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HISTORY AS THERAPY

Alternative History and Nationalist Imaginings in Russia, 1991-2014

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Coverpicture: Viktor Vasnetsov's famous painting 'Sirin and Alkonost: the Birds of Joy and Sorrow'. Sirin and Alkonost are sirens whose songs enchant the listener so that he or she forgets the dreary reality of their everyday life. Alternative History is the modern siren that has seduced millions of Russian readers with its song of long-lost Russian greatness.
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Foreword

In 2009, we wrote a book entitled *Nationalist Imaginings of the Russian Past. Anatolii Fomenko and the Rise of Alternative History*. Its focus was the explosion of 'alternative' history, a publishing phenomenon that emerged in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The leading light in this movement was, and remains, Anatolii Fomenko, a Soviet-era mathematician who claimed that the standard historical chronology was hopelessly inaccurate and that conventional history had failed to notice the existence of a remarkable Slav-Turk empire that dominated much of the world before modern times. Ridiculed by the academic establishment, Fomenko had his revenge when his books outsold the conventional historians many times over. Fomenko's books inspired countless imitators and critics writing within the field of 'alternative history'. The common themes of these writers are the greatness of Russia and the Western plot against Russian history. For Russians disillusioned with their initial experience of capitalism and democracy, alternative history offered a therapy in which the problems of today gave way to new images of past glory.

We are grateful for this opportunity to update and substantially revise the earlier book. Pseudo-history has continued to flourish not just in Russia, but throughout the former Soviet space. Alternative historians aim to show that the greatness of Russia extended far back in time and that its power and influence reverberated from Eurasia to the New World. In recent years, the geopolitical strategy of the Putin regime and the imperial dreams of alternative history have synchronized. This book explains the rise of alternative history within an older historical pattern. In each period of Russian history, a new regime has insisted upon the rewriting of the past to suit the needs of the present. Long before it was fashionable to do so, alternative historians wrote the ideological script for a new Russian Empire. Alternative history serves as a warning not just to the degree to which nationalism is gathering strength in the former Soviet space, but also how difficult it will be to contain this force in the future.

Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown

Introduction: The End of History

'The farther backward you can look the farther forward you are likely to see.'

Winston Churchill

'Alternative history' is a term often used in present-day Russia to describe a disparate group of popular writers and amateur historians who are actively reimagining Russia's past. The vast majority of these writers have no professional training in the academic discipline of History. They are often scientists or popular writers from the Soviet era with a passion for history and story telling. In the West, this type of writing is often described as 'pseudo history'. These writers have become popular at a time when Russia's identity is up for grabs, and when it is by no means clear whether Russia's present rulers will succeed either in building a Western-style nation state or in reestablishing Russia as the powerful international actor it was in centuries past.

The shared premise of alternative historians is that Russian History, as we know it, contains countless errors, misinterpretations, and willful neglect of the evidence. Just as importantly, these inaccuracies did not come about by accident. According to alternative history, conventional historians have acted, wittingly or unwittingly, as the accomplices of Russia's external and internal enemies. These enemies aim to disempower Russia by depriving it of its true past. Alternative historians often accuse the pre-revolutionary Russian academy of working hand-in-glove with the Romanovs, the 'Prussian' dynasty that ruled Russia for three hundred years for the benefit of the West.[1] The Romanovs and their retinue of corrupt courtiers, foreign historians, and a pro-Western intelligentsia constituted a 'fifth column' working against Russia.

Conversations about history that were previously taboo or even punishable by imprisonment or death are now flourishing in Russia, even though the

1 See, for example, LI Bocharov et al., *Zagovor protiv russkoi istorii (fakty, zagadki, versii)* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 1998), p. 4. Andrei Kobyla, the earliest-known Romanov, was allegedly of Prussian origins, although virtually nothing is known about him. In 1761, Peter the Third, whose mother was a German princess, ascended the throne, only to be murdered and replaced by his German wife who became Catherine the Great.

content of these discussions causes professional historians to cringe. Alternative history has become a clearing house for all manner of competing ideas about Russia and Russian history; Communists, anti-Communists, Eurasianists, neo-Nazis, Slavophiles and neo-Pagans all write alternative history and they compete for the attention of the book-buying and Internet-viewing public.[2] 'Alternative history' is just one of the descriptors used for these writers. They are also described as pseudo-historians, pseudo-scientists, alternate historians, conspiracy theorists, and, more imaginatively, as historians of a 'non-traditional orientation'.[3]

In the West, we usually describe such writers as 'Russian nationalists', 'ultra-nationalists', or advocates of 'ethno nationalism'. In Russia, the term 'nationalist' is usually reserved for individuals and groups that wish to separate themselves from Russia.[4] Those Russians, whom Western writers would label as nationalists, describe themselves as patriots.[5] This book refers to the writers under discussion here as 'nationalists' even though the writers themselves would strongly object to this term. This study expands upon our earlier account of the 'New Chronology' movement whose prodigious publishing efforts and fantastic claims about Russia and its history first established the popularity of alternative history.[6]

The context for the rise of alternative history in Russia was the painful birth of post-Communist Russia. In 1991, for the first time in its modern history, Russians became the majority ethnic group within the borders of a clearly defined Russian state. But for Russian nationalists, this was no cause for celebration. The territorial settlements that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Russia was cut off from Ukraine, Belarus, the Crimean peninsula and large parts of the southern steppe, lands that for long periods in the last five hundred years belonged to Moscow. More than

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2 For a summary of these various tendencies, see Marlene Laruelle, 'Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?' *The Russian Review*, 71 (2012): 565–580.

3 Vladimir Lapenkov, *Istoriia Netraditsionnoi Orientatsii, Legendy i Mify Vsemirnoi Istorii* (Moscow: Bystrov, 2006).

4 Alexander Yanov, 'Russian nationalism in Western studies: misadventures of a moribund paradigm', *Demokratizatsiia* 9:4 (Fall 2001): 552–562, p. 562.

5 Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union. The Mind Aflame* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 230.

6 See Konstantin Sheiko in collaboration with Stephen Brown, *Nationalist Imaginings of the Russian Past. Anatolii Fomenko and the Rise of Alternative History in Post-Communist Russia* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2009).

twenty million ethnic Russians now lived in the 'near abroad', the fourteen former Soviet republics that became independent countries in the post-Soviet space. There was a danger that the Russian Federation itself would implode as new nationalist discourses made their presence felt from the Caucasus to Siberia.

Territorial integrity was not the only issue. The birth of a Russian nation-state revived questions about whether Russia was part of the West or the East, whether its government was instinctively autocratic or a fledgling democracy, and whether Russia should aim to be a super power or simply a middle-ranking regional power. These issues arose at a time of plummeting living standards and economic collapse when ordinary citizens rapidly lost faith in the new democratic institutions, and when the suspicions of many Soviet citizens that they had been systematically lied to for the best part of a century were confirmed as censorship broke down. Having been assured for decades that the Soviet Union was a beacon of humanity, that the Communist state was fast overtaking the United States, that there was no crime, and that their living standards were constantly improving, Soviet citizens learned in the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras that the reverse was true. Meanwhile, economic and social problems of unemployment, crime, corruption and collapsing life expectancy seemingly spiraled out of control.[7]

As ever more challenges arose to its power, the administration of President Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999) became more authoritarian and at the same time all the more weak as powerful oligarchs divided up Russia's economic resources between them. The perception grew that the new financial elites were interested only in personal gain and had no interest in the public's welfare.[8] Commentators suggested that the Russian state had become in effect the largest of Russia's criminal gangs.[9] The new market economy lacked both private capitalists and the impartial rule of law.[10] This 'crony

7 See, for example, Stefan Hedlund, *Russia's 'Market' Economy: A Bad Case of Predatory Capitalism* (London: UCL Press, 1999).

8 See, for example S. Rosefelde, 'Russia: An Abnormal Country', *The East European Journal of Comparative Economics*, 2:1 (2005), pp. 3–16.

9 See for example, David Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

10 Stefan Hedlund, 'Vladimir the Great, Grand Prince of Muscovy: Resurrecting the Russian Service State', *Europe-Asia Studies*, p. 797.

capitalism' left Russian voters and many critics of the old Soviet system unimpressed.[11]

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the momentum behind Russia's movement into the realm of the Western liberal democracies appeared unstoppable. Since the mid 1990s, the trend in voting patterns in Russia has moved away from pro-Western reformers, usually described as the political 'right' or 'liberals' in Russia. In Presidential and Duma elections, politicians described as patriots, conservatives, and 'state-builders' dominate. Embodying this new modified version of Russian autocracy is Russia's most successful politician of the post-Communist era, Vladimir Putin. President from 2000 to 2008, Prime Minister from 2008 to 2012, and President once more from 2012, Putin's political longevity and personal power over the resources of the state allow for meaningful comparisons with previous tsars and Communist Party leaders.[12] The four political parties represented in the Duma that survived the Putin era—United Russia, Just Russia, the Communist Party, and the Liberal Democratic Paty—have all promoted a version of authoritarian patriotism.[13]

From 2003, the main liberal political parties did not receive enough votes even to enter the State Duma. As one account put it, by 2012, 'the liberals' views have been so marginalized that they are associated with strictly opposition politicians who have no significant influence'.[14] Russian television has essentially been renationalized and promotes the official version of the new patriotism.[15] Dissident oligarchs and investigative journalists alike faced severe repression.[16] Developments such as these caused some Western commentators to fear that its long history of autocracy left Russia

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11 Ellen Carnaghan, 'The Difficulty of Measuring support for democracy in a changing society: evidence from Russia', *Democratisation*, 18:3, 682–706, p. 689.

12 For a discussion of parallels between Putin and his Communist and Tsarist predecessors, see, for example, J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 13–18.

13 Timm Beichelt, 'Two variants of the Russian radical right: Imperialism and social nationalism', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42 (2009) 505–526, pp. 514–15.

14 Andrew C Kuchins and Igor A. Zevelev, 'Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change', *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2012), pp. 147–161, 149.

15 Miguel Vazquez Linan, 'History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin's Russia', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2010, Volume 43, Issue 2, pp. 167–178.

16 The Committee to Protect Journalists listed fifty-six journalists murdered in Russia between 1992 and 2013.

unprepared for life as a liberal nation-state. There were predictions that Russia would follow the example of the Weimar Republic, the depressing path travelled by Germany in the 1920s and 30s from infant democracy to an aggressive, nationalistic and racist dictatorship under the leadership of Adolf Hitler.[17] For some, Putin's presidency fulfilled this unhappy forecast. In the West, Putin is often presented as a charismatic and autocratic nationalist, reminiscent of Hitler and his Nazi regime.[18] For others, the Putin era represents a return 'to the tactic tested in the past by Stalin and Mao, who maintained society in a state of constant tension and used the "besieged fortress" idea to justify violence'.[19]

Putin's assertive foreign policy and his strongman image are often mistaken for evidence that ethnic nationalism is already victorious in Russia. Yet, for Russians inclined to embrace a radical nationalism, the Putin/Medvedev administrations have proved much too moderate and pro-Western. While Western media tended to view the government-orchestrated imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oligarch and political rival of Putin, as evidence of Russia's slide into dictatorship, Russian nationalists complain that, on the whole, oligarchs continue to thrive at the expense of ordinary people. Nationalists accuse Putin's government of unwarranted tolerance, even favoritism, towards ethnic minorities instead of discriminating positively in favour of ethnic Russians.[20] In other words, for many Russians, Russia's post-Communist identity is far from settled.

It should be remembered too that there remains significant opposition both to Putin and his government, even if this opposition is seriously divided. During the parliamentary elections of 2011 and presidential elections of 2012, there were anti-government demonstrations in Moscow. In the mass protests in Moscow in October 2011, television footage showed how the

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17 See, for example, Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Refrained. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Judith Devlin, *Slavophiles and Commissars* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 204.

18 Dmitrii Shlapentokh, 'Russian Nationalists as Georgian Allies', *Iran & The Caucasus* [serial online] 16:3 (October 2012): 337–353.

19 Lilia Shevtsova, 'The Next Russian Revolution', *Current History*, 111.747 (Oct 2012) 251–257, p. 252.

20 For an account of this discourse, see Shlapentokh, 'Russian Nationalists' and Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pain, 'Civilizational Nationalism. The Russian Version of the "Special Path",' *Russian Politics and Law*, 50:5, (September–October 2012), pp. 52–80, 53–54.

protesters marched in three columns. The first column comprised left-leaning 'patriots', including young and old Communists, some wearing their medals from the victory over the Nazis in World War Two and waving Red flags adorned with the hammer and sickle. The second column, waving the current Russian flag of white, red and blue, comprised those advocating a more liberal Russia oriented towards the West. The third column comprised right-wing nationalists, many wearing the black shirts of the neo-Nazis, who marched under the old imperial, black, yellow, and white standard. Each column represented a potential political future for Russia. One scholar, semi seriously, has described modern Russia as suffering collectively from Borderline Personality Disorder.[21]

Amid the bewildering political and economic change that began in the 1990s, there were, unsurprisingly, new calls for Russia to reevaluate its past in order to chart a course into the future. Many luminaries of present-day alternative history were already working on their projects in the Soviet period, but it was the transition from the monotonous certainties of Soviet 'historical science' to the intellectual free-for-all that obtained in Russia during the Yeltsin era that provided an opportunity to connect with a wider audience.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Communism, Russian universities were in an especially parlous economic position. In the 1990s, history writing, like the Russian state itself, entered a state of flux. The erstwhile conformism of Soviet academia collapsed from within as some historians defended the Communist past, others became trenchant critics of the former regime, and the majority looked anxiously to see which way the political wind was blowing.[22] Their Western counterparts were keen to investigate and publish materials relating to the more sensational aspects of the Soviet period such as the Stalinist purges. But in Russia and the West, there was only a limited market for scholarly ruminations on arcane controversies connected to Russia's ancient and medieval past.

It was into this virtually empty space that alternative historians, led by the likes of the New Chronology movement of Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, ventured. Fomenko (1945–) is a renowned mathematician who has

21 Arias-King, Fredo, Arlene King De Arias, and Fredo Arias De La Canal, 'Russia's Borderline Personality', *Demokratizatsiya* 16.2 (2008): pp. 117–129.

22 Nina Tumarkin, 'The Great Patriotic War as myth and memory', *European Review*, 11:4 (2003) 595–611, pp. 605.

belonged to the academic staff of Moscow State University since the Soviet era. He is a member of Russia's Academy of Sciences, a professor with a doctorate in applied physics and mathematics, head of the Mechanical-Mathematical Department of Moscow State University, and author of more than one hundred and eighty scientific works. He has written dozens of well-respected monographs and textbooks in his specialist field of mathematics. Fomenko was awarded Russia's State Award in 1996 for his scientific achievements.[23] The qualifications of Nosovskii (1958–) include a PhD in physics and mathematics. More notoriously, they are the authors and co-authors of more than one hundred publications dealing with Russian and world history. The volume of their output is astonishing and reflects both their enthusiasm and their mass-production methods as different members of their team specialize in different periods and locations.[24]

Since the collapse of Communism, New Chronology has thrived as a publishing phenomenon, despite and partly because of the hefty criticisms directed at it from conventional scholars. It has become better known in the West too, attracting the attention of scholars who are concerned about its

23 Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Novaia khronologiia i kontseptsia drevnei Rusi, Anglii, Rima. Fakty, statistikia, gipotesy* II volumes (Moscow: Moscow State University press MGU, 1995, 1996); Anatolii Fomenko, *Novaia khronologiia Gretsii. Antichnost' i srednevekov'e* II volumes (Moscow: MGU, 1996); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Imperiia: Rus', Turtsia, Kitai, Evropa, Egipet. Novaia matematicheskaia khronologiia drevnosti* (Moscow: Faktorial press, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Rus' i Rim. Pravil'no li my poinimaem istoriiu Evropy i Azii?* II volumes (Moscow: Olimp, AST print house, 1997); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Novaia khronologiia Rusi*, (Moscow: Faktorial press, 1997); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Matematicheskaia khronologiia bibleiskikh sobytii*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1997); Anatolii Fomenko, "Smysl russkogo dela v sokhranenii Imperii," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 21 November 1996; Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Rekonstruktsia vseobshchei istorii* (Moscow: Delovoi Ekpress, 1999); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Bibleiskaia Rus'* II volumes (Moscow: Faktorial press, 1998, 2000); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Rus'-Orda na stranitsakh bibleiskikh knig* (Moscow: Anvik, 1998); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Vvedenie v novuiu khronologiiu, kakoi seichas vek?* (Moscow: Kraft+Lean, 1999); Anatolii Fomenko, *New Methods of Statistical Analysis of Historical Texts. Applications to Chronology* III volumes (New York: Edwin Mellen Press); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Rekonstruktsia vseobschei istorii. Issledovania 1999–2000* (Moscow: Delovoi ekspress, 1999); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Kakoi seichas vek?* (Moscow: Aif-Print, 2002).

24 For a complete list of their publications, a summary of New Chronology's rewriting of history, and even a sample of Fomenko's art-work, the interested reader should consult the official New Chronology website.

impact upon ordinary Russians' understanding of history and Russia's place in the world.[25] The English language title of Fomenko's magnum opus is *History. Fiction or Science*.[26] Fomenko's ambition is to replace the existing 'fiction' with the 'science' of alternative history. Fomenko and New Chronology represent a popular rebellion against the version of history preferred by Russia's scholarly elite.[27] Or, as one scholar has put it, New Chronology is a prime example of 'the conjunction between conspiracy theory and the rewriting of history [that] makes up one of the main instruments for disseminating nationalist theories in today's Russia, theories based on a kind of post-modern, paranoid cultural imaginary'.[28]

The number of critics of Fomenko and his fellow alternative historians has certainly grown in recent years, and there have been premature announcements of New Chronology's imminent demise.[29] Yet alternative history has shown a remarkable capacity to absorb the blows inflicted by its critics and move forward, its momentum enhanced rather than deflated. So far, alternative history has not succeeded in winning over the academic departments of major universities, nor has it replaced the existing school textbooks. The alternative strategy is not to outscore the professional historians in a debate over a particular controversy or time period. Rather, the plan is to render conventional scholarship irrelevant by winning over the book-buying public and Russia's growing army of Internet users. Their passion is expressed in their apocalyptic version of patriotism for, in the words of one alternative historian:

> When a nation maintains her historical memory, she will fight not only for material values, but also for the honour of the state (*derzhava*). … But if this nation is forced to abandon traditional national values and substitute instead a set of alien principles, then this nation is like a giant that was defeated not by the sword, but poisoned with a substance that darkens the mind and paralyses the will.[30]

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25 See, for example, James Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Research Center, 2004).

26 Anatolii Fomenko, Gleb Nosovskii, History*: Fiction or Science* VII vol. (Paris, London, New York: Delamere, 2003).

27 See 'Introduction' to Fomenko *History: Fiction or Science.*

28 Laruelle, 'Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia', p. 566.

29 See, for example, S. Shmidt, *Fenomen Fomenko* (Moscow: Nauka, 2005).

30 Alexey Kungurov, *Kievskoi Rusi* ne *bylo, ili chto skryvaiut istoriki* (Moscow: Eksmo, Algoritm: 2011), p. 31.

Fomenko's intellectual heroes include Mikhail Lomonosov, the eighteenth century polymath, scientist, and Russian patriot, who famously accused the Romanov dynasty of supporting a history profession that praised the West, while diminishing Russia's own historical achievements. Fomenko's writing is inspired too by the work of the Eurasianists of the early twentieth century who argued that Russia was neither European nor Asian but a distinctive society. The academic leader of this group, Nikolai Trubetskoi, claimed that Asia was the natural home of Russia in much the same way that Europe was a traditional enemy.[31] Another influential figure in preparing the ground for alternative history was Lev Gumilev, a maverick Soviet-era dissident who argued that there was no neat division of Eurasia into its Asian and European halves.[32]

Russian public opinion remains deeply divided, but the trends are not encouraging for Russia's 'Westernizers'. Immediately after the Communist collapse, opinion polls suggested that more than two-thirds of Russians expected 'positive change and a return to the "family of civilized nations" and the beaten track of world development—modernization, democracy, and liberalism'. By the late 1990s, public opinion had changed dramatically to the point where two-thirds were of the view that 'Russia has its own special path'.[33] Divisions over Russia's eastern and western orientations remain. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Russian public opinion had undergone what one researcher described as 'a deep transformation of Russian identity, in the course of which its Eurasian component is becoming stronger'. The view that Russia was a 'part of Europe, and it will be associated with Europe most closely in the future just as it was in the past' enjoys about the same level of popularity as the view that 'Russia is not a purely European country but is a special, Eurasian civilization, and the center of gravity in Russian policy will be shifting to the East'. The momentum, however, is shifting in the direction of the Eurasian view.[34]

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31 Nikolai Trubetskoi, *The Legacy of Chengiz Khan and other Essays on Russia's identity* (Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), pp. 161–67.

32 See, for example, Lev Gumilev, *Drevniaia Rus i velikaia step'* (Moscow: Mysl', 1992), Lev Gumilev, *Poiski vymyshlennogo tsarstva* (Moscow: Tanais, 1994), and Lev Gumilev, *Chernaia legenda* (Moscow: Ekopros, 1994).

33 Verkhovskii and Pain, 'Civilizational Nationalism', pp. 53–54.

34 A.L. Andreev, 'Europe or Asia', *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 2010, Vol. 80, No. 5: 461–465, p. 463.

Just as importantly, the outlook of the Russian intelligentsia, its educated elite, has clearly changed. Educated Russian opinion was firmly in the camp of the Westernizers in the early 1990s. The claims of Frances Fukuyama that history had come to an end because humanity's ideological wars were over and of Samuel Huntington about the link between the growth of the middle class and increased support for political and economic freedom appeared triumphant. Just about every poltical commentator recognizes that the mood in Russia is very different now. In the words of one observer, twenty years after the collapse of Communism, not a shred of the liberal optimism of the early 1990s remains.[35]

It seems likely that the relative dynamism of the Asian economies in comparison to the stagnation of the European and American economies in the wake of the Great Financial Crisis—which began in earnest in 2008 and was still impacting the world economy in 2013—contributed to this shift in perspective. On the other hand, it seems clear that an increasing proportion of Russians are embracing the notion of a Russian special path or *sonderweg*. This is a pleasing development for most writers of alternative history. It is also an outcome for which alternative history can take some credit.

Fomenko began to puzzle over the issues of conventional chronology as far back as the 1970s. Fomenko's original claim was that the accepted dating system was bedeviled with errors and deliberate falsifications. Conventional dating amounted to little more than the ill-informed guesses of early modern scholars, who, Fomenko alleged, added thousands of years to the story of civilization and filled in the gaps with the mythology that we know today as ancient and medieval history.[36] For Fomenko, recorded history was nowhere near as old as previously thought, ancient history was a duplicate of medieval history, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans deserved far less atten-

35 For a summary of the difficulties, see Lilia Shevtsova, 'What's the Matter with Russia?', *Journal of Democracy* 21.1 (2010): 152–159.

36 Fomenko, Nosovskii, *Bibleiskaia Rus'*, I, 21–24; for a mathematical-statistical critique of Skaliger/Petvius see also Anatolii Fomenko, *Metody statisticheskogo analiza narrativnykh tekstov i prilozhenie k khronologii* (Moscow: MGU, 1990, 1996); Anatolii Fomenko, *Globalnaia khronologiia* (Moscow: MGU, 1993); Anatolii Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskii, *Geometrical and statistical methods of analysis of star configurations. Dating of Ptolemy's Almagest* (USA: CRC-Press, 1993); Anatolii Fomenko, *Empirical-statistical analysis of narrative material and its application to historical dating* II volumes (the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic publications, 1994); Fomenko and Nosovskii, *Kakoi seichas vek?* pp.16–33.

tion than was usually accorded them, and the Bible's Old Testament was written after the New Testament. According to Fomenko, confusion has arisen because many historical figures are duplicates and triplicates, that is, copies of the one historical personage known in different contexts and eras by different names. Roman history is mostly the history of the Holy Roman Empire, which turns out to be the story of Russia projected westwards and backwards in time. Jesus Christ was also known to history as Pope Gregory the Seventh and lived in Rome in the eleventh century. Only in the seventeenth century did the dating of conventional history and Fomenko's dates achieve unison.

Fomenko's initial challenge to the Soviet historical academy invoked only ridicule from historians trained to think in terms of party thinking (*partiinost'*), class war, and Soviet patriotism. His speculations, based on arguments from astronomical data, were often opaque to the non-specialist reader, although they excited at least some interest among fellow mathematicians.[37] Fomenko's new version of Biblical history, however, drew fire from the Russian Orthodox Church. Having been labelled an anti-Christ in the early 1990s, Fomenko soon became a celebrity academic of interest to popular newspapers and the makers of television documentaries. Fomenko began to trawl through the history of Eurasia, Byzantium, and Rome to show that historians all around the world appropriated the achievements of Russians to boost the prestige of their own national history. Arguably, Fomenko's greatest achievement is the invention of a Slav-Turk empire that allegedly dominated the first half of world history, that is, the period we know as the ninth to the seventeenth centuries. This 'Russian Horde' as Fomenko named it, was based in the area that we normally associate with the Golden Horde founded by the Mongol khans in the thirteenth century.[38]

Fomenko's vision is an inspiring one for those who measure Russia's greatness by the amount of space it occupies on a map. He offers an account of the Russian state as if it were the history of all of Eurasia. One of Fomenko's claims, often repeated in the works of popular writers, is that the Mongols or Tatars, as the Russians called them, did not come from far off

37 For an account of Fomenko's mathematical reasoning and its reception in Russia, see Florin Diacu, *The Lost Millennium: History's Timetables under Siege* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

38 The 'Golden Horde' is the latter-day name that Russians applied to the Kipchak Khanate.

Central Asia but had always lived within the lands of European Russia along the Volga River and adjacent steppes. Genghis Khan had European features, spoke Slav and Turkic languages, and never invaded Russia. One of Fomenko's goals is to achieve what his thirteenth-century ancestors could not, the expulsion of the Mongols from the historical record. According to Fomenko, the myth of the Mongol invasion was an invention of Church chroniclers and the Romanov dynasty, designed to glorify their own contributions to Russian history.

Fomenko and alternative history are a recent example of one of the oldest stories in Russian history. This is the constant reimagining of Russia, or, as one historian has put it, the 'agony of the Russian idea'.[39] There have been several obvious breaks with the past in Russia's history—the coming of Christianity, Peter the Great, the Communist revolution, Stalin's revolution from above, the collapse of the Soviet Union. At each point, those who came to power obliterated the past from the historical record and invented a new history.

According to the early Russian chronicles, Vladimir the First converted Kiev Rus *en masse* to Christianity in 988 and literally destroyed all traces of the pagan gods. Peter the Great attacked almost everything old from the existing church hierarchy to the beards of his subjects and then set up an Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg in 1725 whose mission included the writing of Russian history. After 1917, Lenin and Stalin destroyed the pillars of the former establishment, tsar, nobility, church and peasantry and then destroyed any information that could be viewed as positive concerning their imperial predecessors. The pattern continued after the fall of Communism in 1991 when Russian reformers declared an end to the Communist period as if Russia was a land with a future but no past.

Fomenko reads this pattern of history as suggesting that at every crisis in Russia's history, a new idea is needed to account for the crisis and to enable Russia to move forward. Because there is a point to history, it is too important to be left to purely academic research. The Marxist historian Pokrovsky put this idea most cynically when he described history as politics projected into the past. When pseudo-historians like Fomenko are told that the past they have invented is full of lies and distortion, they invariably reply that the history written by conventional historians suffers from the same de-

39 Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 16–17.