

Stalin anniversary: Georgian supporters leap to defence

By Damien McGuinness BBC News, Tbilisi, March 4, 2013



Sixty years after Joseph Stalin's death, attitudes towards the former Soviet leader in his homeland Georgia are dividing society.

Visiting the garden of Georgian pensioner Ushangi Davitashvili is an eerie experience.

Life-sized statues of Joseph Stalin poke out from behind bushes. And the brick walls are lined with hundreds of photographs of the former dictator.

In some pictures, Stalin looks like a rosy-cheeked kindly grandfather. In others, like a tough hero, adorned with military medals. This is a shrine to a man who is seen in the West as responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

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"I love Stalin," says Mr Davitashvili, as he polishes a huge statue. He dismisses as propaganda evidence that hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of Stalin's orders in the purges of the 1930s. "Stalin didn't know about any of that," he said.

Until parliamentary elections last October, Mr Davitashvili's Stalin adoration seemed anachronistic. Over the last decade the fervently pro-Western government of Georgia's US-educated President Mikheil Saakashvili has been desperate to shake off the country's Soviet past.

Statues of Stalin were torn down. A law was passed banning Soviet symbols, such as the hammer-and-sickle or the red star, on buildings and monuments. And the national parliament was moved out of its Stalin-era stone fortress, adorned with Soviet frescoes of happy socialist workers, into a modernist glass dome.

Toasts to Stalin

But it now looks like those changes may have been simply cosmetic. In October President Saakashvili's government was ousted from power by a coalition led by billionaire tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in 1990s Moscow. The new government has put repairing relations and re-establishing trade links with Russia as a top priority.

The former government accuses Mr Ivanishvili of acting in the Kremlin's interests. He firmly denies that - and, for many Georgians, a less antagonistic approach when dealing with the country's huge and powerful neighbour seems economically and politically sensible.

But the critics who accuse the new government of being pro-Russian say it has now become more socially acceptable to express public admiration for Stalin.

In one village a statue of Stalin has been restored to the main square.

And in another region of Georgia 24-year-old Rezi Merebashvili quit his local government job in disgust, after the council wanted to name a street after Stalin and colleagues drank toasts to the dictator during a work function.

"I just could not work with people who discuss bringing back a monument to Stalin. Or want to name a street after him," explained Mr Merebashvili. "Which century is this? How can this be happening today?"

Ghost at work

According to a new survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers almost half of Georgians have a positive attitude towards Stalin, with that figure rising to 75% among Georgian pensioners.

Which doesn't mean there's nostalgia for the former Soviet Union or a risk of a return to authoritarianism. Georgia is a fiercely independent state. And surveys show that the vast majority of Georgians want to join Nato and the EU.

But Stalin is Georgia's most famous son. And in a culture which reveres strong personalities, that counts for a lot.

In protest against what some see as a growing Stalin cult, anonymous youth activists have launched a campaign to paint newly restored Stalin statues pink in protest.

At least two Stalin monuments have been daubed pink so far. And at the end of February Georgian musicians staged a concert, to bring attention to what they say is the danger of the new government dragging Georgia back into Russia's sphere of influence.

Stalin himself may be long gone. But his ghost is still capable of tearing Georgian society apart.