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Op-Ed Contributor

Stalin's Long Shadow



Fotosearch/Getty Images

A Soviet poster reads: “Under the leadership of Great Stalin — Forward to Communism!”

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SIXTY years after Josef Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, Russia is still struggling whether to view him as mass murderer or a national hero. Although his name and statues have been almost absent from Russia since the de-Stalinization campaign that followed his death, he continues to impose himself onto Russia’s political discourse far more prominently than Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state whose body still lies in the mausoleum on Red Square.

Although Russians know more about Stalin’s crimes than they did ever before, many politicians and historians want to pull him out of the shadows and celebrate him for his role in the industrialization of the young Soviet state and the victory over Nazi Germany.

Communists have collected 100,000 signatures on a petition to give Volgograd back the name Stalingrad; others are seeking a referendum to this end. If there is a Metro station in Paris called Stalingrad, they argue, why should the name be banned in Russia? Earlier this year, on the 70th

anniversary of the battle of Stalingrad, buses in several Russian cities were decorated with portraits of Stalin.

It would seem to be difficult to still have any lingering doubts about the role of Stalin, who ranks, along with Hitler and Mao, among the worst mass murderers of the 20th century. Yet Russians have never been able to agree on how they should view Stalin.

For the 60th anniversary of Stalin's death, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace conducted another Stalin poll. It found that Stalin is the uncontested No.1 on the Russians' list of great historical figures, ahead of Lenin, Marx and Peter the Great. In 1989, only 12 percent of Russians felt that way. Today it's 50 percent.

In 1994, 27 percent of Russians had a positive view of Stalin. In 2011 it was 45 percent. Fifty percent of the respondents thought that Stalin was a wise leader who brought might and prosperity to the Soviet Union. Yet at the same time, 68 percent agreed that he was a cruel tyrant guilty of the death of millions of innocent citizens. Sixty percent also said it was more important that under his leadership the Soviet people won World War II.

Already in the 19th century, a Russian poet said that it's impossible to fathom Russia with your brains. From his tomb behind Lenin's mausoleum, from which he was evicted in 1961, Stalin must be taking pride in the fact that he can still divide the people he ruled and terrorized 60 years ago. Stalin's supporters, reviving an old agitprop line, can still claim that "Stalin lives!" and today's tyrants can still hope that they can get away with mass murder.

In my family, there has never been any question about our view of Stalin. In 1941, my parents and two siblings were among thousands of Lithuanian citizens deported to the remotest regions of Siberia. After two years, more than 40 percent of the deportees had perished.

Still, the exile offered my parents a better chance of survival than the alternative. Shortly after they were deported the Nazis crossed into Lithuania and all the Jewish families in their town perished. So, paradoxically, my family could say: "Thank you, comrade Stalin for deporting us."

But it was not exactly gratitude that characterized our view of Stalin. My parents never had any doubt that he was a state criminal on a global scale. So they did not succumb to the panic that gripped the Soviet Union when Stalin died.

I remember vividly how the women from our neighborhood ran around in the courtyard of our house crying hysterically when the news of Stalin's death reached our remote Siberian village. In our tiny apartment there was no mourning or crying. Stalin's death lit a flicker of hope that we now may be able to go back to Denmark, my mother's homeland. It happened four years later. Thank you, Comrade Khrushchev.

The fact is that the de-Stalinization campaign was never completed, either by Nikita Khrushchev or his successors. Under Leonid Brezhnev's long rule, Stalin was relegated to a no man's land of history that allowed a half-hidden cult to persist in a mixture of defiance and protest against the weakness of the Kremlin rulers.

An underground industry of Stalin memorabilia developed that distributed Stalin pictures and calendars. Truck drivers took to taping a portrait of Stalin on the windshield as a symbol of a bygone power and greatness. They were the “other dissidents.”

Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, and Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia, any attempts to deal with Stalin were drowned in the political chaos of those years. When Vladimir Putin took over, he approached the question of Stalin’s legacy with his customary ambivalence and evasiveness.

Putin openly deplored the lives lost during the rule of terror, but he never condemned Stalin. A product of the K.G.B., Putin’s power base rests on the same structure that empowered and served Stalin’s terror machine. All talk of a national monument for the victims of Stalin’s terror has disappeared from the public debate under Putin.

And so, instead of the catharsis the country needs and deserves, Russians will go on struggling with a dictator who refuses to go for good. As the Russians like to say, “Our past has again become as unpredictable as our future.”

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