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Xi, Putin and the struggle for “History”

History and memory as much as interests play a critical role in sustaining the Russia-China relationship today, writes Michael Cox.

It is often said by latter day doom-mongers that one of the many symptoms of the West’s current malaise – perhaps most visible in the United States – has been a steady move away from the study of history and the importance attached to it in schools and universities. As one *New York Times* headline recently proclaimed, over the past few years there has been a “**dangerous decline**” in the popularity of history and the profession of history which bodes ill for the future.

There is not even agreement any more on how history ought to be taught. It was not always so. Indeed, once upon a time in America it was clear what the story was and should be, with the country’s past painted in glowing colours embedded into a larger narrative about the rise of western civilisation. Those days are now long gone, consigned into that proverbial dustbin, or so critics claim, by a hodgepodge of progressive academics determined to tell the past as it really was. And the story they tell **is rarely a positive or pretty one.**

History with a large “H”

No such challenges face Russia and China today. Here, History with a very large “H” is not only taken very seriously but much time is also invested in making sure that history is presented in the correct way. As Xi has made clear on more than one occasion, history is not some intellectual game played out between argumentative academics, but a deadly serious business in which there is no room for what he has termed “**nihilism**”.

Getting the past wrong can, after all, have fatal consequences. Look, says Xi, what happened to the former Soviet Union, whose “ideals and convictions wavered” leading in time to **the collapse of a**

once great nation in 1991. The rot however had set in many years earlier when successive Soviet leaders started to play around with its past, beginning with Khrushchev in the 1950s when he criticised Stalin and continuing with Gorbachev in the 1980s when he opened up the door to a more critical look at the USSR's past.

Putin has been equally sensitive – some would argue obsessive – about the USSR's past. Here the Stalin question has posed the biggest problem. Putin has solved this by being “balanced”. As he explained in an interview with Oliver Stone, Stalin may have been a tyrant, but we should avoid **“excessively demonising”** him. Putin even set out the case for launching his “special military operation” against Ukraine in 2022 not by talking about Ukrainian Nazis or oppressed Russians in Ukraine, but instead by publishing a **long historical essay** about Russia in which he pointed out why Ukraine had no independent history of its own outside of a close relationship with Russia.

Even the less than critical Tucker Carlson could not escape Putin's obsessions with Russia's past, and in **an interview** designed in part to provide the Russian leader with an opportunity to denounce NATO, Putin immediately “launched into a rambling half-hour lecture covering more than a thousand years of Russian and Ukrainian history that placed the roots of today's war firmly in the distant past”.

History matters

History in other words matters. As Orwell **once reminded us**, those who are able to “control the past control the future” and those “who control the present” also “control the past”. Xi and Putin (no great lovers of Orwell and *1984* I would guess) could not agree more, and over the years have expended a great deal of time in making sure that China and Russia's respective pasts have been carefully controlled to iron out the wrinkles.

China of course has been doing so with ever greater determination since Xi came to power, thus ensuring that many of the more problematic moments in modern China's long turbulent history – most obviously what happened in May 1989 at Tiananmen Square – do not figure prominently (if at all) in the public discourse.

Russia too has become increasingly careful when it comes to the past. In 2021, Putin even created an “interagency commission on historical education” to ensure that the past was presented in the right way. As one official **openly admitted**, it was necessary to do so because “if history” was constantly being “rewritten, then the state” would “no longer exist”.

World War II

Both Xi and Putin have approached their own relationship with equal care, as became only too clear during recent events in Moscow when various dignitaries from a number of countries gathered to commemorate the end of WW2.

It was by any measure an impressive and moving day of remembrance, where Xi and Putin made the historically irrefutable claim with which no serious western historian like a **Max Hastings** or **Rana Mitter** would disagree, that both the Soviet Union and China at enormous cost played vital roles in overcoming the Axis. But it was not just the decisive part played by Russia and China in the war that was being commemorated when the troops (including some from China) marched by along Red Square. A certain version of History was on display too.

Xi even spelt it out in **a lengthy piece he wrote for the Russian press** just before he arrived. He could not have been clearer. If there was to be a brighter future then we must first learn from History, and the single most important event in the past from which we must all draw a lesson was that China and Russia together (more or less alone it seemed) “served as the mainstay of resistance against Japanese militarism and German Nazism”.

Others may have played a walk-on part, though no mention was made of any other allies like the United States or Great Britain, or even the role played by the KMT. It was the sacrifices made by the “heroic peoples” and the two great “civilisations” of Russia and China he insisted which turned the tide. Moreover, it was Russia and China who together then went on to build the “postwar international order” by establishing “the UN”, whose Charter “China and the Soviet Union were among the first to sign”.

Naturally enough, Putin agreed, even insisting that it was not just China and Russia who had done all the heavy lifting during the war, but whom together must “firmly stand” as the “**guard of historical truth**” when it comes to analysing the war. Why? Because as Xi himself warned, there were many out there who sought to “defame” the role played by China and the Soviet Union and the part they had played. But the truth would always out. Russia and China had stood side by side back then resisting aggression; and would **stand together shoulder to shoulder** now and into the future doing the same against modern day bullies and unilateralists and “all forms of hegemony and power politics”.

Don't mention the Russians

Sitting side by side watching as the assembled troops marched past on 9 May was hardly the first time that Xi and Putin had deployed an historical event to confirm their close relationship to the world at large. Yet Russia and China have not always been so close.

There is, most obviously, the ever so delicate question of how Russia humiliated China in the 19th century, acquiring in the process vast chunks of Chinese territory in the East, not to mention a gateway to the Pacific which it controls to this day. Others have also pointed to more recent

problems in the relationship, most notably between the 1960s and the 1970s **when the two became enemies**. As a **Council on Foreign Relations report** put it in a most understated way, "China and Russia have" what the report rather delicately termed "a long, complicated history together".

Complicated perhaps, but not necessarily set in concrete. Take the 19th century when Russia made one of the more serious land grabs in its long colonial history, seizing around 1.5 million square kilometres of China's territory. Not only does Putin say little or nothing about it (in fact he claims **"we have never been colonisers anywhere"**); Xi too like his immediate predecessors has increasingly avoided talking about this particular "dark spot". As one wit put it, when it comes to the past, it is perfectly legitimate to point a finger at nearly every power who humiliated China, but **"don't mention the Russians"**.

Instead focus, as Xi has done more and more, on the positive role the USSR played first in helping establish the Chinese Communist Party itself, and then many years later, in ensuring the Party came to power in 1949. As he noted on **the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of Marx in 2018**, "Marxism has not only profoundly changed the world" but China too, offering us through "Marxism-Leninism" a "brand new choice" by setting the "scene" for the birth of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s and subsequently helping the "Chinese people in their struggle to survive".

Soviet collapse

But what about the history of the former Soviet Union itself? Here the story becomes a little more complicated. After all, Putin no longer calls himself a communist, whereas Xi does. Xi meanwhile venerates Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, whereas Putin now ignores 1917 altogether and thinks Lenin was to blame for creating Ukraine "by separating" or "severing" what was "historically Russian land".

That said, both seem to admire Stalin as a great war-time leader who made Russia strong. Both moreover view the collapse of what Stalin and his successors constructed as a catastrophe from which only the United States benefitted. Unsurprisingly, they also share the same very negative view of Gorbachev and the role he played in bringing about the collapse.

There may of course be differences as to why this all happened. On the Chinese side at least **there are several different views** about what occurred between 1989 and 1991. But on one thing there is clear agreement: that the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet Union were tragedies, the greatest in the twentieth century according to Putin, and which Xi **we are told** finds it "too painful to look back upon", giving "him almost physical pain" when forced to think about it!

The tide of history

Of course, the past alone, or at least official constructions of it, are not enough to explain why China and Russia today are so close. Nor should we ignore the outside possibility that one day the two may just drift apart, and that if or when they do history with a big “H” will change once again. Yet in spite of the many predictions made over many years about the two not being anywhere near as united as they themselves claim, there is little sign of this particular marriage coming to an end any time soon.

On the contrary, the two today seem closer than ever, united in the belief (to quote Xi again) that both countries together are driving changes “the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years” in a world where the tide of history is finally turning in their direction. Hegel is once rumoured to have said that there is nothing to be learned from history. Xi and Putin would, I think, beg to differ.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Сергей Бобылёв, РИА «Новости» / Kremlin.ru](#)



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