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Selective memory and symbolic chaos:

domestic legitimation in Putin's Russia



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Contents

- 1. Executive summary3
- 2. Executioners and victims — who matters more?4
- 3. Reconciliation without reckoning6
- 4. Cleansing dissent: sanitising memory through ritual7

1. Executive summary

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, history is not remembered, it is curated. Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has cultivated a memory regime rooted in contradiction. It glorifies both executioners and their victims, reconciling Tsarist and Soviet legacies, and transforming once democratic commemorations into tools of state loyalty. This symbolic chaos is not incoherent, but a matter of strategy. By selectively invoking elements of Russia's Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet pasts, the state has sought to forge a flexible ideological narrative to legitimise authoritarian rule while neutralising the moral challenges posed by historical trauma.

This brief outlines three central mechanisms of this strategy. First, the rehabilitation of the Soviet security services – through official ceremonies, monuments and the memorialisation of symbolic dates – has revived institutions once associated with political terror, while marginalising victim-centered narratives. Second, the use of political reburials and memorials has allowed the regime to fabricate a false reconciliation between “reds” and “whites” with a view to presenting a unified historical lineage without addressing the causes or crimes of the civil war and repression. Finally, the Kremlin has systematically repurposed national holidays, stripping them of their democratic or Revolutionary origins and rebranding them as expressions of imperial pride, militarised sacrifice and historical unity. Together, these processes reflect a larger shift in Russia's state ideology, from a politics of reckoning to a politics of erasure.

2. Executioners and victims — who matters more?

One of the clearest illustrations of symbolic contradiction in Putin's Russia is the state's shifting approach to the memory of Soviet repression. While official discourse occasionally acknowledges the victims of totalitarianism, in a broader trajectory it has leaned towards the celebration of its architects. This paradox – commemorating victims while at the same time glorifying their persecutors – has defined memory politics over the past two decades, culminating by the mid-2020s in the near-total eclipse of victim-centered narratives.

For Russia's key security agencies – the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Federal Protective Service (FSO), and the Presidential Directorate for Special Programmes (GUSP) – 20 December is not just a professional day, but a foundational institutional holiday. On this date in 1917, the Bolsheviks created the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (better known as the Cheka)¹ under Felix Dzerzhinsky. It was designated the “governing body for the fight against counter-revolution across the country”. The Cheka became the principal organ of the Red Terror, a campaign of mass violence pursued during the Civil War, aimed at eliminating perceived “class enemies” by means of executions, forced labour and widespread surveillance. Its institutional lineage runs through the OGPU, NKVD, MGB and ultimately the KGB, all of which were responsible for orchestrating mass repression on political, religious and ethnic grounds. Today, 20 December remains the central holiday of Russia's security establishment, officially marked by presidential congratulations and state-sponsored ceremonies. In December 1999, Vladimir Putin underscored the symbolic weight of this legacy by restoring² a commemorative plaque to Yuri Andropov on the infamous Lubyanka building, explicitly linking the post-Soviet security state to its Soviet roots.

Nevertheless, the state could not immediately pivot toward a full rehabilitation of the repressive security services. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, a formal – if often superficial – commemoration of the victims of political terror continued. In December 1992, President Boris Yeltsin established the Presidential Commission for the Rehabilitation

of Victims of Political Repression. Memorials to these victims were opened and legal acknowledgments followed. In 2002, Stalin's execution lists, containing over 46,000 names personally approved by the Politburo, were published jointly by the Presidential Archive and the NGO Memorial. During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, limited efforts at de-Stalinisation gained renewed momentum. In 2009, Solzhenitsyn's book *The Gulag Archipelago* was introduced into the high school curriculum, and on 30 October – Russia's Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repression – Medvedev publicly condemned³ the Stalinist purges. In 2010 and 2011, his Human Rights Council developed a national “de-Stalinisation” programme that sought⁴ to confront the legacy of totalitarianism and establish a public consensus around democratic values. In 2015, the government approved a federal concept for memorialising victims of repressions⁵ and President Putin personally opened⁶ the “Wall of Sorrow” memorial in Moscow in 2017.

But even these gestures were carefully constrained. While acknowledging past suffering, they refrained from questioning the institutional continuity between today's state and the Soviet apparatus of repression. By the mid-2010s, the limits of this dual-track approach were becoming increasingly visible. In May 2017, just months before the Wall of Sorrow was inaugurated, the Alley of Rulers was opened⁷ in Moscow, a state-sponsored historical installation featuring busts of every Russian and Soviet leader, including Stalin. Putin, although not present at the ceremony, lent his broad support to the cultural logic of historical continuity that the project embodied. The installation was promoted as an educational tool to unify national identity around a shared, uninterrupted lineage of rulers, from medieval princes to Soviet General Secretaries. When the Wall of Sorrow was unveiled that October, it stood in uneasy

¹ Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library (ND): On December 20, 1917, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (VChK) was established. Security Agency Worker's Day in the Russian Federation. Available at: <https://www.prlib.ru/history/619826> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

² Agentura.ru (2022): How the Cult of Andropov Was Revived, 10 September. Available at: <https://agentura.ru/kak-voztrozhdali-kult-andropova> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

³ RFI – Radio France Internationale (2009): Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repression: Russian President Condemns Stalinist Repressions, 30 October. Available at: http://www1.rfi.fr/acturu/articles/118/article_4521.asp (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

⁴ Nezavisimaya Gazeta (2011): Mikhail Fedotov and the Ghost of Stalinism, 5 April. Available at: https://www.ng.ru/politics/2011-04-05/3_fedotov.html (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

⁵ Concept of State Policy on Commemorating the Memory of Victims of Political Repression (2015). Available at: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_184254/ (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

⁶ RBC (2017): Putin Opens the “Wall of Grief” Memorial in Moscow, 30 October. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/30/10/2017/59f6ce559a79473dc615ef66> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

⁷ Meduza (2017): “Alley of Rulers” Opened in Moscow Featuring 33 Busts by Zurab Tsereteli, 26 May. Available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2017/05/26/v-moskve-otkryli-alleyu-praviteley-rossii-tam-ustanovleny-33-byusta-raboty-tsereteli> (last accessed on 6 July 2025).

juxtaposition to the earlier tribute to authoritarian tradition. These contradictory signals revealed a deeper pattern: remembrance without accountability, commemoration without rupture. The state maintained the appearance of moral reflection while laying symbolic foundations for the restoration of the very institutions it once nominally scrutinised.

Judge Konstantin Aranovsky, then a Justice of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, articulated in his 2019 special opinion⁸ a fundamental legal and moral challenge to the state's narrative of continuity. He asserted that the Russian Federation is not the legal successor of the Soviet Union, a state he described as "created illegally" and inherently repressive, but rather a constitutional republic founded in opposition to totalitarian rule. Because it bears no legal responsibility for Soviet crimes, Aranovsky argued, the modern state is morally freer – and thus more obligated – to provide victims with justice without preserving the institutions that persecuted them. His stance implied that true rehabilitation requires rupture, not inheritance. The political response was swift: he faced public denunciations, his opinion was stripped of formal standing, and later that year the publication of dissenting judicial opinions was banned. In 2022, amid the court's proceedings on the annexation of Ukrainian territories, Aranovsky resigned. His legal dissent thus became both a rare moment of judicial candor and a testament to the cost of confronting the mythology of state continuity.

After 2022, Russia's state memory policy entered a phase of open glorification of the Soviet security services, discarding the earlier ambiguity. In September 2023, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) unveiled⁹ a new monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky at its headquarters in Yasenevo. The bronze statue was a replica of the original monument that had stood on Lubyanka Square until August 1991, when it was dismantled by order of the Moscow authorities following the collapse of the August Coup and the broader rejection of the KGB's legacy. Its reappearance – now behind the closed gates of SVR headquarters – signalled not only institutional reverence for the founder of the Cheka, but also a symbolic reversal of the post-Soviet reckoning with state terror. In September 2024, authorities in Karelia inaugurated¹⁰ a large memorial complex dedicated to NKVD and SMERSH officers who died during the Second World War. The site, consisting of 25 stone slabs inscribed with

153 names, was unveiled with a high ceremony, attended by the regional governor, senior FSB officers, clergy and security service veterans. No distinction was drawn between combat casualties and those involved in repressive operations. In May 2025, in the southern city of Taganrog, the symbolic shift became even more explicit. A plaque commemorating victims of political repression was removed¹¹ from the facade of a university building and replaced with a new sign honouring the "contribution of OGPU/NKVD officers to the city's liberation from fascism".

The change erased the earlier gesture of acknowledgment and reframed Soviet state violence as unproblematic patriotic service. These developments illustrate a coherent new memory regime encompassing not just the selective silencing of past abuses, but the active elevation of the very institutions and figures responsible for them. Under the guise of wartime unity and national strength, the state is systematically rehabilitating political violence as historical virtue.

⁸ Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation (2019): Ruling No. 39-P of 10 December 2019 on the constitutionality of Article 13 of the Law of the Russian Federation "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions" and provisions of the Law of the City of Moscow "On the Right of Moscow Residents to Residential Premises". Available at: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_338849/ (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

⁹ Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (2023): A Monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky Unveiled at the SVR Headquarters, 11 September. Available at: <https://svr.gov.ru/publications/v-shtab-kvartire-svr-otkryli-pamyatnik-dzerzhinskomu.htm> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹⁰ Sever.Realii (2024): "So that nothing darkens the present": Why monuments to executioners are being erected, 10 October. Available at: <https://www.severreal.org/a/so-that-nothing-darkens-the-present-why-monuments-to-executioners-are-being-erected/32631044.html> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹¹ 161.RU (2025): Memorial plaque to victims of repression removed in Taganrog — replaced with one honoring NKVD officers, 28 May. Available at: <https://161.ru/text/gorod/2025/05/28/74173868/> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

3. Reconciliation without reckoning

The practice of political reburials as a tool of symbolic reconciliation began in 1998 with the state-sponsored reburial of the remains of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in St Petersburg. Under President Boris Yeltsin, this act was framed as an expression of national repentance.¹² In his speech at the reburial, Yeltsin explicitly acknowledged the Romanovs' execution as a crime, committed by a regime that had divided the country and inflicted lasting trauma. The event was solemn, modest and infused with moral language. It was focused more on mourning than myth-making.

In the ensuing years, however, especially under Vladimir Putin, the tone and purpose of such reburials shifted significantly. They became instruments not of historical reckoning, but of state-led myth construction. The reinternment of various Romanov remains – including those of Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich in 2014 and Empress Maria Fyodorovna in 2006 – was often based on questionable last wills or unclear forensic evidence.¹³ These ceremonies consistently avoided confronting the reasons for their deaths or exile, namely, the violence of the Revolution or their opposition to Bolshevism. Instead, they served diplomatic and political purposes: smoothing relations with Denmark, France and monarchist circles abroad, while domestically bolstering a narrative of civilisational continuity. The imperial dead were recast not as victims of political violence, but as cultural ancestors of a unified, undivided Russia.

This narrative deepened in the 2000s through a series of symbolic reburials and monuments aimed at fabricating a sense of historical reconciliation. In 2005, the remains of General Anton Denikin and émigré philosopher Ivan Ilyin were returned to Russia and ceremonially reinterred at Moscow's Donskoy Monastery. Unlike Yeltsin's 1998 reburial of the Romanovs, which had been framed as an act of national repentance, these events were explicitly political. Denikin was remembered less for his anti-Bolshevism than for his opposition to Ukrainian independence, a theme Putin highlighted¹⁴ in a 2009 speech. Ilyin, a radical monarchist and anti-democrat, was integrated into the state's

ideological canon. This logic culminated in the 2021 unveiling of the monument "To the Sons of Russia Who Fought in the Civil War" in annexed Sevastopol. This is a massive memorial portraying a Red Army soldier and a White officer standing solemnly beneath a towering golden figure of Mother Russia. Funded by the Russian Military-Historical Society and inaugurated by President Putin, the monument melds ideological conflict into a shared patriotic sacrifice. The trauma and political stakes of the Civil War are obscured, replaced with an imperial myth of brotherhood. By aestheticising the dead and ignoring the causes of the conflict – namely terror, repression and revolution – the state offers not truth or justice, but a stylised unity in which memory is subordinated to symbolic control and national consolidation.

While figures of the White movement have been increasingly incorporated into the official state narrative under Vladimir Putin, largely to support an imperial vision of Russian continuity, the Soviet past has remained largely unchallenged. The state has carefully avoided consistent moral or legal condemnation of Soviet-era terror, even as it selectively integrates pre-Revolutionary or anti-Bolshevik figures. This ambivalence is clearly illustrated by the legal and symbolic treatment of Admiral Alexander Kolchak. Despite public campaigns for his rehabilitation, a 1999 decision by the Military Court of the Transbaikal District declared¹⁵ that Kolchak was not eligible, citing his alleged role in wartime violence and repression against civilians and Red sympathisers. Meanwhile, in 2015, when opposition activist Vitaly Shpilyayev requested¹⁶ a legal review of the 1918 dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the subsequent founding of the Soviet state, the Prosecutor General's Office dismissed the matter as beyond its jurisdiction, despite its prior willingness to rule on the legality of Crimea's transfer to Ukraine in 1954. These examples show the asymmetry of memory: while "White" figures may be selectively honoured to buttress an imperial narrative, the foundational violence of the Soviet regime is generally left untouched. Historical truth is used selectively, on the basis of utility rather than on a path to a reckoning.

¹² Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center (1998): President Boris Yeltsin at the Funeral of the Romanov Family in St. Petersburg, 17 July. Available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/video/item/2542/> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹³ Uvarov, A. (2023): Rolling the Bones: How Putin Used the Romanov Dynasty – Dead and Alive – for His Own Ends, in: *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, 31 July. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/31/pustit-v-khod-kosti> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹⁴ Kaftan, L. (2009): Why Putin loves Denikin, in: *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 25 June. Available at: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/24316.4/508969/> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹⁵ Cvetkov, V. Ž. (2018): Admiral Kolčak. "Prestuplenie i nakazanie" Verhovnogo pravitelja Rossii, Moscow. p. 10.

¹⁶ Mediazona (2015): The Prosecutor General's Office to examine the legality of the formation of the RSFSR and the USSR, 2 July. Available at: <https://zona.media/news/2015/07/02/rsfsr-ussr> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

4. Cleansing dissent: sanitising memory through ritual

Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian state has not only blurred the boundaries between imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet historical narratives, it has also systematically re-engineered the symbolic meanings of national holidays. In doing so, the regime has stripped potentially subversive commemorations of their original democratic or oppositional content, rebranding them as apolitical celebrations of unity, heritage and state continuity. This process reflects a broader strategy, namely to domesticate the memory of rupture, Revolution and reform by embedding it within a stable, sacralised national mythology. The calendar, once a means of civic mobilisation and historical reckoning, has become a tool of ideological containment.

Russia Day, celebrated annually on 12 June, originally marked the adoption of the RSFSR's Declaration of State Sovereignty in 1990. This was a foundational moment that signalled the republic's intent to assert its political autonomy and contributed directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This meaning was still present in the early 2000s. Vladimir Putin himself acknowledged¹⁷ in 2000 that the declaration "ended an era" and reshaped Russian statehood. A year later,¹⁸ he described it as the beginning of "a new stage in the country's history", the construction of a democratic state rooted in civil liberties and the rule of law. This framing, which emphasised democratic transformation, remained part of official discourse until the early 2010s. However, following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin's broader ideological turn, the holiday was reframed. In his 2014 address, Putin emphasised¹⁹ not the rupture with the Soviet past but the "centuries-long path of our native Fatherland", signalling a pivot from democratic ideals to national pride. In subsequent years, official rhetoric further diluted the political meaning of 12 June, replacing talk of sovereignty and democracy with generic references to "national greatness" and "historical continuity". The celebration of independence thus became a celebration of permanence, effectively erasing the holiday's origin as a symbol of political transformation and casting it instead as another ritual of national unity.

Russia's National Unity Day was introduced in 2005 to replace the post-Soviet holiday of 7 November, formerly the Day of Accord and Reconciliation, and before that the anniversary of the October Revolution. National Unity Day commemorates the expulsion of Polish forces from Moscow in 1612 by a volunteer militia led by Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky. Officially, it celebrates "the unity of the Russian people" across ethnic, religious and social lines. Since its inception, the Kremlin has used the holiday to promote a message of patriotic consolidation. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasised the symbolic power of 1612 as a moment when Russians of different backgrounds overcame internal chaos and foreign intervention through collective effort. The Russian Orthodox Church, which played a key role in reviving the holiday, imbued it with religious significance, linking national salvation to divine protection and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God. Over the years, presidential speeches have recast the holiday not merely as a historical commemoration, but as a celebration of timeless Russian unity, sovereignty and traditional values, often in contrast to perceived foreign threats and ideological subversion. What could have been a moment to celebrate civic initiative and grassroots mobilisation has instead become a tool for sacralising vertical power relations and historical continuity.

Beneath the official symbolism, however, the events of 1612 offer a very different historical lesson, one rooted not in centralised power but in decentralised civic action. During the Time of Troubles, when foreign armies occupied major Russian cities and state authority collapsed, it was not the tsar or the elite who saved the country, but ordinary citizens. The militia that ultimately liberated Moscow emerged from grassroots mobilisation in Nizhny Novgorod, organised by local merchant Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky. This moment of horizontal solidarity, uniting nobles, merchants, peasants and clergy, demonstrated the capacity of Russian society to self-organise in the absence of legitimate authority. Rather than serving as a myth of top-down unity, the story of 1612 could stand as a founding moment of Russian civil society: a testament to collective agency, local initiative and bottom-up patriotism. But this interpretation has been systematically displaced in the state's messaging. By framing the holiday as a celebration of historical unity under a strong state, the Kremlin has erased the emancipatory potential of the past, transforming civic resistance into imperial obedience.

¹⁷ President of Russia (2000): Speech at the reception on the occasion of the Day of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Russia, 12 June. Available at: <https://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/2000/06/12> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹⁸ President of Russia (2001) Vladimir Putin took part in a reception dedicated to Russia Day, 12 June. Available at: <https://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/2001/06/12> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

¹⁹ President of Russia. (2014). Speech at a reception on the occasion of the national holiday – Russia Day, June 12. Available at: <https://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45917> (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

7 November, once synonymous with the October Revolution, has undergone a striking transformation in Putin-era Russia. After its rebranding in 1996 as the “Day of Accord and Reconciliation”, the holiday was entirely removed from the calendar in 2005 and replaced by National Unity Day. But rather than fading into obscurity, the date was repurposed. Beginning in 2006, the Moscow government and federal authorities began holding annual reenactments of the 7 November 1941 Red Square military parade, originally staged during the Battle of Moscow to project defiance and morale. These reenactments, involving thousands of troops in Second World War era uniforms, vintage military vehicles such as T-34 tanks, “Katyusha” rocket launchers, and GAZ trucks, grew in scale each year. By 2015, over 5,000 participants, including cadets, Suvorov school students and patriotic youth, marched²⁰ in formation while veterans watched from tribunes. The spectacle has steadily replaced Revolutionary memory with a sanitised, militarised myth of national resilience. This symbolic shift – from the Revolutionary storming of the Winter Palace to the disciplined march of wartime troops – reflects the state’s broader effort to erase the legacy of radical change and elevate narratives of order, sacrifice and loyalty. In Putin’s Russia, the Revolution is no longer commemorated, it has been neutralised and reframed as a moment of national threat overcome not by upheaval, but by state-centered endurance.

²⁰ Topnews.ru (2015). Parade on Red Square on November 7, 2015. Available at: https://www.topnews.ru/news_id_91291.html (last accessed on 6 July 2025). (in Russian).

About the author

Alexey Uvarov is a political scientist and historian specializing in Russian memory politics and post-Soviet identity. He is a guest researcher at Ruhr University Bochum, supported within the framework of the Fedor Stepun Initiative. He has contributed to academic publications as well as independent media, among them Meduza and Dekoder.

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The paper explores how Vladimir Putin's Russia builds political legitimacy through a deliberately contradictory politics of memory. History is not passively remembered but actively curated to sustain authoritarian rule and neutralise historical trauma. This "symbolic chaos" merges imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet legacies into a flexible narrative that turns the past into a strategic resource for state power.



Three key mechanisms define this memory regime. First, Soviet security institutions are rehabilitated through commemorations and monuments, reviving organisations linked to political terror while sidelining victim-centred narratives. Second, political reburials and memorials fabricate a false reconciliation between "reds" and "whites," presenting unbroken historical continuity without confronting civil war crimes. Third, national holidays are repurposed, stripped of democratic or revolutionary meaning and reimagined as celebrations of imperial continuity, sacrifice, and unity.



These practices reveal a shift from reckoning to erasure, reframing violence as virtue and replacing emancipatory narratives with myths of order and continuity.

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