

Andrei Zavadski\*, Vera Dubina, Egor Isaev, Alexandra Kolesnik, Julia Lajus and Katerina Suverina

# Public History in Russia: The Past, the Present, and (Thoughts About) the Future

<https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2022-2052>

Published online December 26, 2022

**Abstract:** This discussion’s participants – all public historians working on Russia, albeit from different disciplinary backgrounds and with different areas of expertise – speak about the past and the present of (public) history in the country, and touch upon possible futures. Beginning with an acknowledgment of the immense interest in historical knowledge that characterized the 1990s, the conversation goes on to examine the rise of the official historical politics in Putin’s Russia and their impact on historical science, memory work, and public engagement with the past more broadly. These developments contextualize the establishment of the first public history programs at Russian universities in the early 2010s, discussed here both in their specificities and compared to other countries. At the heart of the conversation is the war of aggression that Russia launched against Ukraine in February 2022. The participants of the discussion see it as a caesura, while at the same highlighting continuities in the regime’s historical politics before and after the invasion. Issues of postcolonialism and

decolonization are also raised, as well as the question of (public) historians’ responsibility for the ongoing tragedy.

**Keywords:** Memorial Society, memory politics, Russia, Stalinist repression, usable past

**ANDREI ZAVADSKI: What has been happening to historical knowledge in Russia over the past few decades?**

**VERA DUBINA:** Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the departure of the “leading role of the Communist Party” from the scene, Soviet historical scholarship lost its foundation. At the same time, interest in history among people in Russia was huge, and the public demand for “historical truth” was enormous. In the 1990s, with the opening of archives, rehabilitation of the repressed, and publication of secret documents (such as the Hitler-Stalin pact), Russian citizens were overwhelmed with the amount of new information that had become available.

Still, people lined up for volumes of Sergei Solovyov’s nineteenth-century historical writing, looking for guidance in pre-revolutionary historiography. Solovyov had collected the history of Russia in 17 volumes and is considered the first scholar to have written a general history of the country. But his work is more of a compilation of information from chronicles; it is positivist and descriptive in nature, which is why it proved unable to satisfy the public’s demands. I remember my parents standing in a long line for this multi-volume work and being very disappointed to learn that Solovyov’s history of Russia ends in the 1770s.

In addition to pre-revolutionary history, people wanted to understand the Soviet period and Stalinist repression. Alas, historians had little say here: their reputation had been undermined by catering to communist ideology. For this reason, by the way, many misguided theories flourished, such as Edvard Radzinsky’s “mysteries of history”<sup>1</sup> and

---

The conversation took place over email between the middle of October and the middle of November 2022, with questions and answers then edited for clarity by the corresponding author and the journal’s editors.

---

\***Corresponding author: Andrei Zavadski**, Institute of Art and Material Culture, TU Dortmund University, Dortmund, Germany, E-mail: andrei.zavadski@tu-dortmund.de

**Vera Dubina**, Institute for East European History, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany; Moscow School of Social and Economic Studies (Shaninka), Moscow, Russia; and University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany, E-mail: dubinave@hu-berlin.de

**Egor Isaev**, Institute for Media Studies, University of Bochum, Bochum, Germany, E-mail: Egor.Isaev@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

**Alexandra Kolesnik**, Poletaev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities (IGITI) and School of History, Faculty of Humanities, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia, E-mail: aleksa-kolesnik@yandex.ru

**Julia Lajus**, DGE Global Studies Institute, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA; and University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, E-mail: jlajus@gmail.com

**Katerina Suverina**, Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, Moscow, Russia; and University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany, E-mail: katya.suverina@gmail.com

---

1 Edvard Radzinsky (b. 1936) is a Russian playwright, screenwriter, television personality, and writer who authored more than 40 popular history books. Since the 1990s, he has published a series called *Mysteries of History*. Among Radzinsky’s books translated into English are his biographies of Nicholas II and Joseph Stalin. His books have been criticized for utilizing anecdotal evidence and unconfirmed reports. See Dmitry Volodikhin, Olga Yeliseeva, and Dmitry Oleynikov, *Istoriya Rossii v melkiy goroshek* [Polka-Dotted History of Russia] (Moscow: Yedinstvo, 1998).

Anatoly Fomenko's "new chronology."<sup>2</sup> The 1990s was a time when a broad public debate on the Soviet past was possible; it was a time when a genuinely *public* history could have been established. But this chance was, unfortunately, missed. Not only because historians' reputation had been compromised and the public was reluctant to listen to academics, but also because members of the academic community were themselves not very eager to speak publicly: they were afraid of losing what was left of their scholarly reputations.

I am sure that this distrust of historians, encouraged by all sorts of "discoveries" and "revelations" made by the Fomenkos of the Russian public-at-large, prevented a healthy attitude to history being adopted by people in Russia. Dealing with the Soviet Union's difficult past also failed because no group with the power and tools to do so had taken consistent steps in this direction. Interest in reflecting on Soviet repression therefore did not become mainstream. It persisted and developed in some circles, for instance, around the *Memorial Society*. There were also many grassroots initiatives, like history clubs, *kvartirniki* ("flat meetings"), and others. But, as we can now see, this work of individuals and groups has not stood up to the competition of television. Vladimir Putin's aggressive historical politics implemented over the past 20 years, together with the power of televised propaganda, have made the current horrific war possible. These politics have also made it possible to accuse Ukraine – the (former) republic of the Soviet Union that, together with Belarus, suffered most during the Second World War – of "fascism."

For most Russian citizens, history still means a succession of military victories and defeats. The young discipline of public history did quite a lot to change this old Soviet view of the past as a military parade. It could have done much more. But, developing under the conditions I have just described, public history failed not only to become mainstream, but also to survive the aggressive historical politics of Russian authorities. What has been happening in Russia since 2014 – not to mention the events following the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 – could already be qualified as "crimes against history."<sup>3</sup> It all happened

gradually: slowly but surely various laws and bylaws restricted the freedom of research, with ideology taking the place of scholarship.

During Putin's first term in power (2000–2004), the Presidential Administration – the president's executive office – denied any need for a state ideology. Putin cast himself as a non-ideological figure, claiming to be working solely in line with technocratic objectives. The aggressive offensive of historical politics became most visible following Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (after 2012), even though it had started earlier. The first law adopted in this regard was Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which criminalized the "rehabilitation of Nazism." The bill was first introduced to the State Duma during Medvedev's presidency, in 2009, and met with widespread disapproval, including within the cabinet of ministers. This bill had been cast aside until it was revised and quickly passed in May 2014, against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis. Although some aspects of this law resemble the "memorial laws" adopted in other European countries around that time (that is, laws that prohibit the denial of or support for Nazi crimes), the Russian law is different. It allows for the prosecution of those who disapprove of the Soviet government's policies during the Second World War or express "disrespectful" opinions about Russia's military history.

Having started with a legal ban on free academic research of the Second World War, the scope of historical politics has been expanded to include a wider range of topics. In recent years, the Russian state has been busy creating and implementing an official historical narrative centered around the glorification of the Soviet era's achievements. This downplayed or even justified the massive crimes committed by the Soviet regime, including Stalin's Great Terror. In 2020, this glory-obsessed historical narrative was *de facto* introduced into the Constitution of the Russian Federation. A number of additions to the Constitution declared the Russian Federation "the legal successor" to the Soviet Union (Article 67.1(1)) and stated that the Russian Federation "honors the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland" and "ensures the protection of historical truth" (Article 67.1(3)). Thus, continuity with the USSR, the sanctity of the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War, and state monopoly on history were placed at the heart of Russia's contemporary political system.

**ANDREI:** I cannot but think about what has been happening in this regard since February 2022. Indeed, what changes to historical knowledge, historical science, public history, and memory work have taken place in Russia since this new stage of Putin's war in Ukraine began? I want to say: nothing and yet everything.

<sup>2</sup> Anatoly Fomenko (b. 1945) is a mathematician and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences who created a "new chronology" of world history. Fomenko asserts that all ancient history (including the histories of Greece, Rome, and Egypt) is just a reflection of events that occurred in the Middle Ages, and that Chinese and Arab histories are seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fabrications by the Jesuits. His pseudoscientific theory was very popular in the Russia of the 1990s and still has some supporters. In 2019, a museum of Fomenko's "new chronology" was opened in Yaroslavl with the support of the regional administration.

<sup>3</sup> Antoon De Baets, *Crimes against History* (London: Routledge, 2018).

“Nothing” in the sense that, when it comes to the regime’s treatment of the past, the principal trends had been there all along. Vera has already touched upon the official historical politics and historical knowledge in Putin’s Russia. The former has been tightening its grip year after year, exemplified perhaps in the activities of Vladimir Medinsky, in his capacities both as the culture minister from 2012 to 2020 (when he was appointed an assistant to the president), and as the head of the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS). This so-called scholar, whose dissertations<sup>4</sup> have been demonstrated to contain multiple instances of plagiarism, has reportedly done plenty to promote Putin’s idea of a thousand-year-old Russia and his views on history more generally.<sup>5</sup> The Medinsky-run RMHS created a state-sanctioned “public history” field, which, with its easy access to funding and unfailing approval of the political establishment, became increasingly separated from what could be called independent public history projects. The RMHS has installed multiple memorials, the monument to Vladimir the Great in Moscow being perhaps the most (in)famous of them, and organized numerous exhibitions, with “Russia – My History”<sup>6</sup> as its most ambitious museum project and arguably also the most contentious one (see Figure 1). The organization has published books, held conferences and seminars, and hosted thousands of children across Russia in its military history summer camps. All the while, independent public history projects were mostly confined to the realm of the digital, showing vulnerability to the changing political situation, experiencing an acute lack of funds, and generally struggling to survive.

When thinking about historical knowledge more broadly, it is impossible not to mention Putin’s recent speeches, the one given immediately prior to February 24



**Figure 1:** “Have you done this?” – “Cross my heart.” The cartoon “Monument to Vladimir the Great” is a (post)ironic reference to the religious embeddedness of the official memory politics. Image Credit: FOX&OWL studio, Moscow, illustration for the book “All Things Past: Theory and Practice of Public History,” co-edited by Andrei Zavadski and Vera Dubina (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2021). Courtesy of the book’s editors.

and those that have come since then. Is there anything new in these pronouncements, replete with (pseudo)historical references and meant to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia’s military? Not exactly. Rather, these talks provide an “executive summary” of the Russian authorities’ treatment of the past over the past decades. In this sense, when I think of what has been happening in the country since February and what had been happening before, I see first and foremost continuity.

And yet, February 24 was a definitive caesura. Earlier, the official historical politics suppressed, stifled, and suffocated, but killed only selectively, out of spite or revenge (as in the case of the director Kirill Serebrennikov, who reportedly crossed Medinsky). The idea behind these cat-and-mouse games was to muffle voices of resistance. Now, the regime’s historical politics suffocate in order to kill – and thus to silence for good.

Putin’s speeches, which hardly offer new insights into how he sees the history of his own country and that of its neighbors, are now being treated as nothing less than

<sup>4</sup> In Russia, the doctoral degree system has two levels: a Candidate of Sciences (can be recognized as equivalent to the Dr. phil./PhD level) and a Doctor of Sciences (similar to Dr. habil. in Germany). Medinsky holds the degree of a Candidate of Sciences in political science (1997) as well two (sic!) Doctor of Sciences degrees, in political science (1999) and in history (2011). Instances of plagiarism and academic fraud have been found in all three. See Maria Lipman, “Meet the second-rate academic who is Vladimir Putin’s culture cop,” *The New Republic*, published May 24, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117896/vladimir-medinsky-russias-culture-minister-putin-toady> (accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> “Hegemon. Putin’s new favorite word?,” *Signal/Medusa*, sent October 5, 2022, [https://medusa.io/?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=signal&utm\\_campaign=2022-10-03](https://medusa.io/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=signal&utm_campaign=2022-10-03) (accessed November 22, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Ekaterina V. Klimenko, “Politically useful tragedies: The Soviet atrocities in the historical park(s) ‘Russia — My History,’” *Problems of Post-Communism* (published online first, 2021), doi: 10.1080/10758216.2021.1974884.

blueprints. For instance, there have been numerous media reports<sup>7</sup> on history teaching guides that the Ministry of Education has been spreading among schools across Russia. Schoolteachers, of history and other subjects, used to be able to keep politics out of their curricula and lessons. In fact, with the goal of suppressing any potential dissent, keeping politics out of the classroom is exactly what the authorities demanded from them. Yet, silent acceptance (or rejection, for that matter) of official politics is not enough anymore. For instance, teachers are being told exactly how they should teach the history of Ukraine and its relationship to Russia.

When it comes to public history as a discipline, relevant university programs, which essentially teach students to treat public representations of the past critically, have been under pressure for years. One only has to look at the example of the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, the private university that is home to the first public history program in the country, co-founded in 2012 by Vera. One year, the school did not receive accreditation; later, a criminal case against its leadership was initiated. All of this had happened before February 2022. And yet, there is a dramatic disruption to this seeming continuity. Independent education and scholarship are hardly possible today at all; the space of freedom, very limited before, has shrunk like a cashmere sweater in boiling water. Public history programs are barely surviving, continuing to exist with most of the students and staff abroad.

In terms of memory work one can discern a certain continuity as well. The Memorial Society had been under pressure for years; it was outlawed before the February 24 stage of the war, in late 2021. The victory in the Great Patriotic War had been at the center of the regime's historical politics for decades, with the memory of the Gulag and its victims increasingly and systematically ghettoized, ultimately in Moscow's Gulag History Museum.<sup>8</sup> But there is hardly any doubt that the caesura of February 24 has destroyed (at least from the perspective of those who stand against the invasion of Ukraine) the myth of this victory heroically achieved by a country unjustly attacked from the

outside. This memory, and memory work in Russia overall, will be – will have to be – radically different in the future.

Finally, the post-February 24 stage of the war has also opened our eyes in terms of postcoloniality and decolonization. In 2019, when Vera and I were looking for somebody to author a chapter on interconnections between post-colonial studies and public history for our collective monograph *All Things Past: Theory and Practice of Public History*,<sup>9</sup> we were shocked to discover that, to our knowledge, only three or four researchers were working on the topic. Moreover, the very fact of our “discovering” it smells somewhat like Columbus's “discovery” of America, doesn't it? How is it possible, I am now asking myself, that 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in a country like Russia, not every or at least every second humanities scholar would be preoccupied with reflections on, analyses of, and working through (post)colonial pasts and presents? This status quo has now begun to transform radically.

**ALEXANDRA KOLESNIK:** An interesting and inspiring example of changes in public history practices are small bottom-up projects focusing on cultural heritage in Russia, like the project *Vlesah* (“In the Woods”) and the collective *Gang*.<sup>10</sup> *Gang* is an informal association of heritage activists from St. Petersburg, which was founded in 2019. Their main activity consists of finding and cleaning details of St. Petersburg's architecture (stained-glass windows, stoves, panels, tiles, and similar), in collaboration with the city's inhabitants. These practices are complemented by the collective's active work on social media. This has resulted in a virtual community of people interested in preserving material heritage and ready for an open conversation about it. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many participants began to see their work in the collective as a form of political activism. They use social media posts to speak out against the war, express their personal frustration with political persecution in Russia, and protest against mobilization – or, as it quickly became known on Russian-language social media, “moGilization,” from the Russian word *mogila* (“grave”).

The project *Vlesah* was launched in 2021 and focuses on the visibility of local and regional (often unconventional) heritage. It unites researchers and practitioners from different cities across the country and aims to create online media about Russian architectural monuments as well as

7 See, for example: Sergey Kassia-Khazov, “S gordo podnyatoy golovoy: Metodichka dla urokov propagandy woyny” [‘Standing tall.’ A guide for teaching war propaganda], *Radio Svoboda*, last modified March 22, 2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/s-gordo-podnyatoi-golovoi-metodichka-dlya-urokov-propagandy-voiny/31761073.html> (accessed November 22, 2022).

8 Andrei Zavadski, “Moscow's new GULAG History Museum: A ghetto for Memory?” *Lernen aus der Geschichte Magazin* May 2016, [http://lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de/sites/default/files/attach/lagmagazin\\_mai2016\\_gulag.pdf](http://lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de/sites/default/files/attach/lagmagazin_mai2016_gulag.pdf) (accessed November 23, 2022).

9 Andrei Zavadski and Vera Dubina (eds.) *Vsio v proshlom: teoriya i praktika publichnoy istorii* [All Things Past: Theory and Practice of Public History] (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2021).

10 *Vlesah's* Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/vlesah/?hl=en> (accessed November 22, 2022). *Gang's* *Vkontakte* page: <https://vk.com/stpkraevedgang> (accessed November 22, 2022).

about different communities involved in heritage maintenance practices and conversation about heritage (from restorers to entrepreneurs). One of the project's key purposes is searching for new ways of talking about heritage in Russia, a conversation in which communities that had previously been excluded from it could take part. After the outbreak of the war, the project suspended its activities, but in August 2022, the work was resumed. Now, drawing attention to regional and disappearing heritage, *Vlesah's* participants often write about the war and heritage, giving examples of monuments lost during the Second World War. Such examples show that bottom-up projects still exist, developing and strengthening horizontal ties, and contributing to the formation of grassroots forms of solidarization. This is especially important in the context of the atomization of the population under Putin's regime.

**ANDREI: What can be added to this with regard to Russian media?**

**EGOR ISAEV:** The decisions that followed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have radically changed the media landscape in the country. A series of laws were passed that *de facto* introduced military censorship. This led to the blocking of virtually all independent or even partially independent Russian media, and of entire social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and others). As a result, Russian journalists began to emigrate, relaunching their media abroad. Other publications were not closed at all: *Meduza*, reasonably aware of what was coming, had been launched abroad (in Riga, Latvia) in the first place. *Mediazona* was relaunched in the first days of the war without a break in delivering content. While independent media were blocked or shut down, those loyal to the regime found themselves under conditions of unprecedented hands-on regulation by the authorities.

Moreover, quite a few new platforms and so-called small media (*Verstka*, *Beda*, and others) have emerged. Here, I'd like to speak to Andrei's point about the almost complete absence of postcolonial optics in the discourse of Russian historians and humanities scholars. Over the past decades, Russian media did not make much use of this lens either, often ignoring problems of the relationships between Russia and its former colonies as well as between the "center" and "the peripheries." Clearly, it is now becoming a key theme in media discourse, with a full-scale decolonization seen as the only possible way to escape the agony of a phantom empire. In the materials published by independent media, history has suddenly become a tool not to contrast past and present regimes, but rather to highlight their mistakes in general. In independent media, Russia has suddenly gained a temporal perspective extending to the depth of centuries, finding – somewhat ironically – the continuity that Putin was constantly talking

about all these years. Importantly, however, this temporal lens is now being used to uncover the continuity of state violence and imperial ambitions.

When it comes to the treatment of history by state and pro-government media, they continue to produce more or less the same content they have been producing for years, even though it is clearly becoming more and more difficult for these "journalists" to keep track of the authorities' increasingly chaotic and unpredictable discourse. Low-quality and often outright fake content (including the material about the felling of Berlin's Tiergarten<sup>11</sup>) is juxtaposed with bloodthirsty materials by Russian propagandists (Anton Krasovsky, for example, recently suggested killing children and raping elderly women in Ukraine), which puts an end to the transformation of these media into yellow (sensationalist) journalism paid for by the Russian taxpayer.

The study of media has noticeably stalled, both because of the "purges" and scandalous layoffs in Russian universities and the exodus of faculty members from today's higher education institutions. Researchers keep explaining the impact of state media, particularly television, on public opinion in Russia with the help of the outdated magic bullet (hypodermic needle) theory, which posits that the intended message – the information conveyed by mass media – is directly received and wholly accepted by passive audiences. The narrative of the power of propaganda influencing people in Russia and completely changing their worldviews is now commonplace. The question of people's own demand for the kind of content that state-owned media deliver is not raised in principle. Offering any kind of criticism to this approach today seems a rather pointless endeavor. But we can rest our hopes on the data currently being collected by anthropologists: perhaps in the future, they will help us find an explanation for what happened.

**ANDREI: Does memory activism exist in Russia after February 24, 2022?**

**KATERINA SUVERINA:** I agree with Egor: the new laws, especially the one on "false information" about the Russian army, *de facto* established military censorship in the country. This censorship plays a key role in the prosecution of activists who stayed and worked in Russia immediately after the invasion had begun. Since then, most of them – like Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) as well as the academics

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Bushev, "Bloomberg: Otchayavshiyesia iz-za energokrizisa evropейtsy vozvrashchayutsia k stareyshemy vidu topliva" [Bloomberg: Frustrated by the energy crisis, Europeans are returning to the oldest fuel], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, published October 9, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/10/09/bloomberg-v-berlinskom-parke-tirgarten-zhiteli-vyrubili-pochti-vse-derevia-a-teper-zainteresovalis-navozom.html> (accessed November 24, 2022).

and public figures behind it – have had to leave the country due to the threat of criminal prosecution. Following the immigration, some decided to continue their work and launched new Telegram and Instagram channels. From my point of view (a point of view of somebody who remains in the country), the impact of this “soft resistance” on the debunking of state propaganda is rather weak.

Another depressing, yet very characteristic example is the new campaign to ban all the information on LGBTQI+ issues. After the first “anti-gay” law of 2014, as a positive side-effect of this horrible legislation, there was a lot of research on gender issues, queer histories, and alternative historical narratives. Much new writing emerged, as well as new publishing houses that focused on queer literature: *Popcorn Books* and *No Kidding Press*. In order not to break the law, publishers, academics, and activists had to attach 18+ labels to their materials. Not long ago, a “total ban” on LGBTQI+ information was suggested by the lawmakers. While its initiators were working hard on amendments to the 2014 bill, Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies, and Mass Communication) publicly called for bookshops to take LGBTQI+ literature off their shelves; which, it must be added, they refused to do. On November 24, 2022, the State Duma passed the “total ban” law in its third reading.<sup>12</sup> So, many people, including myself, are now outlawed.

Another example of these repressive politics is the “foreign agent” label. The authorities use it to mark “enemies of the state” – mostly journalists and political activists, but also popular historians and schoolteachers, such as the distinguished historian, Honored Teacher of the Russian Federation, and blogger Tamara Eidelman. She had publicly announced her support for Ukraine, but I do not think that this was the decisive factor behind her inclusion in the list of foreign agents. One of the main reasons, I believe, was the growing popularity of her YouTube history lessons.<sup>13</sup> The historical narrative that she promotes is, without a doubt, radically different from the established official point of view.

Regarding memory, memory activism, and memory studies, the situation seems similar to the one in the media landscape. The only possible way to participate in a discussion of a historical matter, to organize a commemorative event, or to publicly engage with an issue of the past seems to involve cooperation with “the Kremlin.” For instance, the

<sup>12</sup> “Zapreshchayetsia propaganda netraditsionnykh seksual’nykh otnosheniy” [Propaganda on non-traditional sexual relations banned], State Duma, November 24, 2022 <http://duma.gov.ru/news/55838/> (accessed November 24, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> “Tamara Eidelman History” <https://www.youtube.com/@TamaraEidelmanHistory>.

Higher School of Economics in Moscow is now closely working with the Russian Historical Society (RHS)<sup>14</sup> and its chair Sergey Naryshkin (who is also the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service and a member of the Security Council) on “developing” historical disciplines at the university.<sup>15</sup> At the school level, the Ministry of Education has created a series of lessons called “Conversations on What Is Important” aimed at pupils of all grades.<sup>16</sup> Andrei already mentioned the Ministry-prepared methodological handouts for schoolteachers that underline the importance of “state patriotism,” which is undoubtedly connected to the “right” understanding of the past.<sup>17</sup> Officials are also planning to implement a new ideology course for university students, the historical part of which is to be curated by Medinsky.<sup>18</sup>

The authorities have also banned “Returning the Names,” the commemoration of Great Terror victims that was established by the Memorial Society in 2007 and has been held on October 29 every year since then. Despite this and other repressive measures, however, people continue to engage in practices of micro-resistance within the country. For instance, independent bookshops display books dedicated to previous wars, genocides, international tribunals, or histories of political and cultural resistance. Another example here is *Gorky Media*, a Russian website dedicated to literature and publishing: since the beginning of the war, *Gorky Media* have been continuously publishing war-related materials, for instance, lists of books on such topics as “Five Books on Propaganda.” Mostly dedicated to wars of the past, they present micro-level resistance to the present. This is what Andrei calls “mnemonic counterpublics.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Alongside the Medinsky-led Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), the Russian Historical Society (RHS) is the leading state-sanctioned “public history” organization in the country.

<sup>15</sup> “U gunarnitarnoy nauki v nashey strane istoricheskiy profil” [The humanities in our country have a historical focus], News of Higher School of Economics, October 13, 2022, <https://www.hse.ru/news/edu/783602451.html> (accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Andrey Pertsev, “Molodyye ludi dolzhny ponimat, kuda idet Rossiya” [Young people must understand where Russia is going], *Meduza*, October 25, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/10/25/molodye-dolzhny-ponimat-kuda-idet-rossiya> (accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> “True patriots are willing to defend the Motherland with arms in hand” Russia’s ‘patriotic’ curriculum for the upcoming school year,” *Meduza*, August 26, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/08/26/true-patriots-are-willing-to-defend-the-motherland-with-arms-in-hand> (accessed November 28, 2022). See also: Andrey Pertsev, “Molodyye ludi dolzhny ponimat, kuda idet Rossiya.”

<sup>18</sup> Andrey Pertsev, “Molodyye ludi dolzhny ponimat, kuda idet Rossiya.”

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Zavadski, “Remembering the 1990s in Russia as a form of political protest: Mnemonic counterpublics,” in *Remembering Transitions: Local Revisions and Global Crossings in Culture and Media*, ed. Ksenia Robbe (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming 2023).

Despite all these efforts, however, I'd have to answer your question with a "no." If we speak about Russia's public-at-large, there is little, too little memory activism left. There is no possibility to have an open discussion about queer histories, decolonization, postcolonial memory narratives or similar issues/topics without serious consequences. Even though some conversations are still occurring on social media (some of which are officially banned and can only be accessed through a VPN), most of these practices have returned to the kitchens.

**VERA:** Dear colleagues, if I may add something ... I am not a media specialist and judge them only as a user. It seems to me that, with the outbreak of the war, what can be called soft resistance has come to dominate social media. Not open opposition, but rather the Aesopian language that Alexandra Arkhipova is actively exploring.<sup>20</sup> It seems to me that astonishing ingenuity and creativity have taken over far more people than before the war. All these exemptions of words (like three dots plus five dots (... ..)) to mean *Net voyne* – "No to War") or references to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*<sup>21</sup> have not subsided since February, but, after being deciphered by the punitive authorities, acquire new forms: *wobla* (Caspian roach)<sup>22</sup> in the place of "war," and similar. This is not a form of protest that can directly change the regime, but it is a whole new world of political speech that can, in my view, influence public opinion.

**JULIA:** What strikes me in the (mis)use of history and public perceptions of history in Russia is its breached temporality: when the events and norms of a very distant past return as contemporary, it is as if the time did not pass at all. After February 24, this is especially visible. "Oprichnina," the Red Terror, Stalin's purges – all these historical events have become much closer to us. These terrible periods and events have been transpiring through the "thickness" of history. More and more often, wars of the

past are mentioned: first "pechenegi" (Pechenegs) as enemies, then the "anglosaks"<sup>23</sup> (Anglo-Saxons); a lot of monuments to ancient heroes and saints have been erected. My hypothesis (most probably not original) is that these old creatures acquire meaning both for politicians and for the general public in a situation when the layer of the present is "too thin" and the future is not visible at all. "Thin present" means that people are rooted in neither political nor economic fabrics of reality. They feel insecure and do not have any power to influence what is going on. For them, a distant, highly mythologized past is often more meaningful than their own, quite miserable life. Metaphorically speaking, Russian history and society resemble a soil that is not replenishing because there is not enough organic material to feed it (economy), not enough water (education, culture), and the wind is too strong (too many fast changes, too much cruelty). The only way to replenish the "soil" is to build institutions that could serve as bolstering foundations. When the soil layer of the present time is thick enough, then the distant past is safely buried and does not come so easily to the surface. The more the present with its everyday life is destroyed, the more distant pasts harmfully transpire to the surface of political and social life. On this thin soil, people need to make simple choices, they cannot keep their multiple identities, as they are forced to anchor themselves to a simpler – but deep – time in history. In this perspective, the "short" history of Ukraine as a state serves as an unbeatable argument against this fully constructed long *durée* history of the Russian state.

The role of the church as an agent of "public history" is also quite emblematic. The revival of the church after the fall of the Soviet Union in its most archaic version, its inability to guide people through modern challenges, and the mythologization of history as part of religious belief put this institution into a very ambiguous situation. Historical events, even those from a non-distant past – for instance, victorious battles during the Great Patriotic War or the murder of Nicolas II – receive religious explanations. This leads to the mythologization of the past and bolsters a new

<sup>20</sup> Alexandra Arkhipova, "(Ne)zanimatel'naya antropologiya" [(Non) Fun Anthropology], Telegram Channel, [https://t.me/anthro\\_fun](https://t.me/anthro_fun) (last accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> In the Soviet Union, the ballet *Swan Lake* was a symbol of the death of a Soviet leader, for it was shown on the days of mourning on all television channels instead of the other programs. During the 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt it was constantly shown on TV instead of news.

<sup>22</sup> In Tyumen, a young woman wrote "Net w\*\*\*e" ('No to War') and managed to prove in court that she had meant "No wobble" because she did not like that fish. But the police are already trying to appeal against the court's decision and to charge the woman with discrediting the Russian army. See Yulia Mal'tseva, "Politsiya dobivayetsia nakazania dla tyumenki, protestuyushchey protiv vobly – raneye sud opravdal ee" [Police seek punishment for Tyumen woman protesting against cockroach. Court acquitted her before], *72.ru*, published October 28, 2022, <https://72.ru/text/gorod/2022/10/28/71773985/> (accessed December 5, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> "Vlasti vse chashche govoriat, chto glavnye vragi Rossii – eto angosaksy. Eto zhe tolko SSHA i Velikobritaniya. A kak zhe 'kollektivnyi zapad'?" [The authorities more and more often say that Russia's main enemies are Anglo-Saxons. These are only the USA and Great Britain, aren't they? And what about "the collective West"?], *Meduza*, May 19, 2022, [https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/19/vlasti-vse-chashegovoryat-chto-glavnye-vragi-rossii-eto-anglosaksy-eto-zhe-tolko-ssha-i-velikobritaniya-a-kak-zhe-kollektivnyy-zapad?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=signal&utm\\_campaign=2022-08-29&utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=signal&utm\\_campaign=2022-10-03](https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/19/vlasti-vse-chashegovoryat-chto-glavnye-vragi-rossii-eto-anglosaksy-eto-zhe-tolko-ssha-i-velikobritaniya-a-kak-zhe-kollektivnyy-zapad?utm_source=email&utm_medium=signal&utm_campaign=2022-08-29&utm_source=email&utm_medium=signal&utm_campaign=2022-10-03) (last accessed November 28, 2022).

temporality, with the imperial period easily continued by Stalinism, then on to the late Soviet stagnation and afterwards immediately to the present. More ‘problematic’ periods, like the Revolution of 1917, the 1920s, or Nikita Khrushchev’s Thaw during the Cold War, are not receiving much attention.

**ANDREI:** When we speak about public history in Russia, it is necessary to emphasize the specificity of the country’s public sphere. Florian Toepfl, for instance, defines it as a “leadership-critical public-at-large,” which, in his typology, means that within Russia’s spheres, partial publics of three types co-exist: he calls them “uncritical,” “policy-critical,” and “leadership-critical.” The delimiting factor here is, according to Toepfl, the level of criticizing authorities that can circulate in public discourse. However, he stipulates that this was the case at the time of his research (the paper was published in 2020),<sup>24</sup> now one could probably argue that there are no leadership-critical publics left in Russia. Against this background, as well as against the background of the developments in the sphere of history and historical politics, how can we summarize the trajectory of public history as a discipline in Russia?

**VERA:** Russia’s public sphere is indeed structured differently than that of a Western liberal democracy. Yet, historians, like Alexander Khodnev who writes that “public history is developing in Russia from below as an activity of the public, particularly the educated part of it,” still talk about “the public” and “the public sphere.”<sup>25</sup> When Khodnev and others speak about the public’s demand for historical knowledge in Russia, they imply non-academic readers, or simply non-historians who are interested in history, visit museums and lectures on historical subjects, and so on. These people are, too, involved in the production and reproduction of historical interpretations, and their interest in historical knowledge and heritage issues has not abated over the past 40 years.

Thanks to this public interest, various kinds of grassroots historical projects developed in Russia independently and in different directions. Books like Svetlana Alexievich’s *War Does Not Have a Woman’s Face* (1985) or historical TV programs like *Namedni* (1990–1991 and 1993–2004), while not presented as “public history,” have laid the groundwork for its emergence. But such projects emerged alongside the strengthening of historical politics imposed by the authorities and ultimately could not compete with state

television. As I said before, historical politics gradually but surely tightened its grip. First, journalistic projects were shut down (like Leonid Parfenov’s *Namedni*), then the pressure moved on to academic historians, with the authorities further fueling the distrust of historians already widespread among people in Russia.

The field of public history found itself between the Scylla (public distrust of historians) and the Charybdis (the aggressive historical politics of the state). It began to actively develop in Russia just about 10 years ago. Alexander Khodnev writes that the discipline’s emergence was a response to the attempts of the state, since 2001, to monopolize the sphere of public usage of the past. According to him, state institutions reduced the dialogue between the society and the state to politics of history.<sup>26</sup> I agree that the pressure of state historical politics caused the wish to oppose it, but public history in Russia grew not out of this opposition alone, but out of a huge popular interest in history, out of a sense of raw historical trauma ripping through the aggressive state historical politics. The need to build public history programs became apparent to historians across Europe in the 2000s. In Russia, as in Germany, for example, the first MA programs appeared almost simultaneously.

When in 2011, I proposed the creation of a program in public history to a private university – the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka) – I was hoping for a lot of interest from colleagues and wider publics. The need to combine historical expertise with public inquiry had already been quite evident by 2011; it was in the air. But most fellow historians ridiculed me: What kind of history is this, “public history,” they would ask. I was supported by Andrei Zorin, who agreed to be the supervisor of my proposed public history program, and so, in 2012, we started with a group of 10 students. Although students were highly interested, most were not prepared to pay the fees. Within the first few years of the program’s existence, it became well known, with more and more students enrolling in it. The Moscow program was followed by MA programs in Perm, St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Yaroslavl, and Kazan.

**ANDREI: What is the specificity of public history programs in Russia in comparison to their counterparts abroad?**

**ALEXANDRA:** At the moment, there are five MA and one BA programs in public history in Russia: “Public History: Historical Knowledge in Contemporary Society” (Moscow Higher School of Social and Economic Sciences/Shaninka), “Modern Approaches to the Study of the Politics of Memory and Cultural Memory” (European University, St. Petersburg),

<sup>24</sup> Florian Toepfl, “Comparing authoritarian publics: The benefits and risks of three types of publics for autocrats,” *Communication Theory* 30, no. 2 (2020): 105–25.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Khodnev, “Public between the state and academia,” in *Public in Public History*, eds. Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewska (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 247–262. Here p. 249.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Khodnev, “Public between the state and academia.”



“Educational Aspects of Public History” (Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University), “Theory and Practice of Applied Historical Research” (Perm University) and “Public History: Modern Narrative and Visual Practice” (Kazan Federal University). A BA program (which grew out of the MA created by Vera) in public history is now available only at Shaninka. The previously existing programs – “Usable Pasts’: Applied and Interdisciplinary History” (Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg) and “Public History: Historical Informatics and Media Technologies in History” (Baltic University, Kaliningrad) – were closed for various reasons in the last two to three years. Related to the ideas of public history is the MA program “Digital Methods in the Humanities” at the HSE Perm campus. However, it has become known that the head of the program, Dinara Gagarina, was removed from her position due to her anti-war statements in mid-October 2022, and the program itself has changed its name and profile for the next academic year.

It is important to note once again that almost all public history programs in Russia are for MA students. This, in general, corresponds to the global situation. The National Council on Public History guide to public history programs lists 17 Bachelor’s programs and 44 Master’s programs in public history in the world.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the competencies of public historians are more often seen as additional to the basic skills that historical education provides: analyzing sources and reading and writing texts. On the other hand, this is related to the specifics of school history education in Russia, which only rarely offers a broader and participatory look at the past rather than the banal kaleidoscope of events and names given in textbooks in preparation for the Unified State Examination.

It seems to me there are several features that Russian public history programs have in common. First (and rather obviously), the core of the program is strongly related to the program team. For example, the “backbone” of the teaching staff of the MA program at the European University in St. Petersburg comprises leading researchers in the fields of memory studies and historical politics in Russia (Aleksii Miller, Boris Kolonitsky, and Yulia Safronova). They had worked at the university even before the opening of the program, and it was their research interests that determined its specialization.

Second, the development of the very field (or fields?) of public history in Russia influences teaching programs. Initially, the question was about comprehending the specifics of Russia’s public sphere and the opportunities to be

included in the global context of public history. In many ways, the answer to this question was the MA program in public history at Shaninka, which involves both theoretical training of students and the possibility of obtaining education abroad (graduates receive two diplomas – a British MA in public history from the University of Manchester and a Russian diploma of vocational retraining with a major in “Historical Knowledge in Modern Society”). Such significant attention to the theoretical foundations of public history was connected to the novelty of this field in Russia. It seems to me that the authors of Shaninka’s program, who are brilliant theorists in the field of the humanities and social sciences, tried within the program’s framework to comprehend the possibilities and prospects of different theoretical approaches to the emerging field of public history in the country. At the same time, students’ strong theoretical training was also practice-oriented.

Third, the development of a market for humanities knowledge in Russia in the 2010s influenced the specialization of the relevant programs. Thus, the program in Perm, launched in 2015, initially focused on working with applied projects, considering Perm’s regional specifics, in museums, at various city sites, for city media, and so on. With the growing interest in public history in Russia, the development of social media, and the emergence of many applied projects focused on working with different pasts (urban, regional, and others), more specific requests arose. In particular, the above-mentioned program “Digital Methods in the Humanities” at the HSE Perm sets out very specific tasks: to give graduates competencies in the field of digital research (to know the most common programming languages, to work with digital databases, etc.) and to be able to use them when working with historical sources. Almost no public history project is now complete without these skills.

In general, the Russian situation with education in public history is consistent with the global context and is not unique. In particular, a series of online discussions on public history in different countries, organized by the International Federation for Public History during the COVID-19 pandemic, was focused on the issues related to the respective peculiarities of educational programs. Many of these problems (like adaptation of English-language research literature to national contexts) are typical for Russia as well. For example, Bárbara Silva describes difficulties of adaptation and translation of public history textbooks written in English to the national situation in Chile.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> National Council on Public History, “Guide to public history programs,” <https://ncph.org/program-guide/> (last accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> See her text published earlier: Bárbara Silva, “Leading the way: Teaching public history for the first time,” *International Public History* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2019-0002> (last accessed November 28, 2022).

However, several significant differences of Russian programs from others should be highlighted. First, there is a very weak development of the humanities knowledge market in Russia and, in general, there are few opportunities for its extension. The situation only worsened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the tightened censorship that followed. In many countries of the world (the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany are the most significant in this context), education in the field of public history enables graduates to work in different fields (museums, media, IT, contemporary art, and others). In Russia, these opportunities are generally quite limited for various reasons (from state control of the media to weak funding), and suitable jobs and projects are still localized mainly in large cities, with a significant predominance of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Second, Russian universities have some specific features. As Thomas Cauvin notes, the teaching of public history at universities must inevitably include the implementation of applied projects.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, this approach fits into the profitable projects; in others, it involves the participation of academia in socially oriented initiatives. But it inevitably correlates with the transformation of the universities themselves.<sup>30</sup> This process also has a side effect: in an interview in 2018, Serge Noiret told me how a number of Italian universities were developing criteria for evaluating the work of public historians who would like to be affiliated with them.<sup>31</sup> In Russia, most universities are far removed from what is happening outside academia, both because of the specifics of the universities themselves and their fear of losing their expert role, and due to features of the market for the humanities, as mentioned above. Third, as Cauvin further notes, the teaching of public history must involve the competence and ability to work with different audiences, in different situations and contexts, for the co-production of knowledge.<sup>32</sup> In Russia, however, public history programs

are still more focused on broadcasting than on sharing authority in the production of new knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

Another question is whether education in public history will be possible in Russia at all in the foreseeable future...

**JULIA:** As the academic head of the international MA program “Usable Pasts”: Applied and Interdisciplinary History” that opened at the HSE St. Petersburg campus in 2015 and closed in 2019, I had the opportunity to closely participate in the development of at least one such program. Although we deliberately decided not to give it a name that included the term public history, we had many elements of this field in mind. The program's concept stated that using and interpreting historical data enables historians to construct “usable pasts” as a tool for understanding the present and imagining possible and alternative avenues of future development. We tried to develop a program in applied history that would embrace methods and practices of dealing with the identification, preservation, interpretation, and presentation of historical artifacts, texts, structures, and landscapes. In one part of our training, we focused on material objects in history and their meanings within the framework of heritage and memory studies. Another part intended to encompass a critical approach to the politics of circulating historically formed discourses of identity and legitimacy in today's society. This approach to the complex problem of historical legacy and heritage was meant to fill in a gap in professional historical training and to provide a platform for creating interactive processes that would link the historical object, the historian, and the public. Behind another component of the program – interdisciplinary history – was the intention to construct a platform for history's dialogue with other disciplines, not only humanities, but also social and natural sciences, including economics, geography, and ecology.

The choice of this direction was based on the notion of “usable past” developed by environmental historians and historians of technology.<sup>34</sup> Still, we definitely connected the

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 222.

<sup>30</sup> An interesting discussion of public history and neoliberalism can be found in Jerome de Groot's essay: Jerome de Groot, “For what it is ‘worth’? Neoliberalism and public history,” *Public History Weekly* 6, no. 12 (2018), doi: dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2018-11315 (last accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Publichnaya istoriya segodnia: interview s Tomasom Kovanom i Serzhem Nuare” [Public history today: Interview with Thomas Cauvin and Serge Noiret], *Okna rosta*, March 13, 2019, <https://okna.hse.ru/news/252262912.html> (last accessed November 28, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Cauvin, *Public History*, 231.

<sup>33</sup> See the interesting reflections of Sergei A. Oushakine on this topic: Sergei A. Oushakine, “Kolonial'nyi omlet i ego posledstviya: o publichnykh istoriyaakh postkoloniy sotsializma” [The colonial scramble and its consequences: On the public histories of the post-colonies of socialism], in *Vse v proshlom: teoriya i praktika publichnoy istorii* [All Things Past: Theory and Practice of Public History], eds. Andrei Zavadski and Vera Dubina (Moscow: Novoe Izdatel'stvo, 2021), 395–428. In English: Sergei A. Oushakine, “The colonial scramble and its aftermath: Writing public histories of the postcolonies of socialism,” *eSamizdat*, XIV (2021): 19–43.

<sup>34</sup> J. R. McNeill, “Observations on the nature and culture of environmental history,” *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2003): 5–43; Colin Michael Divall, “Transport history, the Usable Past and the future of mobility,” in *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society*, eds. Margaret Grieco and John Urry (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 305–19.

program with public history, taking inspiration from an article by Juliane Tomann, Jacqueline Nießer, Anna Littke, Jakob Ackermann, and Felix Ackermann published (in a shortened version) in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* in 2012.<sup>35</sup> We were very much concerned with the instrumentalization of historical knowledge in the politics of Russia, thinking here about Andrei's discussion of Medinsky. We thought it was of utmost importance for historians to be able to analyze cases of use and misuse of history and be ready to participate in public debates, and of course we were much too optimistic that these debates could be possible for many years ahead.

When recruiting students, we quickly realized that the program (taught in English) was very attractive to international students and not so much to students in Russia. While we managed to attract some people with non-historical backgrounds, the program did not become very popular with history students, for whom the term "applied" was alien: they did not see many career possibilities in doing applied projects for museums, media, and so on. Applied history had negative connotations in their eyes, quite in line with what had been described by our German colleagues. We put a lot of effort into strengthening the practical components of the program, namely, internships in museums and NGOs, and by inviting a professor to teach a course on history in the media, which was a big success. Although there were a number of reasons, both external and internal, for closing the program in September 2019, the rapid changes in the overall political landscape of that "hot" summer made the program politically not suitable anymore, and that was explicitly conveyed to me by the university administration.

**ANDREI: What has changed in this regard since February 24, 2022?**

**ALEXANDRA:** Unfortunately, I cannot fully assess how the teaching of public history in Russia has changed since February 24. I have had very little contact with colleagues from other programs and universities. This is partly due to a general frustration over the war, and partly to the difficult situation at the Poletayev Institute, where I work (it has to do with an internal conflict at the university that started before the war). However, I can talk about the course "The Past in Popular Culture" (part of the "Public History" minor at the

HSE) that I taught in the winter-spring of 2022. It is worth noting that the course was organized exactly as I had planned it: there were no attempts from the faculty administration to change it or limit the topics that I touched upon.

First, the course became a vital form of therapy both for me and for my students (this is not just my opinion: many of the students repeatedly said so themselves). For some people, keeping a diary has been therapeutic, for others, daily posts on Facebook. For me, it is conversations with my students. It so happened that on February 28, we had a seminar about the Nazi past in Rammstein's songs and videos. We were to talk about possibilities of working with trauma through music and its importance for the building of memory cultures (this task was given to the students before the war, around February 17). Of course, we mainly talked about the war and abuses of history in Putin's speech that had announced the invasion of Ukraine. For me and, as far as I can tell, for many of my colleagues, teaching has become a way of grounding yourself, an activity that still holds at least some meaning.

Second, teaching a course on public history for me personally became a great help in understanding the ongoing tragedy. The syllabus is structured in such a way that students can use different examples to discuss how the past is comprehended and represented in popular culture, what opportunities popular culture provides for understanding the past and the present, how history can be manipulated in it, and so on. Because of the war, I tried to give more Russia-based examples and to discuss, at each seminar, how the texts we read and those non-Russian examples (cinema, music, literature, TV shows) that we were considering can help us in understanding and critically analyzing the contemporary Russian context. It was very important for me that the students reacted to this with great attention and enthusiasm (this conclusion is based on their feedback to the course). Many of them wrote the final essay on Russian cases.

Third, I became even more convinced of the importance of teaching public history at a contemporary university. Despite the fact that I do not have a practice-oriented course (students do not prepare an exhibition project or create their own channels on social media, but only write a small research essay), it seems to me that an important part of public history as a discipline is the development of sensitivity to working with the past and understanding the importance of this work in the present.

**ANDREI: Can we try to draw a picture of audiences/publics/co-creators of historical knowledge, before and after February 24?**

**EGOR:** When it comes to audiences, I don't think they are very different now. Worldviews, like consumption

<sup>35</sup> Juliane Tomann et al., "Diskussion Angewandte Geschichte: Ein neuer Ansatz?," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, February 15, 2011, [http://docupedia.de/zg/Diskussion\\_Angewandte\\_Geschichte](http://docupedia.de/zg/Diskussion_Angewandte_Geschichte) (last accessed November 28, 2022). The Russian (shortened) translation: Juliane Tomann et al., "Prikkladnaya istoriya, ili Publichnoye izmereniye proshlogo," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3 (2012), <http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nz/n3-2012/14968-prikkladnaya-istoriya-ili-publichnoe-izmerenie-proshlogo.html> (last accessed November 28, 2022).

habits, cannot change overnight. Yes, at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and since the announcement of the partial mobilization in Russia, we have clearly seen ourselves and the people around us disappear for hours into the news feeds. But sooner or later, consumption eventually returned to some kind of "norm," as people got used to the new context.

The demand for historical knowledge in Russia has traditionally been very high. But the war changed the attitude of (first and foremost, popular) content creators towards the past. Russian society, being split into two parts, is, on the one hand, discovering the world of post-colonial optics as well as the concept of empire and its legacies, and, on the other hand, beginning to adopt a new ideology rooted in "traditions" and the past that the Kremlin has been trying hard to develop over the last six months by integrating ideological disciplines into the school and higher education system.

So, it is correct to say that the public will inevitably change, but it will take time for that to happen. And it will depend, among other things, on the extent to which the people involved in the creation of historical knowledge are able to convey their views and pictures of the world to their audiences. But what can be said for sure is that the question of the past's objectivity in the works of historians is closed for some time: it will clearly be subject to revision later, when the regime falls.

**ANDREI: Do historians and public historians share blame for the ongoing war – and how?**

**VERA:** All citizens of Russia, regardless of their profession, will have to process the issue of guilt for themselves. Just listen to the news – journalists talk about the attack by "the Russians": "the Russians did this, the Russians did that." I shudder every time I hear this. So, my first, quite human wish is to say: I'm against it! As a historian, I did everything I could to remind my readers and listeners of how dangerous dictatorship is and what it does to people. Out of this desire to vindicate oneself come arguments about "the good Russians" and all these internet squabbles that look out of place next to the reports of deaths, bombardments, and eyewitness accounts of the war. We tried, we were persecuted, but we continued, we talked about repression, we sought to help those persecuted for their beliefs, we seemed to be on the side of historical truth... But this nightmare of war is continuing – and there is no end in sight. And now it turns out that we "collective Russians" are responsible for this.

To historians, and above all public historians, this question of guilt implies another question: Why did you allow history to be treated in this way? Where was your expertise during these last years of violence against historical truth? That is, "why couldn't we stop it"? This question turns into a question of responsibility and reproach that we have

done too little to prevent the war from happening. From the point of view of academic discourse, this question is unproductive. History never happens because it is meant to happen. It happens when a multitude of circumstances, including those beyond human control, come together. A historian knows this well. But this war is not a long past nightmare of the Second World War – this nightmare is right at our door, here and now. Which means we have to do something to stop it. But when you are inside it, you find yourself no less incapable of changing the present than the historian who learns everything second-hand from sources and other people's experiences.

Surely, we will all have to think about what we could have done better. Personally, I think that historians have spoken too little to the public in Russia, unwilling to step onto the thin ice of "unscientific discussions," that is, to step out of their comfort zone. It is also very important for Russian historical scholarship to address postcolonial studies, which are almost undeveloped in Russia, although they were not born yesterday. The colonial perspective that dominates the historical politics of today's Russia has not been sufficiently resisted by historians and may even be unconsciously shared by many to this day. But when drawing conclusions, we should not forget that historians do not own history. No matter how hard we try to interest the public in our historical analyses, audiences do not have to listen to us, even when we talk about historical events that concern everyone. People use the shared historical past for their own purposes, to build their own conception of the future. And despite all the scientific apparatus of source criticism, historians are also part of this community of the living. As Aleida Assmann said in her polemic with Reinhart Koselleck, "Those who campaign against 'ideology' and 'myth' have the moral certainty of being on the right side. However, those who have learned in the meantime that their own position also has parts of ideology and mythos will want to maintain this simple self-positioning less and less, except in clear political struggle situations."<sup>36</sup>

**ANDREI: What are the potential futures for historical science and public history in Russia?**

**KATERINA:** For me as a witness to Russia's horrific present, it is currently almost impossible to think of any scenarios of the future in its temporal or philosophical sense. That said, I am thinking about the future as a scholar. Namely, I am working to collect an archive of the present, which could potentially be key to building a counter-memorial narrative about what is happening and – at some

<sup>36</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013), 23.

point – perhaps contribute to shifting the researcher’s position in Russia. By the latter, I mean the necessity for myself and my colleagues, literally every humanities scholar in the country, to take a critical approach to what they do in their research, what optics they use, and so on. We need to start working on a counter-memory archive that would comprise grassroots materials. We must stop thinking about Putins’s speeches and laws – every totalitarian regime is obsessed with “preserving traditions” – and start looking for and collecting anti-war flyers from poles, stickers, artistic works and similar, in other words, anything that the current Russian authorities identify as rubbish and anti-patriotic actions.

**EGOR:** I am afraid I have no optimistic scenarios for you – unless there is a rapid change of the regime in Russia. We have watched how history has become the basis of Putin’s ideology (although it is still quite eclectic) for several years; now these processes have seriously accelerated. At first, we saw the integration of ideological education in schools (weekly “talks about important things,” mentioned by Katerina earlier), and now the authorities have started talking about universities.

I used to not really understand this strange desire of Soviet historians to study Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Now I understand it. Censorship, tougher legislation against the freedom of speech, and denunciations work very effectively. Many public attempts to talk about the past have now become private. It is reminiscent of the Soviet transition from the streets to the kitchens. Parallel to this, pro-government narratives and historical content that fits into the system of values described by Vladimir Putin in his direct appeals to the people are flourishing.

It therefore seems more important than ever not to lose the international ties between academic, cultural, and educational workers that have been built over the past 30 years. I often speak to colleagues who have remained in Russia to continue teaching students despite all the risks, and I see only bewilderment in what they say. They feel completely abandoned: by their colleagues who have left and are criticizing them for this choice and by their colleagues from foreign institutions who have stopped contacting or collaborating with them. But if everyone leaves, who will be left to educate students, to have a chance to build a free and democratic society at least at some point in the future? Isn’t that what the academy, which has always understood itself to be above national divisions and populist decisions of individual politicians, is for? I am afraid that if the European academic community does not take this step forward, we will lose a chance to see Russia as an open society in our lifetime.

## Bionotes



### Andrei Zavadski

Institute of Art and Material Culture, TU Dortmund University, Dortmund, Germany  
[andrei.zavadski@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:andrei.zavadski@tu-dortmund.de)

Dr. Andrei Zavadski is a Research Associate and Faculty Member (*wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter*) at the Institute of Art and Material Culture, TU Dortmund University, Germany. He works at intersections of memory studies, museum studies, public history, and media studies, with a focus on Eastern Europe.



### Vera Dubina

Institute for East European History, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany  
 Moscow School of Social and Economic Studies (Shaninka), Moscow, Russia  
 University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany  
[dubinave@hu-berlin.de](mailto:dubinave@hu-berlin.de)

Dr. Vera Dubina is a Research Associate (*wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter*) at the Institute for East European History, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany, where her position is financed by the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung München. She also teaches at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Studies (Shaninka), Russia, and at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her research areas are public history, memory cultures, everyday history, and theory of history.



### Egor Isaev

Institute for Media Studies, University of Bochum, Bochum, Germany  
[Egor.Isaev@ruhr-uni-bochum.de](mailto:Egor.Isaev@ruhr-uni-bochum.de)

Egor Isaev is a film director and researcher in cinema studies. He is currently working on his PhD thesis at the Institute for Media Studies, University of Bochum, Germany. He is also running a documentary series called *Document at Mediazona* (a Russian media in exile).



### Alexandra Kolesnik

Poletaev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities (IGITI)  
 School of History, Faculty of Humanities, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia  
[aleksa-kolesnik@yandex.ru](mailto:aleksa-kolesnik@yandex.ru)

Dr. Alexandra Kolesnik is (until January 2023) a Senior Research Fellow at the Poletaev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities (IGITI), and an Associate Professor at the School of History, Faculty of Humanities, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia. Her major fields of research are popular music studies, public history, heritage studies, and sociology of culture.



**Julia Lajus**  
DGE Global Studies Institute, University of  
Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA  
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland  
[jlajus@gmail.com](mailto:jlajus@gmail.com)

Dr. Julia Lajus is currently a Courtesy Research Associate in the DGE Global Studies Institute, University of Oregon, USA, and a Visiting Researcher at the

University of Helsinki, Finland. She works on environmental history and history of science, especially the transnational circulation of environmental knowledge in the twentieth century.



**Katerina Suverina**  
Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences,  
Moscow, Russia  
University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany  
[katya.suverina@gmail.com](mailto:katya.suverina@gmail.com)

Dr. Katerina Suverina is an editor at *The Garage Journal* and a researcher of gender studies and sexuality in Eastern Europe. She is a senior lecturer at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, Russia, and an invited lecturer (within the Scholar at Risk program) at the University of Potsdam, Germany.