


Putin's Dark Ages: Political Neomedievalism and Re-Stalinization in Russia. By Dina Khapaeva.

London–New York: Routledge, 2024. xvi+275 pp.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003438045>

Olga Kalashnikova 

Democracy Institute, Central European University, 9 Nádor utca, 1051 Budapest, Hungary;
kalashnikova.olga314@gmail.com

With recent global crises—including pandemics, the eruption of full-scale military conflicts, and the global authoritarian turn—presentist appropriations of the medieval past have become more and more popular in contemporary societies. Dina Khapaeva's book, *Putin's Dark Ages*, is among the latest successful attempts to critically understand this political “mobilisation” of the Middle Ages. Currently a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Khapaeva has devoted nearly two decades to the much-needed globalisation of medievalism studies by shifting the focus from Europe and the Americas to Russia. In her previous monographs, *Goticheskoe obshchestvo* [The Gothic Society] (2008) and *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017), she asserted that a growing interest in medieval history and aesthetics in Russian popular culture reflected deeper anti-humanist and anti-democratic trends. *Putin's Dark Ages*, published in the *Routledge Histories of Central and Eastern Europe* series, represents a logical continuation of this research on Russia's cultural and political fascination with the period. The book's introduction, seven chapters, and conclusion, supplemented by a comprehensive bibliography and index, provide a compelling interdisciplinary analysis of how various actors have deployed medieval-themed references in Russian memory politics, public discourse, and popular culture for anti-democratic purposes from 2000 to 2023 (p. 11).

The book opens with an introduction that carefully sketches the development of pro-Western intellectual currents in Russia from the late seventeenth century to post-Soviet times. Khapaeva skilfully demonstrates that the continuous failures to implement Western-oriented political and cultural ideological projects in the Russian milieu have become a necessary historical condition that paved the way for the successful revision of historical memory, including that of the Middle Ages, under Vladimir Putin. The introduction thus provides the necessary contextualisation,

which readers with no prior knowledge of Russian political and intellectual history may find particularly helpful.

The first chapter sets out the threefold theoretical basis of the research. It starts with explaining the concept of “political neomedievalism,” defined in line with other similar studies as a means of anti-democratic and populist memory politics about the Middle Ages. Much more innovative are the concepts of the “memory of perpetrators” and “mobmemory” (sic!), which political neomedievalism is part of. The author coins the former term as the exaltation of cruel but strong historical figures and the marginalisation of their victims. In turn, mobmemory is understood as collective representations of the past that focus on justifying controversial figures from national history through “discovering” the hidden reasons behind their actions (p. 28). In such a way, Khapaeva firmly situates her research within the field of memory studies.

While Chapter Two offers a general overview of how the collective memory about several disputed medieval warlords has been reconstructed through Russian legislative and cultural initiatives since 2000, Chapters Three, Four, and Five take a more focused approach and concentrate on the figure of the notorious sixteenth-century tsar, Ivan the Terrible, and his repressive policy, *oprichnina*. Through the analysis of a wide range of sources, including historiography, texts of individual reactionary politicians and organisations such as the Izborsky Club, as well as novels, films, and TV series that have been produced in Russia over the past two decades, the author attempts to reconstruct the public representation of Ivan the Terrible and his rule. She argues quite convincingly that the blood-soaked *oprichnina* has been publicly advocated as the most suitable form of governance for contemporary Russian society. More particularly, as the analysis affirms, hatred of the West and the anti-individualist ideas of *sobornost* and *tsarebozhie* have become integral to promoting this neomedievalist “mobmemory of terror” (pp. 120, 133).

Despite Khapaeva’s careful use of various types of sources, the investigation of the public “re-assemblage” of historical memory about Ivan IV and the *oprichnina* in Chapters Three to Five might have benefited from incorporating additional materials. In particular, although state-led and grassroots commemorative initiatives, cultural representations, and historiographical works are, indeed, key instruments in forging the collective memory of Ivan IV, the school curriculum provides another crucial perspective on how this neomedievalist discourse has been orchestrated. For instance, while the majority of textbooks in use in the 2000s–2010s evaluated the outcomes of the tsar’s reign in predominantly pessimistic terms, the 2021 textbook edited by the former Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, presents a much more favourable interpretation. It praises Ivan IV’s earlier policies for centralising the state and stimulating its economic development. At the same time, it depicts the *oprichnina* merely as an unfortunate episode that “darkened his successful reign”

and slowed down the state's centripetal political dynamics.¹ Given that the Russian Ministry of Education proclaimed Medinsky's historical textbooks the only officially approved means of teaching history to schoolchildren in 2023, the analysis of the state's education policy could have further enriched Khapaeva's investigation of how neomedievalist narratives permeate everyday forms of anti-democratic knowledge transmission, particularly among younger generations.

Remarkably, the discussed contemporary rehabilitation of the *oprichnina* terror through various cultural forms recalls Joseph Stalin's earlier efforts to legitimise the Soviet totalitarian police-state by challenging negative portrayals of Ivan IV and presenting him as a wise and able statesman in both scholarship and film. It is therefore unsurprising that Khapaeva juxtaposes the neomedievalist normalisation of inequality and terror with the ongoing processes of re-Stalinisation in Russia in Chapters Six and Seven. As her detailed analysis shows, the Russian state has been promoting the veneration of the victorious Great Patriotic War, fought between June 1941 and May 1945. By extension, this "boom in memory politics" has affected the renewed glorification of Stalin at the price of reconsidering the outcomes of his political repressions (pp. 163–65). The book's final case study on Vladimir Sharov's prose serves to shed light on the romanticisation of Stalinism and the sixteenth-century *oprichnina* in Russian contemporary culture and further demonstrates convergences in the fabrication of memories about these problematic historical periods.

It should be noted, however, that while the author did not intend the last two chapters to be a full-fledged study on re-Stalinisation and has included them in the monograph to draw parallels between the ways of remembering Stalinism and Ivan IV's rule (p. 158), the comparison between political neomedievalism and re-Stalinisation in Putin's Russia remains somewhat imbalanced. For instance, Khapaeva effectively supports her argument about the reformed popularity of Stalin with public opinion data (pp. 170–74). However, no equivalent evidence is provided regarding the reception of the artificially reconstructed image of Ivan IV. Such evidence is, however, available: a 2016 survey by the Levada Analytical Center reported that nearly half of respondents (49 percent) considered this medieval ruler to have brought more good than harm to Russia, compared with only 13 percent who held the opposite view.² The absence of this kind of data in the book leaves the impression that political neomedievalism, unlike re-Stalinisation, is analysed mainly through the prism of state-supported initiatives and cultural production, thus leaving behind the question of its broader public reception.

1 Ср. Medinsky, ed., *История России*, 83–84.

2 "Иван Грозный: Знание и Оценки" [Ivan the Terrible: Knowledge and Assessments], Levada Center (Accessed: 20 September 2025) <https://www.levada.ru/tag/ivan-groznyj/>.

To conclude, Dina Khapaeva's monograph offers a thorough interdisciplinary examination of the refurbished image of Ivan the Terrible and his repressive regime in contemporary Russia. It should be duly appreciated for clearly showing how the revised collective memory of this medieval figure can be mobilised to incentivise public backing for anti-democratic and even militaristic transformations. The author has utilised an impressive source base on the subject and has provided an innovative theoretical framework that may be applied to the study of other medieval figures in Russian history or similar illiberal regimes of other countries. I recommend this book to historians, sociologists, specialists in political science, and the general public who are interested in populism's relationship to national history.

Literature

Medinsky, Vladimir, ed. *История России. XVI–конец XVII в. 7 класс* [Russian History. The Sixteenth–the End of the Seventeenth Centuries. 7th Grade]. Moscow: Prosvetschenie, 2021.

