

**Speaker's notes by Antoon De Baets for the online panel on 10 June 2021 on the report International Federation for Human Rights, Russia: "Crimes against History" (Paris: FIDH, 2021), 64 pp.**

- Thank you very much for inviting me to this panel. Obviously, I was very much honored to notice that my book *Crimes against History* served as an inspiration for the present report. I will briefly review some points of the report from my perspective as an historian of history censorship, of which the crimes against history represent the worst group.
- To my mind, this report is the most complete rebuttal of official Russian historical memory policy to date. It reads like an **indictment** with each of the charges supported by overwhelming evidence. Its format is so convincing that it could be applied to other countries as well — China, Turkey and Iran in the first place.
- The report is testimony to the fact that in the field of historical memory policy, the **legal framework** is perhaps the most powerful weapon to impose official views: this legal framework is coercive, comprehensive, and effective. It also shows the arbitrariness in the administration of justice, which has a pervasive chilling effect on the victims *and* the others. Here and there, it also shows a remarkable **ambiguity** because some rare features of the official policy are actually beneficial to victims or to history producers. Among the positive examples are the role of the Constitutional Court on occasion, or a series of innocent measures for commemoration of victims or the possibility for history producers on occasion to participate in official initiatives. This ambiguity leaves the Russia watcher confused. It is sometimes intended to sap legitimate criticism.
- Among the many highlights of the report, the one that struck me most was the increasing **taboo** on the period between 17 September 1939 – the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Union – and 22 June 1941 – the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany. This is best seen in the frequent denial of the Katyn massacres of April 1940 despite the fact that these massacres are amply proven. It is also implicit in the taboo on the crime against peace – or, to speak in present-day terms, the crime of aggression committed by invading Poland in 1939.
- The worst crime against history is the **political murder** of historians. The report rightly mentions the case of Sergei Koltyrin last year. He died in prison. Because the report focuses on the last seven years, it is instructive to put the phenomenon of the political murder of historians in a historical perspective. In the Soviet Union, at least 111 historians and history producers died because of political reasons. No regime in world history killed more historians than the Soviet Union. In Russia itself, two history producers were killed before 2014: Paul Klebnikov and Natalia Estemirova. All Soviet and Russian historians who were killed for political reasons are listed on the [memorial page](#) of the Network of Concerned Historians.
- A remarkable fact is the relative rarity of **defamation** cases as a weapon of history censorship. The report mentions the recent defamation case of war veteran Artemenko against Navalny; it also could have mentioned the case against Karagodin just weeks ago or at least five other such defamation cases since the year 2000.
- A lacuna in this strong report is, I find, the absence of any explicit analysis of **resistance** against the official historical memory policy. Much can be learned between the lines, of course, especially from Memorial's role. Memorial has become a specialist in using legal channels to battle the assault against its historical work. But on the whole, the ways in which historians have reacted to and resisted against official repression could be mapped better.
- Finally, one wonders what a **comparative perspective** could add to the analysis. A comparison **over time** could answer questions such as, for example, whether and how the

current wave of neo-Stalinism is comparable to the wave of neo-Stalinism under Brezhnev. A comparison **across space** could compare the Russian case with the Chinese one. They have surprising parallels: Xi Jinping has a historical awareness as least as strong as Vladimir Putin's. Xi weaponizes history for his ideology as much as Putin does. And a recent Chinese law such as the "Law to Protect Heroes and Martyrs" has very much the same effect as its Russian counterparts.

- Overall, the report painfully shows what happens when a country **fails to deal with its repressive past**, in this case the crimes of Soviet times. In 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev gave a speech about Stalin's crimes and three years later, he signed a decree exonerating all the victims of Stalinism. But in 1992, after his fall, he defied plans of the Constitutional Court to bring the Communist Party to trial. After that, there has been no systematic policy to come to terms with historical truth, justice, and reparation. Today, three decades later, this has left Russia vulnerable to many abuses of history of which the report offers example after example. Failing to deal with the repressive Soviet past comes at the terrible cost of hampering Russia's future.