Graeme Gill

*Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. vii, 246 pp. $95.00.

A sequel to his 2011 *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, Graeme Gill’s new book has a clear, consistent thesis: Russia’s leaders have not been able to articulate a consistent narrative embodying a vision of the future. This failure, Gill argues, has also affected the way in which the new Russian state has tried to invoke and subsequently use symbols as part of the way it governs. In a sense, as Gill’s book suggests, the ghosts of the Soviet era continue to haunt the new Russia and its leadership.

Post-Soviet leaders, as Gill outlines in his first chapter, have had difficulties in crafting new narratives in part because of the complex legacies Soviet narratives, symbols, and myths bequeathed. Gill examines the Soviet “metanarrative” – which he defines as a “body of discourse which simplified the ideology and acted as a means of mediation between regime and people (p. 3)” – that dominated political debate, visual arts, the physical environment, and rituals. Gill argues that the wreckage left by the Soviet metanarrative’s destruction has proven to be a difficult mess to clean up. He devotes the next chapter to the speeches Russian presidents have delivered since 1991 that have attempted to create a new, post-Soviet, narrative. Boris Yeltsin offered “a total rejection of communism and its metanarrative in favour of the adoption of what he saw as civilized universal values modified by Russia’s particular characteristics (p. 30),” but ultimately failed to conjure a viable vision of the future. Vladimir Putin, as Gill writes, stressed a “Russian idea” based on patriotism, a strong state, and Russia remaining a strong power. In doing so, his speeches did not offer the complete rejection of the Soviet past in the way Yeltsin’s did, but he too struggled to craft a “coherent narrative which integrated pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras into a single story (p. 62).” While Dmitrii Medvedev also emphasized a strong state in his speeches, Gill notes that he highlighted “Russian values” that were different from those articulated by Putin, including a stronger civil society based on personal freedoms and respect for human life. Ultimately, Gill concludes that Russia’s “successive presidents have thus tried to articulate a vision of Russia’s future that would gain widespread consensus” but “none was able successfully to do so (p. 77).” The discourse from the Kremlin, in short, “lacked essential unity, even if common themes could be discerned (p. 78).”

This shortcoming extended into other political structures and the public sphere, the subject of two subsequent chapters. Focusing on the image the Presidents attempted to project – Yeltsin as a symbol of positive change and a rejection of the past, Putin as a protector of the country and decisive leader,
Medvedev (briefly) as tech-savvy populist – Gill posits that the projection of presidential power since 1991 only confirmed the longstanding belief that Russian history, including the Soviet era, was driven not by institutional rules but by the personal power of a powerful leader. This notion was further reinforced by the lack of symbolic resonance afforded to the Constitution, the apathetic perception of the Duma, and the image of a weak civil society illustrated in the Russian polls Gill cites. Presidents, not people or political parties, mattered. Because the presidents could not offer a “clear and consistent narrative integrating the rhetoric with the institutional culture, the symbolism of that institutional culture remained part of the broader fragmented symbolism of post-Soviet Russia as a whole (p. 133).” Gill argues that new holidays such as the Day of National Unity failed to resonate with the public and were not promoted by the media. Nor was the pre-Soviet past generally seen as “a relevant model or guide for contemporary or future development (p. 143).” The ambiguity of the Soviet era promoted by Putin and fostered in newspapers and other media outlets also created a fractured symbolic landscape. Gill devotes a lengthy analysis to the way Stalin has functioned as an ambiguous symbol both in the rhetoric of politicians and in polls, a sign he argues indicates “history is being used for political purposes, just as it was in the Soviet era (p. 171).” The “lack of a single clear attitude to Stalin (p. 172)” is for Gill a perfect example of the public sphere discourse that has emerged since 1991 and has “remained partial and incomplete in the sense that it lacked a clear and consistent perspective on the country’s past, ... how it had reached its current state, and therefore did not constitute a coherent post-Soviet narrative (p. 177).” This lack of coherence is also reflected in Moscow’s symbolic landscape, the subject of Gill’s last chapter, which has been reshaped by an ambiguous policy of dealing with Soviet symbols – some have been destroyed, others remain – while also building new commercial sites. The result, and logical follow-through to Gill’s previous chapters, is that the capital city’s public space has “now become fragmented (p. 193).”

Much of Gill’s argument hinges on the author’s belief that national narratives and the symbols that emanate from them have to be clear, coherent, and unifying. His book raises important points, but many questions remain or could be answered in different ways. Political memory of the Soviet Union, to pick one area that might be further explored, as he rightly claims, “is neither monolithic nor unidimensional” but rather “fractured, perhaps even kaleidoscopic,” a reflection of the complexity of the Soviet experience itself (p. 225). Gill tends to interpret the host of memory practices that have emerged since 1991, often involving controversial figures such as Stalin, as a sign of failure to come to terms with the past and therefore a symbol of the fragmentation within society as a whole. An alternate view of these same issues might be to see them as a sign