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Alexei Navalny and Russia's 'conscience' wars

By Philip Boobbyer, Reader in History, University of Kent

When Alexei Navalny returned to Russia in January, he emphasised that Russia was his home and that he was 'not afraid'. He also said that he would go through passport control like any other citizen because he had a 'clear conscience'. Here he was signalling a commitment to a long-cherished intelligentsia ideal: to live fearlessly according to the dictates of conscience and truth. With roots in stoic philosophy and Byzantine theology, 'conscience' is a term with a powerful resonance in Russia, and the focus for an ongoing cultural war about what the country stands for.

Navalny's remarks were a seeming riposte to a comment made by businessman Yevgenii Prigozhin. Prigozhin had encouraged Navalny to return to Russia and a possible prison sentence with the remark: 'Serve your time and come out to freedom with a clear conscience'. As with Navalny, there were hints here of past tradition. On the door out of Butyrka prison—one of the prisons in which dissidents were held in the late Soviet era—there was a sign similar to Prigozhin's phrase: 'To freedom, with a clear conscience.' Likewise, in one of the camps in the Mordovia region, there was a sign saying, 'Back to work, with a clear conscience'.

Now Navalny is indeed in prison, with reports suggesting that he has been sent to the grim Penal Colony no. 2 outside the provincial town of Pokrov. The hope from the regime's side may be that he can be 'encouraged' publicly to recant—as some of dissidents, under extreme pressure, did in the 1970s.

The Soviet system always wanted to define 'conscience' on its own terms. Honesty, loyalty and proper behaviour were stressed, but generally within a pro-regime context. A particular challenge was to help people not to feel guilty when committing acts normally regarded as crimes. Brutal methods were defended as necessary to defend the country from foreign threats, and moral doubts explained as a sign of reactionary thinking. Dissident author Lev Kopelev, who helped to implement collectivisation, was one influenced by the regime's arguments. 'Some sort of rationalistic fanaticism overcame my doubts, my pangs of conscience, and simple feelings of pity and shame,' he recalled.

Defining concepts like 'conscience' in terms of a certain pro-regime patriotism is also part of the Kremlin's current propaganda strategy. Destroying the idea that Navalny might be considered a person of integrity is part of that. The Putin team will have been delighted when Amnesty International revoked Navalny's status as a 'prisoner of conscience'. And they will be eager to emphasise Navalny's imperfections going forward—using people's past sins to undermine them is another of the Kremlin's favourite techniques.

Yet controlling the narrative around 'conscience' is hard for Russia's rulers, because there is so much in Russian culture coming from a more universal or personalistic perspective. For example, Russian literature has much to say about how people can

get corrupted by power. 'Oh, pity him whose conscience is unclean', declares the Russian tsar, Boris Godunov, in Alexander Pushkin's play of that name (1825).

'Conscience' was a widely discussed term in the late Soviet era when people started to talk about the darker sides of Soviet history. Dissidents of all political persuasions often talked of conscience and the importance of overcoming lies. Solzhenitsyn's writings are full of characters struggling to retain their integrity in the face of repression. Some called Sakharov the 'conscience' of the country. Many in the intelligentsia, and in the Communist Party too, were eager to overcome the experience of living double lives. This moral unease played an important if unseen role in destabilising the Soviet system.

The Putin administration wishes to emphasise the positives in Soviet history, hence its stress on the Soviet triumph over Nazi Germany. Undoubtedly, the resilience and courage of the Soviet soldier played a vital role in freeing the world from fascism. To the English reader, the publication of a translation of Grossman's novel *Stalingrad* a couple of years ago gives an insight into that. But the Kremlin may not want people to dig too deeply. Alongside the victory, there are some dark stains connected to the war and its origins. For example, the Nazi–Soviet pact is hardly something to be proud of. As with many national myths—British myths included—close probing often reveals a complicated picture.

The debate about returning Dzerzhinsky's statue to Lubyanka Square reflects another variant in Russia's 'conscience wars'. For some in the security services Dzerzhinsky is an ethical role model: on the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Cheka in 2007, a medal of him was created calling him the 'honour and conscience of the Soviet people'. The vote on restoring the statue—with Alexander Nevsky presented as an alternative to Dzerzhinsky—has now been put on hold by Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin because of its divisiveness. The Memorial Society stated that only a person 'devoid of conscience' could have conceived of such a vote.

Russia's rulers have often found it hard to control the ethical narrative. Like soap, it keeps slipping out of their hands. Part of the problem comes from the nature of life itself. To build something positive in any situation you need honest and intelligent people—like Navalny. But trouble can start if they ask awkward questions about why things are the way they are. That is the case anywhere—in Russia, China and the West. 'Conscience' can be politicised only up to a point, after which it starts to bite back.