

Dead 60 years, Stalin's influence lingers in Putin's Russia

By Steve Gutterman | Reuters March 5, 2013



People carry red flags and a portrait of the late Soviet leader Josef Stalin during a ceremony to mark the 60th anniversary of his death in his hometown of Gori, about 80 km (50 miles) west of Georgia's capital Tbilisi March 5, 2013. Reuters/David Mdzinarishvili

MOSCOW (Reuters) - A conference held under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church is perhaps the last place you might expect to hear a good word said about Josef Stalin.

The church was heavily persecuted by the Soviet dictator, who died 60 years ago on Tuesday after a three-decade rule in which he is widely held responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people, many in the Gulag network of labor camps.

But there is still a place for Stalin in President Vladimir Putin's Russia, and there was plenty of praise for him at a discussion under paintings of cherubs at a church hotel adorned with icons and a portrait of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.

One speaker said Stalin restored national pride, another said he laid the groundwork for a great Russian future, and a third said the nation must be grateful to Stalin for the "sacred victory" over Nazi Germany in World War Two.

"Stalin was no saint, but he was not a monster," said Russian Orthodox priest Alexander Shumsky, accusing Stalin's critics of exaggerating the scale of his crimes.

He described assertions that Stalin had been in complete control a myth created by liberals and said the former leader had wanted to stop the process of repression.

Six decades on, Stalin's legacy remains the subject of bitter debate and broad interpretation in Russia, where many still believe he did some good for the country.

Analysts and Kremlin critics say Putin wants it that way.

"Putin ... has deliberately manipulated the dictator's image to reinforce his effort to build a 'power vertical' in Russia," the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank said in a report, referring to Putin's domination of Russia under a system that concentrates power in the hands of the president.

Support for Stalin has risen in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 gutted the social safety net, damaged national pride and left many Russians longing for the perceived order and stability of the Communist era.

But Lev Gudkov, director of independent Levada Center polling group, said the biggest shift occurred after Putin came to power in 2000 and "launched a comprehensive program to ideologically reeducate society".

"Putin's spin doctors did not deny that Stalin's regime had conducted mass arrests and executions but tried to minimize these events ... while emphasizing as far as possible the merits of Stalin as a military commander and statesman who had modernized the country and turned it into one of the world's two superpowers," Gudkov wrote.

SUPPORT IN POLLS

In a poll conducted by Levada in the autumn, more than two-thirds of Russians agreed with the statement that "Stalin was a cruel, inhuman tyrant, responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people".

But he has made a comeback of sorts under Putin, who has centralized control in the Kremlin and drawn from the paternalistic playbook of tsars and Soviet leaders, including Stalin, during his 13 years in power.

In the same poll, 47 percent of respondents said Stalin was "a wise leader who brought the Soviet Union to might and prosperity". And in a Levada poll last month, 49 percent said Stalin played a positive role, while 32 percent said it was negative - roughly the opposite of a 1994 Survey.

As the Soviet Union unraveled in the late 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev loosened the government's grip and oil money dried up, Russians rode the subways reading revelations about Stalin's crimes in newspapers and journals.

Nowadays, efforts to debunk the criticism and clean up Stalin's image are a fixture of bookshop shelves, and school notebooks decorated with Stalin's photo went on sale last year - something unthinkable at that time.

In Volgograd, the city where Putin celebrated the 70th anniversary of the 1943 Battle of Stalingrad last month, local authorities now allow the city to be referred to by its old name at annual anniversary events and on five other days every year.

Stalin's image is far from pervasive, and there are limits to his rehabilitation.

Calls to change Volgograd's name back to Stalingrad seem unlikely to succeed, and a campaign to return a giant statue of Stalin to a Moscow metro station fell flat in 2010 - though former Soviet anthem lyrics praising him were put up.

Putin does not go around praising Stalin. He would never, for instance, join the ranks of Communists and other nostalgic Russians who lined up on Tuesday to place flowers at Stalin's grave by the Kremlin wall on Red Square.

But while he paid tribute to victims of Stalin at the site of a mass grave in 2007 and said the tragedy must never be repeated, he said earlier the same year that Russia should not be made to feel guilty about the Great Terror of 1937, the height of Stalin's purges.

Worse things, he said, had happened in other countries.

SIX MILLION DEAD

Putin has shied away from public criticism of the Soviet leader, whose government is accused by Western historians of deliberately killing six million civilians or more.

His reticence contrasts with sterner talk from Dmitry Medvedev, the protege Putin ushered into the presidency in 2008 but replaced in May, when he started a third six-year term after a stint as prime minister.

In a 2009 speech, Medvedev said the millions of deaths and "maimed destinies" caused by the Soviet government could not be justified, and in 2010 he said Stalin "committed many crimes against his people".

For Putin, such words could undermine the power structure built by a longtime Soviet KGB officer who has brought many former colleagues from security and intelligence into prominent positions and used their successor agencies to quash dissent.

Historians and activists who seek to document the Soviet government's crimes against its own people are dismayed by Stalin's staying power. They say Russia will not thrive until it comes to terms with Stalin's crimes, but Putin's critics say he has resisted efforts to make that happen.

While a big new Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center opened last year in the Russian capital, with Putin's support, there is still no national memorial to the victims of Stalin's rule.

"Discussion of Stalin is not about the Gulag or who won the war, it's about what kind of Russia we will live in," political commentator Konstantin von Eggert told the meeting in the church hotel on Monday.

"Will it be a country in which the individual exists for the state ... or a state that respects people and works on behalf of free citizens?"

(Editing by Timothy Heritage)