

What happens when Russia, China and the U.S. erase history | Column

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In a demonstration that couldn't happen now, a protester stands in front of a mock tank in 2014 to symbolize the man blocking a line of tanks at the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing, as thousands of Hong Kong people march on a downtown street in Hong Kong Sunday, June 1, 2014, to mark the anniversary of China's bloody crackdown on Tiananmen Square on June 4, ahead of a much larger annual candlelight vigil. The Chinese words on white T-shirt reads "Citizen against orders." (AP Photo/Vincent Yu) XYY104

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"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Powerful political forces in China, Russia and the United States are currently engaged in aggressive attempts to rewrite history to consolidate political positions and, as Orwell states, "control the future." Examine the following.

In China: For decades, the Chinese Communist Party has ferociously attempted to erase the history of the 1980s movement for democracy. On the mainland, Chinese authorities ban any memorials or public commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen protests for liberty and democracy. Human rights scholars estimate that close to 1,000 civilians lost their lives, and over 900 were wounded in the "Tiananmen massacre" when the Communist government brutally suppressed the protestors. The Chinese Communist Party subsequently banned discussion of the massacre and labeled democracy organizers as counter-revolutionaries.

The former British colony of Hong Kong had been the only place on Chinese soil where pro-democracy protesters killed in Tiananmen Square could be commemorated. This changed in December 2021 as Chinese authorities moved to squelch these remembrances. Three public monuments dedicated to the memory of the 1989 Tiananmen protests were forcibly removed including: a 20-foot bronze "Goddess of Democracy" at the Chinese University of Hong Kong; a Tiananmen massacre wall relief sculpture at Hong Kong's Lingnan University; and a 26-foot statue known as the "Pillar of Shame" at the University of Hong Kong, which commemorated the pro-democracy protesters killed during the Tiananmen crackdown. Chinese artist Chen Weiming stated: "They (the Chinese communists) want to remove the real history of the brutal crackdown. ... They wouldn't allow any different viewpoints to continue to exist in Hong Kong."

In Russia: In December 2021, the Russian government shut down the most prominent human rights organization, Memorial International. Memorial's work focused on the identification and commemoration of the millions of victims of Stalinist purges and labor camps. The organization chronicled the persecutions of the Stalin labor camps and attempted to preserve the memory of its victims. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov and other dissidents founded the organization over three decades ago. Putin labeled the organization as "foreign agents" and supporters of "terrorism." The Russian Supreme Court supported Putin and ruled that Memorial must close and be liquidated.

Putin seeks to mold public opinion around a positive view of the former USSR and soften the image of Stalin's regime. Putin thus focuses on the "glorious accomplishments" of the former Soviet Union as a powerful superpower. According to *The New York Times*, the Kremlin has "moved aggressively to remove" interpretations of Russian history "by organizations it does not control." Stalin's tough rule can appeal to many Russian citizens facing an insecure future and provide a rationale for Putin to continue to amass authoritarian political power.

In the U.S.: Republican Party leadership is attempting to reframe the history of the Jan. 6 riot and insurrection as "no big deal." PolitiFact labeled the Republican deluge of justifications, excuses and conspiracy theories the "Lie of the Year" for 2021. PolitiFact's list of Republicans' lies include: falsely claiming that the riot was instigated by left-wing activists; likening the event to a "normal tourist visit;" denying the visible and filmed role of white supremacists and far-right militia groups in the riot; suggesting that the whole affair was staged by the government; and claiming that the rioters were now held as "political prisoners."

America has never before experienced such a violent attempt by an organized mob to prevent the peaceful democratic transfer of power to a new administration. We were all witnesses and can confirm Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell's description of officers "punched, kicked, shoved, sprayed with chemical irritants and even blinded with eye-damaging lasers by a violent mob." We saw the insurrection cause \$1.5 million in property damage. We saw the rioters brandishing bats, crutches, flagpoles, skateboards, hockey sticks, knives, zip ties, chemical sprays, a fire extinguisher and other makeshift weapons. The University of Illinois' Cline Center for Advanced Social Research stated that the Jan. 6 attack qualified as an attempted coup.

Yet many Republican leaders seem intent on whitewashing the demonstrable facts about Jan. 6 in order to cover for the anti-democratic actions of the Trump administration. Their strategy is working. According to an ABC News-Ipsos survey published on Jan 3, 52 percent of Republicans believed that those involved in the attack on the Capitol were protecting democracy; and 40 percent of Republicans stated that violent actions could be justified. The continuous repetition of lies about Jan. 6 have an impact and are difficult to overcome. Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol stated: "The effort to rewrite history in the service of political power goals is not unheard of in America or anywhere else. What is brazen is the history they want to rewrite includes pictures of what actually happened."

Once a lie is accepted as common knowledge, it can take decades to undo the damage. For example, the lie that the Civil War in the United States was about protecting Southern culture and not about slavery significantly helped prevent civil rights protections for African-Americans for over 100 years. The myths about the Tiananmen Square massacre will help to hold back current movements for democracy in China. Putin's revisionist history of Stalinism will help to push public opinion to accept an authoritarian leader and dismiss human rights. Republican attempts to conceal and misrepresent the Jan. 6 insurrection has already invigorated white nationalists and caused many others to question the viability of American democracy itself.

George Orwell was prescient. Through controlling our understanding of the past, leaders around the world today hope to control our future.

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