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Commentator Says Anti-Fascism Bill Could Lead to Imposition of More Official Histories

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The authors of draft Russian legislation intended to prevent "the rehabilitation of Nazism" on the territory of the former republics of the USSR, as well as most of those who have commented on it, have focused on the ways such a law could be used by Moscow against the governments of some of these countries.

But Irina Pavlova, one of the most thoughtful Moscow commentators on public life in the city, argues that the real and far more negative impact of this legislation is likely to be on the Russian Federation itself, where, she suggests, this legislation sets the stage for the re-imposition of a Soviet-style official version of the Russian past.

In an essay titled, "An Afterward to Victory Day," Pavlova argues that "far from everyone understands the genuine meaning of this legislative initiative." She seeks to provide it by noting that "what is important in Russia is not so much the laws themselves as the subtexts and instructions about what society as a whole may not suspect" until too late.

Consequently, in order to understand what this legislation may ultimately mean, it is important to look beyond the text, which is clearly directed against non-Russian nations, some of whose members cooperated with the Nazis, and consider the existence of those at the top of the Russian political system who send "signals" as to how they want this act to be applied more generally.

In an entry on President Dmitry Medvedev's video blog, Pavlova cites, the president noted that "we have begun to encounter what are called historical falsifications" and these "are becoming ever more severe, evil and aggressive." Consequently, he said, there is a need, in Pavlova's words, "to be objective, in whatever sense the powers that be understand" whatever issue is at hand.

That sent a clear "signal" to those who wanted to hear. General Makhmut Gareyev, president of the Academy of Military Science and an officer long associated with official views on World War II, responded to Medvedev's words with a reassertion of the need for "an objective treatment of the military history of Russia."

He told an Ekho Moskvy interviewer that "no historians will give an answer" like that. "It is necessary," the general continued, "for government organs to participate in the creation of a new work. For example, only the General Staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the KGB and the FSB today can explain what really happened in 1941."

Another person who heard this signal from Medvedev was Yury Zhukov, a researcher at the Institute of Russian History who has played "a definite role in the contemporary glamorization of Stalin," told "Komsomolskaya Pravda" that "Russian citizens who intentionally distort the facts of history must be subject to criminal punishment."

"All deviations from the official truth about the war," Pavlova suggests, "from his point of view are 'a clear expression of a pro-American and anti-Russian view about that which we by rights call the Great Fatherland War.'" To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, Zhukov said, "it is necessary to create a single state history textbook."

In this way, Sergei Shoigu's initiative is being transformed into a weapon not so much against people in other countries who may have different views about World War II than Russians do as much as against "independent historians" who are not prepared to tow the line laid down by "veteran-preservers and historians who serve the present day powers that be."

"The very threat of the use of the law in this way will lead to still greater difficulties in the search for truth about the Second World War," Pavlova writes on the basis of her own experience as a historian, "although even now because of the inaccessibility of still classified documents, this search is extremely difficult."

And "in such an atmosphere, domestic research on Soviet and post-Soviet history [more generally], not to speak about the instruction" of the next generation of historians and of ordinary citizens of the Russian Federation, "will inevitably be degraded."

In 2002, Pavlova writes, she attempted to do research on Stalin and the war and found her

access to the archives contested by veterans groups who felt she was denigrating the Soviet leader. Her "opponents" at that time "could only dream about such a law" as the present one, at least in the interpretation of it that people such as Gareyev and Zhukov are suggesting.

Given her own experience, the Moscow commentator says, she is confident that the chief victims of the new legislation will not be the leaders of Estonia or Ukraine but rather "those who permit themselves to doubt" the generally received "truth about the war" and are willing to look the facts of the case in the face.

Pavlova clearly recognizes that if this legislation passes and is then used by the Gareyevs and Zhukovs who are confident they have heard "a signal" from President Medvedev, the mandating of official histories will not be limited to World War II. It will spread, and those who care about truth will again have to fight on many fronts.

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