

# Why Soviet History Matters in Russia

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Very often when you read these documents you become scared. But I become even more scared when I think there are millions of people absolutely indifferent to this information.

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When the Soviet Union broke apart nine years ago, many observers hoped that the new Russian government headed by Boris Yeltsin would disclose all the records of the Soviet regime and face up to the horrific legacy of Communist rule. Initially, Yeltsin seemed to embrace this goal, but by the time he left office at the end of 1999 he had achieved only limited progress. Under his successor, Vladimir Putin, hopes of a complete reckoning with the Soviet past have diminished still further.

Putin has repeatedly said that he regrets the demise of the Soviet Union, and he has brought back some of the trappings and symbols used by the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who established one of the most brutal and despotic regimes that ever existed. Putin often speaks proudly of the Soviet KGB, the notorious state security agency for which he worked in the 1970s and 1980s, and he has appointed a large number of former KGB officials to senior posts in his government.

Compared to all the other problems Russia now faces--a deteriorating health-care system, adverse demographic trends, severe fuel shortages in the Far East, and an endless war against Chechnya--the whitewashing of Soviet history might seem of only minor significance. But in fact, this issue is likely to be crucial for Russia's future. A failure to come to terms with the Soviet past will undermine Russia's prospects for democracy.

## **The Necessity of Confronting the Past**

The task of confronting unpleasant historical episodes is difficult for any country, even the long-established democracies. The Germans had a term for this process after World War II, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but it was not until the 1960s and afterward that most Germans truly acknowledged the enormity of Nazi Germany's crimes. In France

today, many citizens are still reluctant to look closely at the Vichy period; in Austria many people still pretend that their country was a victim of Nazi aggression; and in Japan political leaders still frequently downplay the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in China, Korea, and Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s. In the United States, too, many tragic aspects of history--the enslavement of blacks, the campaigns against American Indians, and the internment of Japanese-Americans at the start of World War II--have often been glossed over.

Difficult as the process of historical reckoning may be for these Western countries, it is even more onerous in Russia. Part of the problem is the continued presence of officials who served in high-level posts in the Communist Party, the government, and the security forces during the Soviet period. These officials have been averse to harsh reassessments of the past and have sought to prevent the release of sensitive documents that would cast the Soviet regime's activities in a sinister light.

Germany after World War II had less of a problem in this respect, primarily because the country was occupied by foreign troops after the defeat of the Third Reich. The American, British, and French units that assumed responsibility for the bulk of Germany in 1945 forced the Germans to face up to what had happened. Admittedly, some senior Nazis were allowed to go unpunished, and many scientists who had worked for Nazi Germany were recruited into Western nuclear weapons and missile programs. Despite these lapses, which were driven largely by Cold War pressures, the Western occupying powers managed to establish a system of historical accountability in postwar Germany that had a salutary effect.

The results of this process were vital in consolidating the democratic foundations of the new Germany. The Nazi Party was permanently banned. The acts of the Nazi regime were treated with the opprobrium and revulsion they deserved. No German politician after 1945 could hope to get away with praise of the Nazi regime. Nor would any German politician even think of proposing that Adolf Hitler's remains or a statue of Hitler be displayed reverentially in downtown Berlin.

### **How Russia Contends with its Soviet Past**

In Russia, by contrast, no real stigma has been attached to the Soviet regime. Because the Soviet Union collapsed in peacetime rather than in war, no occupying forces have been present to facilitate a reckoning with the Soviet past. The embalmed corpse of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet dictatorship who resorted to mass terror and ruthless violence whenever it suited his fancy, still lies in Red Square in a tomb of honor. Many thousands of Russians visit the tomb each year to pay homage. Large statues of Lenin are still found in Moscow and other Russian cities.

The Communist Party, far from having been outlawed in Russia, is the country's largest and best-organized political party. Yeltsin did briefly ban the Soviet and Russian Communist Parties after the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow, but in 1992 he

permitted the Communist Party to reestablish itself. Even when the Communists led a violent effort to overthrow the Russian government in October 1993, Yeltsin did not proscribe the party again. Unlike most of the former Communist parties in Eastern Europe, which have taken different names and adopted social democratic platforms, the Communists in Russia still proudly regard themselves as Communists and heirs of Lenin and Stalin. To make matters worse, many of the leading officials in the Communist Party engage in viciously anti-Semitic diatribes.

Anyone who doubts that the Russian Communist Party remains beholden to Stalin should peruse the comments of the party's leader, Gennady Zyuganov. In a typical case in late 1999, Zyuganov celebrated what supposedly was the 120th anniversary of Stalin's birth. (Actually, it was the 121st anniversary: we now know that Stalin falsified the year of his birth, but evidently no one has informed Zyuganov.) During the ceremony, Zyuganov lavished praise on Stalin, describing him as the "greatest leader" in Russian history: "Stalin came to power when the country was picking up the pieces, and when he left, it was one of the greatest and most powerful states on the planet." Zyuganov claimed that the demise of the Soviet regime "reduced Russia to the status of a beggar pleading for crumbs in a churchyard."

Zyuganov's comments were broadcast repeatedly on Russian television, but no prominent Russian politician except Grigory Yavlinsky saw fit to rebut them. Putin, who was then still prime minister, criticized Yavlinsky but said nothing about Zyuganov. Moreover, Putin himself, the day before Zyuganov's remarks, took part in a ceremony at the Lubyanka, the infamous headquarters of the former KGB, to mark the founding of the Soviet state security organs in 1917, a holiday that is still celebrated in post-Soviet Russia. Putin used the occasion to ensure that a bust and plaque commemorating Yuri Andropov, the long-time head of the KGB who condoned severe repression at home and aggressive policies abroad, would be restored to a place of honor. The bust had been removed in late 1991.

### **Putin's Role**

Since becoming president, Putin has continued to gloss over many of the unsavory aspects of Soviet rule. Although he acknowledges that certain "tragic events" occurred in the past, he lauds the "monumental accomplishments" of the Soviet regime, including the accomplishments of Stalin. In early May 2000, Putin authorized the Russian Central Bank to issue 500 special silver coins bearing Stalin's portrait, ostensibly to commemorate the Soviet Union's role in World War II. A few days later, at a ceremony marking the 55th anniversary of the end of the war, Putin unveiled a plaque honoring "Generalissimo Josif Vissarionovich Stalin" for his heroic leadership. Putin also approved the setting up of a bust of Stalin at the Poklonnaya Gora war memorial. Several months later, in December 2000, Putin pushed for legislation to bring back the old Soviet national anthem, which had been commissioned by Stalin in 1943 and replaced by Yeltsin in late 1991. The anthem was formally restored as of January 2001, an event that Putin marked with great solemnity. When Putin was asked in an interview how he could

justify the revival of such a blatant symbol of Soviet repression, he conceded that "many people" associate the anthem with "the horrors of Stalin's prison camps." But Putin vigorously disagreed with this view, arguing that the anthem should instead be linked with the "many achievements of the Soviet period in which people can take pride."

Putin's reasoning on this matter is peculiar. Suppose that German leaders after 1945 had claimed that they were bringing back the swastika to remind everyone of the "proud achievements" of the Nazi regime. Hitler, after all, took a demoralized and economically desperate country and turned it into a daunting military power in well under a decade. No doubt, if we were to look hard enough we could find positive things that occurred in Germany from 1933 to 1945, but this would hardly warrant a revival of the swastika. The atrocious evil of the Holocaust, as Germans are well aware, precludes any notion of celebrating the Nazi regime's "accomplishments."

The same should apply to the Soviet regime. Although Putin would like to focus exclusively on the allied victory in World War II and the Soviet space program, none of this gets around the fact that the Soviet Communist Party presided over one of the bloodiest and most abominable regimes in history. The restoration of conspicuous symbols of the Stalinist regime inevitably mitigates and blurs over the regime's monstrous crimes. The continued celebration of Soviet holidays, particularly the "Day of the Security Organs" on December 20, conveys appalling disregard for the millions who fell victim to the Soviet security apparatus.

Rather than harkening back to the symbols and institutions of the Soviet regime, the Russian government should be doing its best to overcome that terrible legacy. Yeltsin had an opportunity early on to promote a thorough historical accounting, but he squandered it. Although he allowed some of the former Soviet archives to be partly opened, he limited the release of documents and kept the most important archives tightly sealed. Yeltsin failed to ensure the systematic removal of statues of Lenin and of other monuments glorifying the Soviet regime, and he was unwilling to disband (or even scale back) the sprawling state security organs, which were just as symbolic of Soviet repression as the SS was of Nazi atrocities. Although the KGB was reorganized in late 1991, the agency's repressive apparatus was preserved essentially intact under the main successor organization in Russia, the Federal Security Service (FSB), which regards itself as proudly carrying on the KGB's work. The free rein given to the FSB was recently lauded by Nikolai Patrushev, the man who succeeded Putin in mid-1999 as head of the security agency. In an interview marking the Day of the Security Organs in December 2000, Patrushev claimed that the KGB "worked for the benefit of Russia and for Russia's development, prosperity, and national interests," and he vowed that the FSB would "preserve and multiply everything" that the KGB achieved.

### **Implications for Russia's Future**

The lack of a thorough reckoning with the past has had deleterious effects on the Russian population. Russians who proudly display portraits of Stalin on the streets of Moscow or

who lay flowers before statues of Lenin are never chided for condoning mass murder. On the contrary, the admirers of Stalin can now purchase silver coins with his image from the Russian government itself. This may help explain why, in a poll conducted at the end of 2000, a plurality of Russians chose Lenin and Stalin as the "greatest" figures of the 20th century. It is inconceivable that a plurality of Germans today would think of Hitler in similar terms. It is also inconceivable that Germans today would tolerate any suggestion of reviving the Hitler Youth. In Russia, by contrast, there has been no outcry at all over recent attempts to revive the Komsomol, the Communist youth organization that indoctrinated and prepared millions of Soviet young people for service to Stalin's regime.

So long as the symbols and institutions of Soviet repression are still flourishing in Russia, the prospects for democracy will be dim. The former Communist countries that have done the most to encourage a thorough reckoning with the Communist period have enjoyed much greater stability than the countries that have gone about the process selectively or halfheartedly. Deep and lasting democratization in the former East-bloc states has made the most headway when the iniquities of the Communist period have been exposed to public light.

Courageous groups in Russia like Memorial and the Democracy Foundation have done invaluable work in documenting the extent of the Stalinist repressions, but a full reckoning with the Soviet past must encompass the whole society. The passing of generations will help, but the task of facing up to the horrors of Soviet rule will also require integrity on the part of public officials--officials who take no "pride" in the Soviet Union's "monumental achievements" and are instead committed to overcoming the Leninist and Stalinist legacy once and for all.