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June 17, 2009

Dmitrii Medvedev, President
Russian Federation
Ilinka Str, No 23
103132, Moscow, Russia

Dear Mr. Medvedev,

We are writing on behalf of the American Historical Association to express our intense concern over the recent creation of a Commission to Counteract Attempts at Falsifying History to Damage the Interests of Russia. The American Historical Association is a non-profit membership organization founded in 1884 and incorporated by the United States Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies and the dissemination of historical Research. It is the oldest and largest professional historical organization in the United States, bringing together nearly 5,000 institutions, 118 affiliated societies and more than 15,000 individuals, including college and university faculty, public historians, independent scholars, archivists, librarians, and secondary school teachers. Our members are students and teachers of all fields of history, including Russia and the former Soviet Union.

We understand that it is the intent of the commission, whose composition of twenty-eight members includes only three historians, to govern historical debate and to prevent the expression and/or publication of historical judgments "unfavorable" to Russia. The critical issue here is who decides what is favorable or unfavorable. We do not think that such a judgment should be in the hands of government appointed officers, but rather should be left to free and open debate among historians.

The American Historical Association believes that it can never be in the public interest to forbid study of or publication about any historical topic, or to forbid the publication of particular historical theses. Any limitation on freedom of research or expression, however well intentioned, violates a fundamental principle of scholarship: that the researcher must be able to investigate any aspect of the past and to report without fear what the evidence reveals. All historical publications are subject to the judgment and criticism of the scholarly community to which the researcher belongs. Some historians, inevitably, will wield historical evidence in ways that anger certain groups in their societies. In some cases, regrettably, they will use their skills to expunge terrible events from the historical

record, or to make them appear less terrible than they were. The consequences for a historian who is widely judged as distorting historical evidence should take the form of denial of positions in universities, based on the critical opinions of scholars in the field, or, in extreme cases, the denial of access to publication venues, again based on evaluations from informed colleagues, not government-appointed organs. Freedom of inquiry enables some writers to put forward untenable or otherwise questionable arguments, but it also enables others to rebut them, and it is in that realm of free public debate that historians can and must work. As the authors of the French petition *Liberté pour l'Histoire* [Freedom for History] rightly argued in 2005, "In a free State, it is not within the power of either Parliament or the judiciary to define historical truth."

It may interest you to know that the sentiments expressed above are the same that informed the American Historical Association's opposition to the European Union's framework decision seeking to make Holocaust denial a crime. As much as we reject the work of Holocaust deniers, we still believe, even in this extreme case, that it should be left to open scholarly debate and judgment to determine the reality of the past and the veracity of various accounts of it. This is the same position that the American Historical Association has espoused when asked to make a judgment on the question of the "Armenian genocide." In short, for us, this is a matter of universal principle, one we hope and believe is shared by the world-wide scholarly community of historians. To establish a commission to adjudicate the "truth" or "beneficial" impact of any given historical judgment, and conversely to seek to control false or detrimental opinions through government action, contradicts this basic principle of intellectual freedom. We therefore urge you to reconsider the creation of this commission and to consider disbanding it.

In addition, the Duma is considering a law that would criminalize attempts to "rehabilitate Nazism," thereby adding legal penalties in the form of fines and/or imprisonment to the work of the Commission. Needless to say, we find any effort to criminalize historical thought, however unpalatable and offensive the findings, equally unacceptable, insofar as it seeks to influence the course of historical research. The result will inevitably be intimidation of scholars and distortion of their findings. The appropriate way for such errors to be penalized is for other scholars to expose them, not to make them subject to governmental action. We hope that Russia will not enact such a draconian law, which would place it and its historians outside the world community of scholars dedicated to the free and open exploration of all historical knowledge.

We send this letter on behalf of all historians, and especially those in the United States, who wish for a more positive relationship with colleagues and students in the Russian Federation in an atmosphere of the rule of law and the protection of human rights stated in the Constitution of the Russian Federation.