

Stalin in contemporary Russia: admired and required

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Despite the fact that more than 60 years have passed since the death of Joseph Stalin, the leader of the USSR from 1922 to 1953, the memory of him remains alive. For several years running Stalin has topped the ranking of the most remarkable figures in Russia's history. Portraits of him appear at political demonstrations and religious events; new monuments to the dictator are erected. The Kremlin's official rhetoric increasingly refers to the positive aspects of the Soviet era, in particular to the victory in World War II. Representatives of the state's administration and the Orthodox Church have been making favourable comments about Stalin. However, Stalin's popularity among society in today's Russia is rather superficial – Russians know little about the dictator and his life; they are rather nostalgic about the period of his rule and the achievements of his era. The image of the Soviet dictator as an outstanding leader is blended with Russians' individual memories of repression and terror which affected almost every Russian family. These reminiscences however do not penetrate the public sphere at the mass level, which makes it possible for the state's narrative to dominate it. The Kremlin has exploited the ambivalent and superficial attitude which Russians have to Stalin. Even though it does not glorify him, it allows for his social cult to develop, and contributes to it by selectively emphasising the positive aspects of the leader's actions and by mythologising his image. The Kremlin has been legitimising its power based on politics of memory, generating controlled divisions in society and mobilising its proponents. On the other hand, the government has made it more difficult to draw attention to the murderous nature of Stalin's actions. Any criticism of him (from Russian citizens and civil society organisations as well as the international community) is seen as an attack on contemporary Russia and its present government which presents itself as the heir to the USSR's and Stalin's accomplishments and victories.

From de-Stalinisation to re-Stalinisation

Three years after Joseph Stalin's death, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, prepared a secret report 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences' in which he condemned Stalin's methods of ruling the country and partly exposed his murderous actions. Even though the criticism was rather selective, at that time it caused a shockwave in the communist world. Fearing the tumultuous implications of the speech in Russian society

and the international community, Khrushchev decided that the speech must not be leaked to the press as this would provide arguments to Russia's enemies and expose the country's weakness. Even before it fully began, the process of de-Stalinisation had already lost its impetus. De-Stalinisation measures undertaken by consecutive USSR leaders were limited. The political foundations of the communist system were not destroyed, radical reforms were not made – the single-party system was preserved for many years; this also applied to persecutions on political grounds and the centralised economy.

The furthest-reaching measures aimed at revealing and assessing the legacy of Stalinism were taken only after the collapse of the USSR, at the beginning of the 1990s, when Boris Yeltsin was the Russian president. A section of the archives¹ were opened, many historical dissertations and memories of prisoners from that era were published. To some extent it was due to the Memorial Society² which was actively operating at that time and thus repression and how it is assessed came to be discussed in the public sphere. These actions, however, proved to be short-lived and in the following years the decisions made by Yeltsin were revised³. After Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, in spite of individual gestures made to commemorate the victims of Stalinism, such as visits to the military training ground in Butovo near Moscow where at the time of the Great Purge thousands of people were shot to death, it quickly became clear that a definitive coming to terms with the Stalinist past would not be made at the government's initiative. As early as towards the end of 2000 the new Russian president signalled that he did not intend to assess and cut ties with the past when he suggested changing the Russian national anthem from the 'Patriotic song' introduced in 1991 to a contemporary adaptation of the USSR's 1944 national anthem. In his statements Putin would also call Stalin an 'efficient manager' and the collapse of the USSR 'the largest geopolitical catastrophe' (for the first time in 2005)⁴.

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of that time, particularly the victory in World War II, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War⁵, and that has become the main pillar of

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Russian national identity. According to experts and sociological research, this politics of memory emerged as early as in 2004⁶. It was substantially intensified following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 when the Kremlin's propaganda indoctrinated society with a militarised, confrontational and imperialistic historical narrative. It justified Russia's rights to the peninsula and depicted the revolution in Kyiv as the rebirth of 'fascism' which Russia should once again defeat. The results of public opinion surveys indicate that a certain kind of re-Stalinisation of social consciousness or even a rebirth of the cult of Stalin is underway.

The manifestations of a re-emerging cult

Building monuments to Stalin or busts and commemorative plaques in his name is the most spectacular way of commemorating Stalin

¹ Among these documents were the classified files regarding the Katyn massacre, the so-called special folder no.1, which were handed to the Polish government in October 1992.

² The Memorial Society was established in 1989. It focuses on examining and drawing attention to crimes of totalitarianism, including Stalinism, and commemorating its victims.

³ For example, access to the archives was made more difficult, the files from the Russian investigation into the Katyn massacre were classified.

⁴ Including the speech in front of the Federal Assembly in 2005: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owzbl7Tsg14>

⁵ This expression was first used by Stalin and is now quite popular in Russia since it emphasises the huge scale of the war and confers an existential character on the victory. In line with the Russian narrative, the war lasted from mid-1941 to May 1945; it did not however cover the period of military and economic co-operation between the USSR and the Third Reich.

⁶ Since Putin came to power, politics of memory regarding the Stalinist era has been subordinated to a wider political process and used opportunistically and instrumentally for the purposes of the international policy, e.g. for the purposes of the short-lived rapprochement with Poland, the Russian government made a series of gestures condemning Stalin's policy towards Poland (e.g. Putin visited Katyn; during his visit to Westerplatte in September 2009 he condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). On the other hand, in 2009 the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests was set up, with the aim of defending the vision of historical events that the Kremlin wished to present.

in contemporary Russia. Initiatives of this kind have appeared in certain regions of the country, including in Moscow, in recent years⁷. Some of

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the monuments have been erected at the initiative of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation which funded the monuments to commemorate anniversaries related to the history of the USSR, e.g. the outbreak of the October Revolution, the victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the birth of Stalin, whom it considers to be a hero. For example, at the 70th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, commemorated in 2015⁸, monuments to Stalin were erected in front of the office of the Communist party in Lipetsk and Penza⁹. Certain initiatives are promoted by organisations and people affiliated with the Kremlin. In 2015 in Yalta in Crimea, which had been annexed by Russia, a monument to the great triumvirate – Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt – was unveiled to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Yalta conference; the celebration was attended by the then Chairman of the State Duma, Sergei Naryshkin. A bust of Stalin in the Pskov oblast was erected in 2016 as part of the Stalin Line Museum and funded by the Russian Military-Historical Society who-

se president is the minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky¹⁰. Busts of USSR-era and post-Soviet state officials, including Lenin and Stalin, appeared in Moscow's Alley of Rulers which was established at the initiative of the Russian Military-Historical Society (as it was officially unveiled on 22nd September 2017). The event's organisers underline that it was not their intention to glorify these figures but only to commemorate the country's history. However, the fact that the a bust to Stalin was built in the capital stirred controversy in a section of society.

Monuments are not the only manifestation of Stalin's return to the Russian public sphere. Souvenirs with the dictator's image – T-shirts, matryoshkas and postcards – can be bought in markets and fairs. It is possible to take a photograph with a person dressed up as Stalin in popular tourist spots (e.g. at Red Square in Moscow). Thus the USSR leader has become a trade mark which can bring profits. This trend is part of a larger phenomenon of Soviet goods and culture being back in fashion which can be illustrated by the return of food products with the symbolism of the Stalin era to stores, e.g. Soviet Standard, Soviet or USSR ice cream¹¹ and the huge popularity of Soviet films and songs. The initiatives to build monuments to Stalin are not coordinated by the Russian government; the Kremlin's role is rather limited to giving consent to their construction. In certain cases the government has blocked local initiatives of this type – it did not allow a monument to be built or delayed the official decision to allocate a certain location for a monument. For example, the local government of Novosibirsk did not allow a monument to Stalin to be built,

⁷ According to the statistics presented on the website http://www.great-country.ru/articles/sss/sov_governor/stalin/00136.html at present there are 93 monuments to Stalin in Russia. This data is difficult to verify. The list was published in February 2016, since then the number of the monuments might have increased.

⁸ Е. Галочка, Памятник Сталину установили в Липецке перед 9 мая, *Московский комсомолец*, 7.05.2015, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/05/07/pamyatnik-stalinu-ustanovili-v.html>

⁹ КПРФ, несмотря на протесты, установила в центре Пензы бюст Сталина, *Radio Svoboda*, 9.09.2015, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27235641.html>

¹⁰ И. Азар, Трепещите, ядом плюйте. Как Иосиф Сталин возвращается в жизнь современной России, *Meduza*, 25.02.2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/02/25/trepeschite-yadom-plyuyte>

¹¹ The Soviet ice cream, popularised by the famous USSR commissioner Anastas Mikoyan, was regarded as a high-quality product made from natural ingredients. The fact that producers referred to the past era is a savvy marketing trick based on the sentimental attachment present in Russian society.

arguing that the initiative caused mixed feelings among the inhabitants of the town. In 2016 the municipal authorities removed a newly erected monument to Stalin in Surgut at the initiative of the inhabitants. Red paint had been thrown on the monument a few times¹².

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Such protests against the construction of monuments to Stalin and other wider civil society initiatives to commemorate the victims of the repression indicate that a section of Russian society decidedly condemn Stalin and his actions. It is worth noticing the initiatives undertaken by the Memorial Society such as the Restoring Names action which is carried out in many towns and cities and consists in reading names of the victims of the Stalin era in public and similar actions (most often conducted by opposition circles) intended to commemorate particular people: the Last Address, the Immortal Barrack. An initiative that has consolidated Russians is the construction of a monument to the victims of Stalinist repression in the 1930s under the name of the Garden of Memory located in a former NKVD training ground in Butovo near Moscow that was opened in September 2017. The construction was funded from private donations, without the help of the government. On the 30th October, in Moscow, on the Day of Victims of Political Repression¹³ the memorial to the victims of Stalin's repression, the Wall of Grief, was open in the presence of the highest state authorities. The position on Stalinism is becoming a cause of divisions in Russian society and the Kremlin is making use of it.

¹² Сургутский памятник Сталину демонтировали, *Lenta.ru*, 6.10.2016, <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/10/06/stalin>

¹³ The construction of the memorial was envisaged in the presidential decree of 2015.

Opinions about Stalin

A considerable section of Russian society considers Stalin to be the greatest figure in Russian history. For years he has topped the ranking prepared by the public opinion research organisation Levada-Center (in the opinion of 38% of those surveyed). Vladimir Putin comes in second (with 34%, level with Alexander Pushkin)¹⁴. On the other hand, there is a growing number of Russians who admit they know nothing about the Stalinist repression – in 2012 only 6% of the respondents declared this, whereas in May 2017 the number rose to 13%. Every fourth respondent believes the repression was 'justified by political necessity' and 36% of those surveyed think that the successes of the Stalinist era achieved in such a short time justify the sacrifices made. The opinions of Russians regarding the nature of the Stalinist repression are also changing dynamically. The number of those who treat it as a political crime has decreased from 67% in 2012 to 39% in 2017¹⁵. Russians are rather against clarifying history and punishing those responsible for the repression. According to data from 2017, the number of Russians who believe the repression should be discussed less and that 'old wounds should not be opened' rose from 37% in 2012 to 47% in 2017¹⁶. Interestingly enough, Stalin led the ranking conducted by the Russian media in 2008 in order to choose the greatest hero in Russian history¹⁷. Eventually, it was Alexander Nevsky who came in first, which was due to the intervention of the organisers of the ranking, according to commentators, who were afraid that victory for Stalin would spark too much controversy. However, Stalin's popularity in Russian society is rather superficial since people know little about him and his life; rather they are nostalgic about the period of his rule and the achievements of his era (the defeat of Nazism, industrial develop-

¹⁴ An open question was asked, for more information see: <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/568025>

¹⁵ <https://www.levada.ru/2017/09/07/16561/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ С. Бочарова, Земля по имени Сталин, *Gazeta.ru*, 7.07.2008, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/07/07_a_2776363.shtml

ment, particular order and discipline in society). In the widespread image of Stalin in Russia, he is presented as the father of the nation – a strict ruler, but wise and he loved the people. This attitude to the leader corresponds to the respect for rule with a strong hand and the approach

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to the state authorities based on the principle that 'the tsar is good, only the boyars are bad', which is deeply rooted in Russian society. Stalin's popularity is due to the longing for the order of Soviet times and a particular concept of justice – as someone on the Internet put it – 'both a worker and a minister were equal before the law'. This subjective representation of the past can be seen particularly in the older generation who remember the USSR era and think about it with sentimental attachment, to a large extent because those were the years of their youth. The memory of Stalinist times has faded in their minds so that it is often reduced to taking pride in the victory in the war. In the younger section of Russian society who do not remember the Stalinist era, the figure of the leader is associated almost exclusively with the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War – perceived as the epic victory which has earned Russia respect and caused fear in the international arena. The promotion of these clichéd opinions can be attributed to the Kremlin's propaganda and these perceptions are further perpetuated by society's poor knowledge of history, which is revealed in sociological research (e.g. the research conducted by Levada-Center on the knowledge of the history of the 20th century¹⁸).

¹⁸ <https://www.levada.ru/2017/09/13/16612/>

It is not a widely held opinion in Russian society that the Stalinist regime - and in the broader context, communism - was criminal in its essence and similar to fascism (particularly due to how it objectified individuals), which is commonly condemned. There is no firm conviction that Stalin was a tyrant and a person responsible for genocide who should be condemned like Hitler because there has never been reflection on it or a complete (also in legal aspects) settlement of accounts with the Soviet past on the national level¹⁹. The fact that the official rhetoric places the emphasis on the victory of the USSR in the war and that Stalin is considered to be the main architect of it has made it more difficult to rationally assess the past. Due to the Kremlin, the myth of the victory, which is regarded as the greatest accomplishment of the Russian nation, has become the pillar of Russia's contemporary national identity.

The memory of the victory meets the needs of Russians since it compensates for the deficit of national pride and a sense of community. This may be particularly important today because reality does not provide reasons for contentment (due to low standards of living, widespread corruption, a lack of upward social mobility etc.). In this context, the individual memory of Stalinist repression and the period of the Great Purge, which brought about individual tragedies for nearly every Russian family, fades into the background since it causes cognitive dissonance and overcomplicates the idealised image of the past. Furthermore, many Russians have relatives who have participated in the repression apparatus and this makes them reluctant to deal with the past. There is a clear tendency to justify the repression and to present it as a necessary cost, incurred by individuals, in order to accomplish spectacular success for the state. This rhetoric falls on fertile ground due to the widespread conviction in Russia that the

¹⁹ In 1992 the document was adopted; it placed the blame for the crimes of Stalinism on the highest-level management of the USSR's Communist party. Nobody was however held accountable.

good of an individual is generally less valued than the good of the state. This perception is corroborated by cross-cultural research which indicates that Russians value individualism less than other European nations, whereas they have a larger sense of distance towards power and

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a greater awareness of diversified roles in society²⁰. On the other hand, the government does not allow people to freely express their individual memory in the public sphere, thus blocking bottom-up attempts to collectively deal with the trauma and to assess the past.

Playing the Stalin card Russian society's superficial assessment of Stalin's actions has advantages for the government since it leaves room to mythologise and to manipulate social perceptions. The Kremlin has been using the politics of memory regarding Soviet times (in particular the victory over fascism) as a fundamental instrument of legitimisation of its power and control over society, thus ensuring continued social support and the preservation of the present model of power. The vision of USSR history which is promoted by the Kremlin is a series of military victories, and scientific and technological achievements; the systemic nature of the repression is however overlooked since it may cause cognitive dissonance or a feeling of guilt in society. The conviction that the USSR alone defeated the Nazis in 1945, without the help of the allies, and saved the European countries from ultimate annihilation, is part of this vision

²⁰ See e.g. the research on values <https://geert-hofstede.com/russia.html>

of history. According to the Kremlin this gives Russia a moral right to decide about the fate of this part of the world. The question of the USSR's co-operation with Hitler in 1939-1941 and the aggressive Soviet politics that led to the division of Europe, is not mentioned. In the eyes of the Kremlin, any attack on Stalin is perceived as an assault on contemporary Russia and its government. Such an opinion was expressed by President Vladimir Putin in a four-episode television interview 'The Putin Interviews' conducted by filmmaker Oliver Stone. When asked about Stalin, Putin declared that the leader was a 'product of his era' and that the excessive demonisation of Stalin is one of the ways to attack the USSR and contemporary Russia²¹. The most popular Russian daily Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote that the attitude to Stalin in Russia is increasingly positive, despite attempts which have been made for over 30 years by the 'liberals' for Stalin to be regarded as a 'bloody monster and a messenger of hell'²².

It is characteristic that the Kremlin does not directly glorify Stalin; it does however selectively emphasise positive aspects of the past era and somehow allow the cult of Stalin to re-emerge in society. This trend is encouraged by the fact that attempts to settle accounts with the past have been abandoned and the issue of responsibility for the crimes committed has been overlooked. The historical events have not yet been subject to systematic assessment, also from the legal point of view, and 'worked through' at the societal level – the Kremlin is not seeking to do so, nor does it allow these processes to develop bottom-up, beyond its control.

This thesis is corroborated by the fact that in 2015 the Russian government closed the Museum of the History of Political Repression Perm-36

²¹ Путин в интервью Стоуну рассказал о своем отношении к Сталину, *Ведомости*, 16.06.2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/06/16/694692-putin-rasskazal-o-svoem-otnoshenii>

²² А. Гришин, Сталин в России бьет Горбачева влежку, *Комсомольская правда*, 13.05.2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26678.7/3700700/>

– the only museum of the Soviet repression, housed in a former gulag labour camp in Ural. The museum was opened due to the effort of the Perm branch of the Memorial Society. In 2014 the organisation was forced to register at the Russian Ministry of Justice as a ‘foreign agent’, which is meant to discredit its activities in the eyes of Russian citizens by evoking associations with espionage. Furthermore, particular activists from the Memorial Society are subject to repression at the hands of the Russian state administration. The most resonating case in recent months has been that of Yury Dmitriev, an activist from the Karelian branch of the Memorial Society, who has been finding sites of mass executions and burials of Soviet regime victims and listing both the victims and the perpetrators. He has been detained for several months and is being tried on charges which are clearly fabricated. The advocates defending Dmitriev have commented that the persecution is caused by his activity to reveal names of the executioners from the Soviet era, among whom are probably the predecessors of those currently in power in the region. In 2016 the first verdict was issued on the basis of the controversial law on the falsification of historical facts related to Soviet actions during World War II (referred to as the law prohibiting the rehabilitation of Nazism²³) – a Russian citizen from Perm was sentenced to a high fine for having shared an article on social media in which it was written that the USSR and Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and provoked World War II²⁴.

The main instruments which the Russian government uses to promote its vision of history are propaganda and the education system. The state-owned media circulate materials which portray Stalin above all as the architect of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. The issues of the Great Purge, the gulag, the forced collecti-

visation of farming, deportations and famines are not brought into the spotlight. The mass-produced series in which Stalin is one of the main heroes and which are broadcast by Russian state-owned television ingrain on a mass level

In Russian society and political elite there is a widespread reluctance to ‘open the old wounds’ of the past, which would lead to holding the guilty and the perpetrators of the Stalinist crimes accountable.

a ‘humanised’ picture of Stalin in the minds of Russians (e.g. the series ‘Vlasik. Stalin’s shadow’ about Stalin’s loyal bodyguard has enjoyed huge popularity²⁵). The government also uses the education system to perpetuate its desired selective vision of history – in history textbooks, which are often modelled on those from Stalinist times, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the Katyn massacre are not mentioned²⁶, nor is the joint official march of the Nazi and Soviet armies in Brest. Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church is becoming an instrument in the hands of the government since the Church hierarchs sometimes present Stalin’s actions with relativism when discussing history. For instance, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ Kirill has declared that Stalin is owed respect and that the leader’s criminal activity should not eclipse the successes of the Soviet era²⁷. The Patriarch has expressed this opinion even though the Russian Orthodox Church incurred colossal losses during the totalitarian repression – many churchgoers and priests were killed; 300 of them were shot dead at the NKVD

²³ The text of the law adopted in 2014: <https://rg.ru/2014/05/07/reabilitacia-dok.html>

²⁴ For more information, see <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28191755.html>

²⁵ Other TV series about Stalin are the following: ‘To kill Stalin’ (Убить Сталина) from 2013, ‘Comrade Stalin’ (Товарищ Сталин) from 2011.

²⁶ This is indicated for example by A. Kolesnikov: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2017/09/13/733518-spetsialnaya-istoriya-literatura>

²⁷ Патриарх Кирилл: злодейства не исключали успехов советской власти, Radio Svoboda, 4.11.2015, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27345123.html>

training ground in Butovo near Moscow and then recognised as saints (new martyrs)²⁸.

Conclusion

Monuments to Stalin will cease to be built in Russia when it becomes clear in the social consciousness that the Soviet regime was as criminal as the Nazi one. This will be possible only if the action carried out by Stalin and his aides are fully examined and assessed from the legal point of view.

However, no large-scale need to settle accounts with the past and to reveal the entire truth about the Stalinist system, and more widely the communist system, can be observed in society. There is a widespread reluctance to 'open the old wounds' of the past, which would lead to holding the guilty and the perpetrators of the Stalinist crimes accountable. However, bearing in mind that the present political system and the present model of relations between the Kremlin and society is based on control and dependence, the chances are low that a de-Stalinisation – and more broadly decommunisation – will be carried out under pressure from Russian citizens.

It should not be expected that the government will pursue a policy of de-Stalinisation at its own initiative in the immediate future – the fact that it uses a selectively developed vision

of history brings too many advantages both internally and in the international arena. In a way the Kremlin has become hostage to its own politics of memory. Firstly, it tries to come across as continuing the achievements and victories of Soviet times, which leads to it objecting to the criticism of Stalin and his aides. Secondly, the present state administration is the direct heir to the Soviet institutions which pursued the policy of terror (e.g. the NKVD – KGB – FSB); no anti-communist vetting of state officials has ever taken place. The systemic introduction of this process may affect the image of these institutions and undermine the stability of the political system in Russia. Archives in Russia remains closed and the government is rationing the disclosure of files, usually declassifying new materials in the context of ongoing political games in the international arena²⁹. The settling of accounts with the past would deprive the Russian government of an effective instrument of international politics. Furthermore, a definitive condemnation of Stalin's actions and the apparatus he created is also met with resistance from high-ranking state officials whose parents and grandparents followed out Stalin's orders. As the attack on Yury Dmitriev proves, their opposition to the attempts at 'opening old wounds' may take active forms and be accepted by the highest level of the state administration.

²⁸ К. Каледа, Бутовский полигон – Русская Голгофа: правда и ложь, *Pravmir.ru*, 9.05.2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/butovskij-poligon-russkaya-golgofa/>

²⁹ Single, carefully selected documents from Soviet times were declassified in response to the adoption of the decommunisation law in Poland. They are available online: <http://poland1944.mil.ru/>

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