CHAPTER 5
RUSSIA'S BURIED PAST

Introduction
The debate over the past in Russia has followed a trajectory much different than in Poland and East Germany. In Russia, the process of coming to terms with the past began in 1987, four years before the country moved from its agenda of gradual reform to a radical break with the communist system. The process started earlier than in Poland and East Germany, well before democratization seemed inevitable. During the period of glasnost' [openness], the media and the new independent civic organizations began telling the truth about past injustices. Truth-telling by groups outside the government became the general pattern for dealing with the legacy of the past. This public discussion about the country’s dark historical moments paralleled political discussions about reforms, but it was curiously disengaged from these changes. Unlike in Poland and East Germany, Russian politicians did not make a connection between condemning past abuses and reforming the institutions responsible for them.

After glasnost' largely discredited the Soviet political system and the failed coup of August 1991 brought the maverick Boris Yeltsin to power, we might have expected that the new Russian leadership would drive a stake through the heart of the old system. Some of Yeltsin's early moves suggest this impulse. Yeltsin banned the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and promised to open the KGB archives, which would have revealed potentially shattering secrets. Procurators began criminal proceedings against the putschists. Yeltsin's tactics changed quickly, however, especially as economic reforms and the complexities of post-imperialism consumed his attention. After the communists and nationalists made strong showings in the parliamentary elections of 1993 and 1995, their ideologies shaped the understanding of the Soviet past. They
were intent on recapturing its goodness and glory, rather than remembering its crimes. Thus, Russia cast aside the crimes in its history as if they had little relevance for building a democracy.

In Russia, transitional justice did not take the form characteristic of other post-communist countries: legal redress and truth-telling. Instead, after glasnost’s brief flowering, the country opted to forget about the crimes of the Soviet state. This was not the type of forgetting attempted early in Poland’s transition, where forgetting took the form of a publicly announced decision to put aside the past for the sake of a higher goal, namely national reconciliation. In Russia, forgetting set in incrementally as a way to remove a controversial, uncomfortable topic from the political agenda.

Russian politicians across the political spectrum had few incentives to raise the issue of transitional justice. The Communist Party remained stronger and more unreformed in Russia than in Poland and East Germany. By far the largest party in Russia, the communists dwarfed the congeries of puny democratic and nationalist parties, and they proudly still referred to themselves as a communist party, not a democratic socialist one. The continued good health of the Communist Party meant that it could take the offensive against anyone who dared to question its past activities. Backlash against historical revisionism began during the glasnost period, and after a brief interlude following the attempted coup of August 1991, the Communist Party recovered the chutzpah to strike against any challenge to its legitimacy and good record. Democratic reformers in Poland and East Germany never needed to fear such a bold backlash by their countries’ weakened and somewhat shamefaced former communist parties, so they could afford to press the point.

Furthermore, the personal history of many leading democrats included a tenure in the Communist Party and various government positions. These individuals were highly implicated in the Soviet system, even though they may not have been associated with any abuses. Too much inquiry into the past had the potential to be embarrassing for many democrats.

Whereas in Poland, the nationalist parties took a strong position in favor of transitional justice, Russia’s nationalist parties were not eager to condemn the Soviet past. Of course, in Poland, the nationalists denounced the communists for collaborating with an evil foreign power in facilitating the takeover of their country. Communists, for them, were no better than traitors. In Russia, nationalists might grumble a bit about the allegedly Jewish origins of the Bolsheviks, but overall they took pride