

Local Chronicles vs. National History

THE SEARCH FOR RUSSIAN IDENTITY

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While Russia's federal government has paid close attention to the depiction of Russian history since Vladimir Putin's first administration began reshaping the symbolic landscape of the country in the early 2000s, regional authorities have been more reluctant to use history for political aims. In recent years, however, many have begun to fashion a unique historical identity for their regions in an attempt to attract federal resources. With their potentially controversial efforts, the prospect for serious historical feuding in Russia extends beyond the many debates concerning federal efforts to prevent "falsification" of national history or the leadership role of Joseph Stalin. Local interpretations of history in some cases undermine loyalty to the federal center and pose threats to Putin's program for the revival of Russian patriotism.

Modes of Using Local History

In Soviet times, it was normal for regional authorities to organize city jubilees or celebrations in honor of local revolutionaries in order to secure additional money from the state budget. There were many limitations to this, including, first and foremost, prior endorsement from Moscow. In some instances, planned celebrations failed due to the lack of such an endorsement and the ensuing funds. This happened in 1977, for example, when Kazan planned to celebrate its 800th anniversary but was refused on the grounds that the event coincided with national celebrations in honor of the 60th anniversary of the Great October Revolution.

In the 1990s, growing regional autonomy resulted in a mushrooming of regional identity-building schemes, which inspired new forms of local historiography, especially in ethnorepublics. Most of these countered national versions of history by highlighting past episodes of local resistance to Moscow's centralizing efforts. Meanwhile, while Boris Yeltsin's administration failed to create its own version of the national past, political forces opposed to reform used Stalingrad as a symbol for their cause, making the city the site of their conventions and calling for a "second Stalingrad" for the reformers. Regional historical identity thus became the sign of a regional *Fronde* resisting central authority.

The Kremlin's quest for an alignment of political and legal terrains across Russia in the early 2000s led to the elimination of all regional identity-building efforts by local leaders. Stalingrad at the time was frequently used by Putin in his own symbolic landscaping of the past.

Regional Identity as a Resource

By the end of the decade, however, newly appointed governors felt comfortable on a now-leveled political terrain, and they again needed to highlight some regional differences in order to attract federal attention and funds. Indeed, with most of the money for regional development concentrated in the federal budget, the main task of the governors is to invent reasons for the allocation of bigger shares to their territories. These reasons may be varied: the region's geopolitical importance (Kaliningrad or the Far East), its role as a site for a national project (the Sochi Olympics), or some other kind of "special" identity.

The major prize sought by regional leaders is the Federal Targeted Program (FTP). There are now six FTPs with specific regional contexts and several more that also possess a regional dimension. Leading examples include:

- The Program of Development of the Kaliningrad Region (-2014)
- The Program of Economic and Social Development of the Far East and Transbaikal (-2013)
- The Program of Socioeconomic Development of the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Region (2007-2015)
- The Program of the South of Russia (2008-2012)
- The Program of Socioeconomic Development of the Social Sphere of the Chechen Republic (2008-2011)
- The Program of Development of Sochi as a Mountain Climate Health Resort (2006-2014)

In addition, the Program of the State Border of the Russian Federation (2002-2010) provides some resources for border regions, while the Program "Germans in Russia" allocates some money for Saratov.

As we can see, regional development was singled out as a specific federal problem in Kaliningrad (it is surrounded by members of the European Union), Chechnya (unstable), the Kuril Islands (claimed by Japan), Sochi (future Olympic site), the whole south of Russia (impoverished and unstable), and the Far East (depopulated).

When President Medvedev met Daghestani authorities in early August 2010, he promised to either create a special federal program for the republic on its own or as part of the "South of Russia" program.

Given such programs, it should not be surprising that other territories have also lobbied for "their" federal programs. History has become a resource for these efforts. In fact, almost every Russian region is creating its own local historical narrative. The relationship of these narratives to the all-Russian history is complicated; some appear innocuous while others pose a direct challenge.

Regional politicians use local historical narratives in two ways. First, they seek to attract more attention to their cities and regions in order to bring in tourists, pilgrims, and federal money to their territory. Second, they seek to create some local identity in order to use it in bargaining with the center for privileges. While these two strategies often supplement each other, they represent different political logics.

Regional Histories: Making a Name for Oneself

Although Kazan did not succeed in holding the celebration of its 800th anniversary, the city celebrated its supposed millennial jubilee in 2005. According to some estimates, the celebration cost about 50 billion rubles (\$1.6 billion), which came from the federal budget.

Kostroma discovered its own historical hero when local activists “found” the tomb of Ivan Susanin, a hero of the anti-Polish resistance in 1612, who allegedly served as a guide for a company of Poles and led them to their deaths in an impassable swamp. Despite the fact that the legend itself rules out the possibility of finding Susanin’s grave, it was made into a local celebration with the participation of then-governor Viktor Shershunov in 2001. The initiative coincided with the transformation of Russia’s main national holiday – from commemorating the 1917 October Revolution to celebrating the liberation of the Kremlin from the Poles in 1612.

Novgorod (“Great Novgorod”) is trying to base its contemporary political identity on the history of the medieval Novgorod republic, emphasizing a “republican” continuity between the twelfth and twenty-first centuries.

Several cities are also arguing for the right to call themselves “the first capital city of Rus,” including Novgorod, Old Ladoga, and even Kaliningrad, which are competing with each other as much as with Kyiv.

Several other cities have built their historical identities on an older history: regional politicians in the Chelyabinsk region call a local archaeological site (known as *Arkaim*) the “ancestral home of Indo-Europeans,” while local journalists and politicians look for the same motherland in such unusual places as the North Caucasus and the Far North’s Kola Peninsula.

These histories do not fit with national narratives and they have little in common with history as a scholarly discipline. However, they do not disturb federal authorities and their political implications are rather slim.

Regional Histories: Creating Controversy

The most developed version of a local historical narrative lies in what is called in the academic curriculums of Russia’s capital “*Moskvovedenie*” or “Moscow studies.” Unsurprisingly, this local narrative perfectly fits the national one. The development of some other local variants of history, on the other hand, pose greater challenges.

The attempt in the Rostov region to rehabilitate Pyotr Krasnov, a Cossack *ataman* during the Russian Civil War, who later allied with the Nazis and was executed in 1946, is perhaps the most striking example. Activists raised a monument to Krasnov on a private estate and created a full-scale private museum in Podolsk near Moscow, which featured anti-Bolshevik resistance figures such as Krasnov and General Andrei Vlasov

of the Russian Liberation Army, who fought alongside the German Army. While in Moscow such personages are unacceptable, the Cossacks in Rostov maintain a different view. Influential politicians initially supported the move to rehabilitate Krasnov in 2008. The move ended, however, with a visit by then-President Putin and, allegedly, a stern dressing-down behind closed doors. Ultimately, the Rostov Cossack leaders repudiated their stance.

There are, however, other potentially conflicting versions of history being promoted in Russia's regions. Historians in Novgorod stress the 16th century "massacre" of local nobility under Ivan the Terrible following the medieval republic's annexation. Ryazan authorities erected a monument to Prince Oleg, who is traditionally portrayed in Russian textbooks as a traitor for siding with the Mongols during Moscow's fight for independence in the 14th century. While old arguments about medieval nobility may seem out-of-date, they represent alternative interpretations of the historical role of Moscow as a unifier of Russian lands and bring into question the basis of local loyalty.

The most visible challenges to national history come from Russia's ethnonational republics. While Tatarstan's politicians seem to be satisfied with their "millennium" celebrations, a history curriculum that includes teaching that the "seizure of Kazan" by Ivan the Terrible was a great achievement of the Russian state is still problematic for the local classroom.

In the Caucasus, local histories possess an even more explosive potential. The "official" Russian narrative suppresses many different histories of ethnic enmities, but these persist in local cultures and can gain credence in some circumstances. One of the more recent examples is the enlivening of the Circassian historical narrative after the decision was made to hold the Winter Olympics in Sochi. According to Circassians (*Adyghe*), Sochi was traditionally their territory. Some go so far as to blame the Russian imperial government for committing "genocide" against the Adyghean people around Sochi in 1864.

In September 2010, the Russian historical community was shaken by a huge scandal over a nationalist-leaning, inaccurate textbook written by Moscow State University professors Alexander Vdovin and Alexander Barsenkov. One section about the percentage of Chechens who defected from the Red Army during the Second World War was particularly controversial. The scandal reached its highest point when journalist Nikolai Svanidze raised the book's tone and flaws with Russia's Public Chamber. Svanidze also brought the book to the attention of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who threatened to summon the authors to a Grozny court and charge them with slander toward the Chechen people.

Volgograd: History as Patriotic Education

Recently, a new initiative was born in a Russian region; its goal was clearly stated as a response to the challenges posed by emergent local histories. Volgograd Governor Anatoly Brovko, who was appointed on New Year's Eve 2009, revived the idea of Volgograd as being of special importance to Russian patriotism.

In office for only a few months, Brovko initiated a program called “Victory” in order to attract federal resources to Volgograd. The main idea is to create a “Federal Center of Patriotic Education,” which is to become the nucleus for a system of patriotic studies that brings every Russian schoolchild to Mamayev Hill, the central site of the Battle of Stalingrad. His intention is to “reshape the image” of the region by making it more positive. His idea was presented to President Dmitry Medvedev in March when the president was visiting Volgograd for a session of the “Victory in the Great Patriotic War” Jubilee Committee. Medvedev bestowed his approval upon the project.

After the celebrations in Volgograd commemorating the 65th anniversary of V-Day, the governor proceeded with his project. “The whole world should know that Volgograd – Stalingrad – is the capital city of Victory. And its contribution to Victory today is to be the vanguard of patriotic education,” Brovko said. Later the governor addressed the participants of the 14th World Russian People’s Council with the same idea and garnered the support of Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The governor realized that in order to be competitive on the national level, his project should be presented in a new way. As a “new-style” politician, Brovko followed Medvedev’s example and started his own blog on the popular Livejournal website. He also met with Volgograd bloggers (as well as local religious leaders).

Brovko ordered the project to be designed by the Moscow-based Institute of Regional Development (IRP). IRP had already designed schemes of regional development for post-Olympics Sochi, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vladivostok in 2012, and other ambitious projects. During the summer of 2010, IRP met with many Volgograd activists who offered an alternative non-military understanding of patriotism. As a result, the new project is heavily based on the whole history of the Volgograd region, with a special emphasis on events of major significance for Russia and the world. The project includes the creation of new museums, archives, and academic and research institutes in Volgograd. It needs considerable federal funds to achieve its goals, but it also seeks to attract tourism and business investment. The ultimate aim, however, is to lobby for an FTP for the Volgograd-centered education initiative. If Volgograd receives its own FTP, the primary goal of the governor will have been reached.

Viewed from the perspective of center-periphery relations, the novelty of the Volgograd initiative is the linking of local history to national history, which would make Volgograd the “Capital of the Victory” and therefore the capital city of Russian history. It could also create an alternative narrative of historical events, moving away from a centrally planned history to an interweaving of diverse local histories into a larger canvas of “federal” Russian history. The stakes are high: if the attempt succeeds, the identity of Russia will shift toward federalism.

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