yet taking into account the state of society at point A (the beginning of ) and the conditions of transition to point B (the turn of the century) the results are quite logical. Moral imperative was often sacrificed for immediate political interests, some of the most painful issues were left for next generations, but significant progress did take place. So, miracles didn’t happen. Still – if twenty years ago, somebody had described Russia in 2001 to me, I would have considered it a miracle.
Warsaw in September 2000, organised by the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Institute for History at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Footnotes


3. See the discussion of The Black Book of Communism in France.


5. VCIOM opinion poll at the end of October 1999 (1600 respondents).

6. Pravda, 1989, December 24 and 28, see also an article of deputy foreign minister of the USSR A.G.Kovalev, which confirmed the existence of the protocols. (Izvestia, 1989, December 27.)


9. The latest discussion about "totalitarian" school and revisionism took place in 1998-1999 in the journal Otechestvennaja istoria, which remains the most important forum for the students of the Soviet period. It was initiated by I.V.Pavlova, who insisted that "concept of totalitarianism remains the most adequate instrument for understanding of the Soviet period" and attacked revisionists as those who are doing their best to lighten the responsibility of the communist regime. (Pavlova I.V. Sovremennyje zapadnyje istoriki o stalinskoy Rossii 30-h godov (kritika "revizionistskogo" podhoda), Otechestvennaja Istoria, #5, 1998.) Her article was strongly criticized by many historians, who insisted that understanding and not moral judgement should be the main task of scholarship. (I snova ob istorikakh-"revizistakh", Otechestvennaja Istoria, #3, 1999.)

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