

Failing the Stalin Test

Russians and Their Dictator

Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber

Imagine that a scientific survey revealed that most Germans under 30 today viewed Hitler with ambivalence and that a majority thought he had done more good than bad. Imagine that about 20 percent said they would vote for him if he ran for president tomorrow. Now try to envision the horrified international response that would follow.

Of course, most contemporary Germans revile Hitler. But ask young Russians about Stalin, and you get answers very similar to those above. Since 2003, we have conducted three surveys in Russia, and according to these polls, there is no stigma associated with Stalin in the country today. In fact, many Russians hold ambivalent or even positive views of him. For example, one-quarter or more of Russian adults say they would definitely or probably vote for Stalin were he alive and running for president, and less than 40 percent say they definitely would not. A majority of young Russians, moreover, do not view Stalin—a man

responsible for millions of deaths and enormous suffering—with the revulsion he deserves. Although Stalinism per se is not rampant in Russia today, misperceptions about the Stalin era are. Few of the respondents to our surveys could be classified as hard-core Stalinists, but fewer still are hard-core anti-Stalinists. Most Russians, in other words, flunk the Stalin test.

And yet, whereas similar findings about Hitler in Germany would no doubt provoke international alarm, American and European political leaders have failed to respond to this trend in Russia—and it is doubtful that they will anytime soon. Western policymakers prefer to ignore unpleasant news about the weakness of democracy in Russia, and this preference is unlikely to change before the next meeting of the G-8, the group of the world's leading industrialized nations, which is to be held in St. Petersburg in July. With U.S. troops bogged down

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in Iraq, American leaders are especially overwhelmed at the moment and have little attention to spare. They will be greatly tempted simply to declare Russia's democratic development finished and to avoid the difficult work of figuring out how to respond effectively to the dangerous legacies of Soviet rule that still trouble their new, uneasy ally.

Statements by U.S. policymakers and some academics on Russia tend to reflect a benign view of the country, lauding its economic growth since 1999, citing its several rounds of elections, and lowering the baseline of comparison so that Russia appears to be a "normal" country. Western cheerleaders of Russian President Vladimir Putin are likely to dismiss positive Russian attitudes toward Stalin as a minor growing pain or a speed bump on the country's road to democracy—just as they downplay the carnage in Chechnya; the festering, potentially explosive conflict throughout the North Caucasus; the Kremlin's blatant suppression of independent television outlets and nongovernmental organizations that dare to challenge its official line; the sorry state of Russia's disintegrating military; the predatory and ineffective police; and the massive corruption at all levels of Russian government.

Such willful blindness is dangerous. But so is the opposite perspective of some pessimistic Russia-watchers, who take Russians' ambivalence toward Stalin as evidence of an authoritarian gene embedded somewhere in the Russian character. In fact, the Russian public's attitude toward Stalin is neither innocuous (and thus not worth changing) nor inherent (and thus immutable). Our surveys suggest that Russian attitudes toward Stalin owe not to any instinctive authoritarianism, but

to the fact that no concerted, effective de-Stalinization campaign has ever been conducted in the country. On the contrary, myths and illusions about Russia's great dictator have been allowed to survive, and even thrive, often with tacit (if not explicit) encouragement from the government. Although some Russian educators, intellectuals, and human rights activists have devoted considerable energy to demythologizing Stalin, their efforts have not produced a decisive shift in public opinion. Indeed, one can walk into a bookstore on Moscow's main street today and find postcards with Stalin's likeness. Stalin playing cards are sold at duty-free stores in Russia's airports.

All of this matters because national historical memory—or amnesia—can have concrete political consequences. How states and societies engage their pasts affects how they develop. Nostalgia for Stalin in Russia is not simply a relic that will die out with the older generation. And as long as young Russians remain ignorant about or have positive feelings toward a murderous dictator who institutionalized terror throughout their country, they are unlikely to mobilize behind calls for greater justice, human rights, or transparency—factors critical to Russia's transformation into a modern democratic society.

ANSWER CLOUDY, ASK LATER

Our assessment of Russian attitudes toward Stalin is based on three surveys: two polls of 4,700 Russians 16 and older taken in January 2003 and July 2004 and a survey of 2,000 Russians 16 to 29 years old conducted in June 2005. The surveys relied on modern scientific sampling techniques and were carried out by the Levada Analytic Center.

Pooling the data from our 2003 and 2004 surveys, we found that when asked, “If Stalin were running for president today, would you vote for him?” 13 percent of the respondents under 30 said they definitely or probably would. An additional 21 percent indicated they would probably not vote for him (as if the decision depended on who else was running), and another 20 percent declined to answer the question. That leaves only 46 percent who said they would definitely not vote for Stalin.

Russians over 30 are more likely than youths to support Stalin: 30 percent of them said they would definitely or probably vote for him, and only 36 percent said they would definitely not. College-educated Russians in all age categories, but especially those under 30, are less likely to consider voting for him. Gender has no effect, nor does residence in Moscow.

The single most remarkable finding of these two surveys is that less than half of Russia’s young people would categorically reject voting for Stalin today. Even if younger Russians are less likely to support him than are older ones, the majority of Russia’s youth appear to harbor ambivalent or positive feelings toward one of the worst dictators in world history.

The survey conducted last year suggests a similar but more nuanced picture. We presented respondents with six statements about Stalin—three positive and three negative—and asked them to say whether they agreed or disagreed with each. The findings were neither straightforward nor uniform. About half (51 percent) of the respondents agreed that Stalin was a wise leader, whereas 39 percent disagreed. Over half (56 percent) said they thought

he did more good than bad; only 33 percent disagreed. And 42 percent of those surveyed agreed that people today exaggerate Stalin’s role in the repressions, whereas about the same number (37 percent) disagreed. Opinions were about equally divided over whether Stalin was a cruel tyrant (43 percent agreed and 47 percent disagreed)—a strange finding given that 70 percent of the respondents agreed that Stalin imprisoned, tortured, and killed millions of innocent people (only 16 percent disagreed with this claim). Only 28 percent felt that Stalin did not deserve credit for the Soviet victory in World War II.

These numbers do not suggest that half of young Russians today are Stalinists. Instead, most young people seem to hold ambivalent, uncertain, or inconsistent views about the man, which lead them to adopt pro-Stalin positions on some questions and anti-Stalin positions on others. Only a small proportion of young Russians seem to have strong sentiments either way. When we plotted people’s attitudes along a scale, the findings were similar. Young peoples’ views, rather than being polarized, clustered at the middle. Only 12 percent of our respondents can be considered consistent pro-Stalinists, and only 14 percent might be considered consistent anti-Stalinists. Again, gender and residence in Moscow did not seem to make much difference.

The rule, therefore, seems to be thorough ambivalence about Stalin among Russia’s youth. Although some people might take comfort in the finding that hard-core Stalinism is not widespread, such ambivalence is itself disturbing. It suggests that Russia badly needs a systematic de-Stalinization campaign—a

need that is growing increasingly urgent. Our survey data suggest that young people's attitudes toward Stalin are, if anything, becoming more positive: in 2005, nearly 19 percent of respondents said they would definitely or probably vote for him, up from 13 percent in 2003 and 2004.

THE YOUNG AND THE AMBIVALENT

Some readers might question whether our surveys really tapped into young Russians' attitudes toward Stalin. We did too—so we designed and observed four focus groups, conducted by the Levada Analytic Center and held with university students in Moscow and a provincial capital, Yaroslavl, in December 2004. In each group, several participants openly expressed positive or ambivalent views about Stalin. Their language illustrates some of the common thinking.

One young man in Moscow explained why he would vote for the dictator this way: "Only because we won the war under Stalin. The rate of growth in the country was pretty inspirational." This man seemed to have no sense that Russia won the war despite, not because of, some of Stalin's actions (such as his decimation of the officer corps through repeated purges, his secret deal with Hitler, and his manifest lack of preparedness). Nor did the student seem to be aware of Stalin's persecution of vast numbers of courageous Soviet troops after the war's end.

A young woman from Yaroslavl voiced similar sentiments. "Stalin had positive and negative traits," she told us. "I think that he was able to mobilize the people in World War II, but his self-aggrandizement was a negative side. It's possible that I would vote for him if his power were

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limited. I think that he was a fairly strong individual." Another added, in a similar vein, "It's possible that he wouldn't be able to do anything bad now. And his rule would, possibly, only better the situation." This optimism was shared by another young man who argued that were he alive today, Stalin "would be different and would act differently. I wouldn't vote for him. I wouldn't vote for anyone. But I wouldn't be against him and wouldn't protest against him." In the same group, a young man concluded that he would decide whether or not to support Stalin, if Stalin were alive and running for president, on the basis of his "PR campaign."

What is most striking about these statements is the ignorance they betray. This lack of knowledge, however, should not be surprising. After an initial flurry of historical reevaluations conducted during Gorbachev's perestroika period, Russian textbooks have become increasingly less critical of—and less informative about—Stalin. In 2003, Russian authorities, with the approval of Putin himself, removed Igor Dolutsky's *National History, 20th Century*—a text widely hailed for its thorough and meticulous discussion of Stalin's repressions and his role in World War II—from public schools. In April 2005, Putin, in his state of the union address, declared that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century"—a statement with which 78 percent of the respondents to our 2005 survey agreed. And in May 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, Putin strongly rejected the Bush administration's request that he denounce the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

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Given the above, it is no wonder that young Russians today are confused about Stalin's excesses and that they closely associate him with the victory over fascism. As one young man in Yaroslavl insisted, "Stalin is not as bad as he is portrayed [by some]. When he came to power, he did some really good things, and then because of fear of losing power he started the repressions." Another told us, "Yes, there were repressions and famine [under Stalin], but it was with him that we won World War II." He then lamented that in contrast, "in ten years we have been unable to do anything about Chechnya." This speaker was skeptical of Russians who criticize Stalin's record. "We know enough from the school curriculum and from stories," he said. "Whoever wants to know more chooses an appropriate profession. But without having lived through that time yourself, it's impossible to actually know about it." The reason the Russian media spend so little time on Stalin, he said, is that "we have a new cult of personality, and probably they don't want to contrast [Putin with Stalin]." At the same time, he worried that those who talk about the dark side of Soviet history may "want to weaken Russia."

Participants in one of the Moscow focus groups—one filled with self-described "democrats"—were especially skeptical of the value of historical knowledge. One woman stated, "I think that there's no point turning back. If you look back all the time then we won't see the present or imagine the future." A young man concurred, saying, "Stalinist times—that's a tired topic to keep beating to death. History must be studied, but to continually walk around and repeat 'repressions,' 'repressions'—why?" He believed any

interest in the topic was "purely the result of propaganda. Look, under Stalin people lived freely and well, just like right now under Putin."

When asked in the survey where they get their information about the Stalin period, most young Russians first identified television, then school and books, and then their parents, grandparents, and government officials. In the Moscow "democrats" focus group, one university student pointed to school and his grandfather. The moderator asked him, "What did your parents, grandparents tell you about this time?" His answer: "Nothing bad about Stalin, for sure, because of the fear that remained. Although Stalin was no longer, they still said that Comrade Stalin was a great leader, and so on." The moderator asked if this was out of fear or real belief. Someone in the group volunteered, "Habit." Another replied, "Some out of fear. Some out of conviction. Some out of a feeling of deep admiration." And another in the group immediately responded, "No one in my family told me anything." Later, when asked what the acronym "GULAG" stands for, this man admitted that he did not know. "The word itself I am familiar with," he said, "but not what it stands for."

HEROES WANTED

Can Russian youth be persuaded that it is important or even hip to know about their past? Can they be persuaded that Stalin is not a neutral or positive figure in their country's history? The answer is yes—but only through a widespread effort, backed by international donors. Left to their own devices, young Russians, like young people everywhere, are unlikely to challenge their views. They need help from the outside.

Having said that, creating a mass-education campaign on Stalin would not be easy. Numerous obstacles exist—including Putin’s government, which seems committed to obscuring the truth. Fortunately, at least some respondents to our surveys did seem to want to learn more about their past. Nearly 39 percent of those polled in the 2005 youth survey said they were interested in the period of Stalin’s rule and wanted to know more about it. Another 24 percent said they were interested but believed they already knew enough. Responses to a related question suggested a majority believed that they “need to know more about Stalin’s period so that [they] don’t repeat mistakes of the past.”

There are plenty of ways Russian educators could make the past—even a negative one—come alive for young people. One way would be to tell compelling stories about the many mysterious disappearances during the Stalin period or about ordinary people of the time doing extraordinary things. Such efforts could tap into the negative sentiments about the Stalin period that young Russians do share. For example, about 26 percent of the respondents in our youth survey reported that they had at least one relative who was “repressed” during the Soviet period, and a majority of young Russians (53 percent) were found to either somewhat strongly or strongly support the construction of monuments to these victims. That number dwarfs the number of respondents (nearly one-quarter) who supported constructing monuments to Stalin himself or naming streets in his honor.

Most of all, young Russians need heroes to inspire them. One additional finding from the 2005 survey is worth noting: young Russians’ attitudes toward Andrei

Sakharov, the dissident who was lionized in the West for his struggle for human rights in the Soviet Union. Young Russians today are not just flunking the Stalin test; they also fail on Sakharov. Only 28 percent said that they would definitely or probably vote for the man if he were running for parliament today. The same proportion said that they had never heard of him. One-fifth, meanwhile, reported that they would probably or definitely not vote for him, and a quarter had heard of him but could not say if they would vote for him. These answers are worrisome, to say the least. One of the university students in a Moscow focus group, when asked if he was familiar with the name Sakharov, thought hard and then responded, “Sakharov. I can’t seem to place it.” If his position is in any way typical, his country is in serious trouble indeed. 🌐