

Historical Fallacies in Communist Propaganda

Anna Zofia Cichocka, PhD

'Who controls the past controls the future,' wrote George Orwell in 1984, a novel that portrays the stark nature of totalitarianism. For communists, control over collective memory was an indispensable element of exercising and strengthening power. Its tool was a lie – the foundation of totalitarian enslavement.

A story rewritten

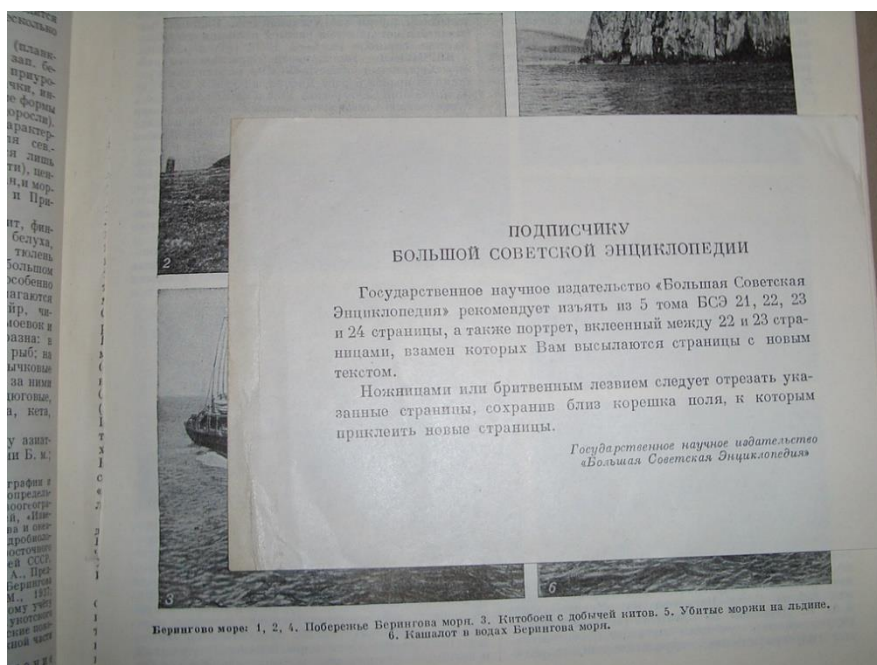
Once the communists came to power as a result of [the coup in Russia in 1917](#), history became an area of strict political control. It was supposed to serve the current political interests of those in power and the Soviet Empire. It was subject to censorship and became an instrument of propaganda. As a science that explores the past, it was no more. It was constantly being rewritten. **As ordered by the Communist Party, which was considered infallible, large-scale manipulation was carried out. Selected facts, dates and people were distorted or deleted.** For example, after the removal from office and the killing of the head of the Soviet secret police Lavrentiy Beria in 1953, subscribers to *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* were instructed to use a razor blade to cut out a page containing an entry with his name and portrait and paste new sheets with the entry 'The Bering Sea' in its place.

The same thing happened with the famous photograph depicting the Soviet dictator Stalin and Beria's predecessor Nikolay Yezhov. When Yezhov was murdered, he suddenly 'disappeared' from the photo, which was duly prepared before its successive publications. Access to the archives was strictly regulated, and revealing the truth or accepting an interpretation of history different from the official version became a crime, for which people risked being repressed.

History was completely subordinated to Marxist ideology, formulated by the philosophers Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and the first leader of Soviet Russia, Vladimir Lenin. The party decided each time which interpretation of the ideology was the only correct one.

According to ideological indications, the driving force behind history was class struggle, and history itself was a consistent march towards socialism and the inevitable global victory of communism. The rise of the Soviet Union, the first socialist state, was described as a turning point in human history.

Volume 5, p. 21 of the second edition of *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* published in 1950, 2008 [accessed 12 March 2021]. Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:BSE-2-Edition-Vol-5-page21-replacement.png>



← A letter from the publisher of *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* to the subscribers of the publication asking them to replace pages 21–24. The letter is placed over photographs of the Bering Sea that was pasted in place of an encyclopaedic entry on Lavrentiy Beria.

The History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course was published in 1938. Its very authorship was falsified. The work of the anonymous committee was in time attributed to Stalin, who appointed himself as the most outstanding historian. This so-called 'bible of Stalinism' – full of lies and omissions – precisely defined how and what to write about in the past, including the history of the Communist Party. It became the mandatory textbook for the citizens of the USSR and the countries it enslaved for the next dozen or so years. During this period, there were over 300 editions, and it was translated into over 60 languages with a circulation of over 40 million copies.

The eminent philosopher Leszek Kołakowski called it 'an excellent textbook on falsified memory', thanks to which 'the party was to control minds and destroy both critical thinking and the memory of society about its own past'. *The History of the A-UCP (B)* presented a simplified scheme of the development of the world, which boiled down to the existence of a primary society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism in succession. This is how the history of even those countries where such formations never existed was to be described. The book also established the cult of Lenin and allegedly his most faithful pupil Stalin as brilliant and infallible leaders of the Communist Party, except that it greatly exaggerated Stalin's role in organizing the Bolshevik Party, the October Revolution and building the Soviet state. At the same time, the actual leaders were either omitted or described as traitors. From then on, historians were required to refer to these 'findings'. The names of the enemies mentioned in *The History of the A-UCP (B)* began to disappear from books still in circulation.



↑ Standing (left to right): Kliment Voroshilov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Joseph Stalin and Nikolay Yezhov inspecting the Moskva-Volga Canal (now the Moscow Canal) after its opening in 1937. After Yezhov's murder in 1940, the original photograph (left) was retouched and his image was erased (right).

After Stalin's death in 1953, it turned out again that, as described by the first Russian Marxist historian Mikhail Pokrovsky, 'history is politics projected into the past'. In 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place. The new leader Nikita Khrushchev presented a report titled *On the Cult of Personality*

and Its Consequences in a closed session. He condemned Stalin for repressing party members (numerous other victims were ignored), deporting people deep within the USSR, making mistakes during the [Second World War](#), including trusting Hitler, which was supposed to prevent the country from having to prepare for an unexpected attack by the enemy, as well as building a cult around his personality. By denouncing Stalin, Khrushchev whitewashed himself and other accomplices of the tyrant, thus freeing himself from responsibility for the crimes in which he had participated.

Historical lies were a tool of the power struggle and guaranteed the system's survival.

In this version, the despot was guilty but the system itself was fundamentally right. Stalin's rule was only a temporary distortion of communism, which, under the leadership of Khrushchev, would be put back on track as Khrushchev was the true follower of Lenin. The same mechanism was used by successive leaders of the USSR, and the notion that the party and the people were not aware that Stalin had abused power remained valid until the end of the USSR. This manipulation leads to the false, yet still functioning, view that Stalinism (an era of a one-man tyranny) cannot be equated with the communist system, which is right in principle.



← Nikita Khrushchev presenting a report titled 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences', Moscow, 1956.

According to the Soviet model

This scheme was copied in other communist countries, including those enslaved by the USSR. The history of individual states and peoples was rewritten following the Russian model. **Communist propaganda highlighted epochs, events and people from the past that fitted into an ideological interpretation, deleting or denigrating whatever did not line up with it, for example the anti-communist or independence movements.** In history, it sought to justify communist rule and post-war territorial changes. It falsified the history of local communist movements, attributing alleged historical merit to them. History was also used to identify arguments in support of an 'alliance' with the USSR. Events that could have disturbed this notion of 'friendship' were omitted or falsified; for example, in Poland, which was occupied by both the Third Reich and the USSR during the Second World War, the theory of one enemy, the Germans, was promoted. Information about the 1919–21 Polish–Bolshevik War was also censored.

The calendar of holidays was manipulated: traditional national holidays were replaced by new anniversaries: the October Revolution (7 November), Victory Day (9 May) or ones commemorating the installation of communist authorities. Publications, monuments and street names promoted the new 'heroes'. Independence activists and other deserving individuals who were not considered progressive enough were replaced by communist activists (for example, Feliks Dzierżyński, a Bolshevik and the organizer of the Soviet secret police).

Subordinating history to ideological and political requirements did not mean that there was no place at all for the truth. Particularly during periods the system's liberalization, free speech about the past was acceptable as long as it did not undermine the official party line.

Blank spots

It is impossible to list all the falsifications in communist propaganda here. For example, the armed coup, by which the Bolsheviks overthrew the democratic

republic established after the tsardom's removal in Russia and seized power, was presented as a great socialist revolution of the working masses against their exploiters. Many events in the history of the USSR were removed, especially those that related to the mass repressions carried out by the communist authorities. Silence was kept about the number of their victims. The circumstances of Soviet intervention during the 1936–39 Spanish Civil War were misrepresented and any knowledge of the crimes committed by the party supported by the USSR was concealed.

The circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the Second World War were not disclosed, that is, the existence of a secret protocol annexed to [the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact](#) – a so-called non-aggression pact concluded between the USSR and the Third Reich in on 23 August 1939, which partitioned the distribution of influence in East–Central Europe. The Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939 was described as 'the liberation of brother nations' and the absorption of the Baltic States by the USSR as 'a victory for the socialist revolution'. The propaganda description of the Second World War was 'The Great Patriotic War', which lasted from 1941 until 1945, thus skipping its beginning and the alliance with Hitler, which was inconvenient for the USSR. There was silence about the Soviet repressions in the USSR-occupied territories, for example, about the fate of nationalities deported deep inside the USSR (including Estonians, Finns, Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Romanians, Ukrainians and Jews) and the circumstances of the Katyn Massacre, which was attributed to the Germans. Some of these falsifications are still being repeated. In Russia, for example, they are still being used politically by the authorities there.

In the countries where communism persists, the falsification of history continues. In China, for instance, the authorities remain silent about the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, and in North Korea, the version that the 1950–53 Korean War started with the aggression of South Korea provoked by the US still prevails.

Translation: Mikołaj Sekrecki

Copyediting & Proofreading: Caroline Brooke Johnson