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## Crisis-Stricken Russians Nostalgic for Stalin The Return of Uncle Joe

*By Christian Neef and Matthias Schepp*

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**Moscow plans to celebrate the Soviet Union's victory over Hitler's Germany with a spectacular parade on Sunday. But this year a shadow has been cast over the festivities by a row over whether posters of Stalin can be hung in the city. Five decades after his death, Russians are still arguing over whether the dictator can be a positive role model.**

Maloye Pizhalino is a small village 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of Moscow. A handful of houses, most of them empty, are scattered among the birch trees, and the Volga River flows sluggishly through the valley below.

The godforsaken village doesn't even appear on any maps anymore. Its only remaining connection to the outside world is a dirt road. Anyone who managed to find a better life elsewhere moved away years ago, and even the kolkhoz, the local collective farm, has long been bankrupt.

The only sign of life is the cheerful music coming from the windows of house number 8.

Inside, a bizarre scene is unfolding in the middle of the abandoned settlement. Three old people are dancing inside the house. Vladimir Mirozhichenko, 86, who once fought at the front, wears an insignia that reads "We will triumph" and a portrait of Josef Stalin on his blue jacket, as well as two medals, the Red Star and a decoration "For the Capture of Kaliningrad." Valentina

Trubinova, 70, also has various medals decorating her vest. She represents the Moscow Committee of War Veterans.

Finally, there is Anatoly Projdakov, the owner of the house, who turns 80 today. The guests are there to celebrate his birthday. Projdakov has spent half his life in Maloye Pizhalino, and he also served as a child soldier in the region, as part of a regiment that fought the Germans.

### **'Our Great Commander-in-Chief!'**

"Here, in the battle of Rzhev, which was worse than the one near Stalingrad, we fought the 9th German Army for 15 months. We had to defend the position at all costs," says Mirozhichenko, who still has a piece of shrapnel lodged in his chest. "But Moscow doesn't want to remember this battle, because it cost the lives of 1.5 million soldiers. And because we lost it."

The old people sigh over the gloomy memory, but then they begin to argue over who was at fault for the disaster. One of them mentions the name Georgy Zhukov, the commander of the Red Army's Western Front, while another says it was the fault of General Ivan Konev, who was in charge of the adjacent Kalinin Front. The three old people agree that both men made huge mistakes.

But one name isn't mentioned -- that of the man who sent entire armies to their deaths in the region, even dispatching soldiers without guns into the deadly firefight. That man was the commander-in-chief of the Soviet military, Josef Vissarionovich Stalin.

In fact, the name Stalin is only mentioned when the three sit down for a festive meal, and then it sounds as if he had had nothing to do with the horrors of the war. "To Josef Vissarionovich, our great commander-in-chief!" Mirozhichenko proclaims. "To the organizer of the great triumph!" the others add.

### **Bitter Dispute over Stalin Images**

On May 9, Russia celebrates the 65th anniversary of victory in what it calls the Great Patriotic War. Some 90,000 soldiers will march across Red Square in a parade, the likes of which Moscow hasn't seen in a long time. The country's military will participate with its latest missiles and 150 aircraft, as will soldiers representing Russia's former allies in World War II, the Americans, the British and the French.

Josef Stalin will also take part, and not just in the memory of the three old people in Maloye Pizhalino.

There has been a bitter dispute in Moscow for weeks over whether the city should be allowed to display images of the generalissimo to mark this anniversary and, if so, in which locations. Mayor Yuri Luzhkov had announced his intention to have posters of Stalin mounted in front of the Bolshoi Theater, at Gorky Park and Victory Park, and at the sites where the people's militias congregated during the war.

A display of this magnitude hasn't happened since 1961, when Stalin's embalmed remains were taken from the mausoleum on Red Square and buried in a simple grave near the Kremlin wall. It was the same year Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev began his drive to remove his predecessor's influence from the public sphere, by changing the names of cities and places that had been named after Stalin.

### **Explosive Effects**

The effects of Luzhkov's idea were explosive, and not just in Russia. US President Barack Obama canceled his attendance of the ceremonies, supposedly because of the Stalin posters. According to a German diplomat, Chancellor Angela Merkel called Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to insist that he intervene in the Moscow city government.

But Stalin's genie had been released from the bottle long ago, and the headstrong mayor's poster campaign only served to stoke the flames of a debate that had been raging for months.

Some interpreted Luzhkov's decision as a long overdue act of liberation, and several other cities copied his idea. Vladivostok, in the far east of Russia, already began decorating its streets with photos of Stalin last week, and other cities that intend to follow suit include the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, Voronezh in southern Russia and the industrial city of Kirov in central Russia. In Volgograd, the former Stalingrad, there is even a soft drink on sale featuring Stalin on its label.

Even the parliament in liberal St. Petersburg debated over whether the "brilliant commander-in-chief" should be allowed to become part of the cityscape again. Members of the city council argued that under Stalin's leadership, Russia "rose from the ashes and became a major power." But the governor of the district rejected the idea. Now a private initiative has leased advertising space on city buses to display images of Stalin.

The local parliament for the Moscow region is even spending 45 million rubles, or more than €1 million (\$1.3 million), to coin new copies of old war decorations, including a "J.V. Stalin" medal bearing the image of the former Kremlin chief and "coated with at least 0.012 mm (0.0005 inches) of silver."

### **Like Germans Glorifying Nazis**

Stalin opponents, however, are outraged and horrified. For the human rights organization Memorial, the Luzhkov decision is a "sacrilege." And a group of notable intellectuals calls the efforts "tasteless" and "idiotic," pointing out that honoring Stalin in modern-day Moscow is akin to Germans today "glorifying leading Nazis."

Stalin was "a complete failure as commander-in-chief" and had the deaths of millions of Soviet citizens on his conscience, writes the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Alexander Avdeyev, Russia's culture minister, classified him as an "executioner" who was to blame for the fact "that our country lost almost an entire century in its development." And both human rights organization Memorial and the anarchist group Autonomous Action announced their intention to remove the Stalin icons or to put up opposing posters of their own.

How can the son of an alcoholic shoemaker and a cleaning lady from the Georgian city of Gori, whose body has been buried at the Kremlin for 57 years, still divide an entire people today?

### **Cruel and Vindictive**

Josef Stalin was a psychopath, pathologically suspicious, cruel and vindictive. He ruled the Soviet realm with an iron fist for three decades, exposed 190 million people to his social experiments and made terror part of the rhythm of life for an entire country.

Stalin drove 20 to 25 million people to their deaths. He allowed farmers to starve to death and exterminated almost the entire elite, even signing the death warrants of some of his closest war comrades with the stroke of a pen. Mussolini believed that the Kremlin leader was secretly a fascist. Nevertheless, Stalin was a hero in the eyes of his subjects. His propagandists were so adept at portraying Stalin as the red czar that half the country wept when he died in 1953.

And now, half a century later, do the Russians still believe in his genius? There is no doubt that Stalin is back in vogue.

More than a dozen new statues of Stalin have been erected in Russia in the recent past, in addition to the more than 200 that still existed in the country: in the Siberian diamond-mining town of Mirny, at High School No. 2 in Chelyabinsk in the Ural Mountains, and in the Siberian village of Kureika, where Stalin spent his exile under the czar.

### **'Stalin Raised Us to Be Loyal'**

Once again, Moscow residents can read the phrase "Stalin raised us to be loyal to the nation" when they walk into the Kurskaya metro station in Moscow, where a frieze bearing the inscription has now been restored. And anyone who is interested can visit the [website](#) of notorious Stalin apologists or, in any bookstore, choose among dozens of works of lightweight Stalin literature, arranged next to the shelves of bestsellers, with titles like: "Stalin's Great War," "Stalin's Terror: The Great Lie of the 20th Century" or the five-volume work "200 Legends About Stalin."

Volume 14 of Stalin's "Collected Works," which were no longer published after 1951, is now on the market again. There is even an 800-page book that contains all the information that was meticulously recorded in notebooks in Stalin's outer office, such as the names of people who went in and out of the general secretary's office, together with the exact times of their arrival and departure. A new schoolbook goes so far as to praise Stalin as an effective manager.

Stalin critics, on the other hand, are having a tough time of it. A grandson of the dictator is suing the liberal radio station Ekho Moskvyy for €258,000 in damages, because the broadcasters claimed that Stalin approved the executions of 12-year-olds in the 1930s. And in Arkhangelsk, a history professor was arrested for investigating the mass deportations under Stalin and -- absurdly -- charged with having violated the "private sphere of Soviet citizens."

### **No Public Outcry**

There was no public outcry in either case. According to a survey by the Levada Center, an independent polling organization, almost one in three Russians regards the former Kremlin leader "with respect" or "with sympathy," while 2 percent of respondents even said that they regarded Stalin "with enthusiasm." Some 38 percent said they were indifferent to the former dictator, while opponents of Stalin were in the minority.

Does this explain why the chairman of the organizing committee for the May 9 celebration -- none other than President Dmitry Medvedev's chief of staff -- initially decided that Stalin posters could not be displayed for the commemorative event, but then caved in? The organizers were "strictly against it," says his spokesman, but points out that his office, unfortunately, lacks the authority to dictate to Moscow residents how they should decorate their city. At the end of last week, there were rumors that the controversial images might be displayed in only a few prominent places.

On Wednesday, the city government put up small posters of Stalin around Moscow, the news agency Reuters reported. Some of the posters were within exhibits about World War II, while others were displayed outside museums.

The mayor responded to his critics by saying that May 9 is a day to honor war veterans, and they happened to have fought in Stalin's name. But, he added, it was also a day "for our children, so that the memory of the great victory remains in their hearts and minds" -- and to that end, it was important that they know the name of the man who was commander-in-chief at the time.

### **Reclaiming the Soviet Era**

Their victory over Nazi Germany is sacred to the Russians, and it remains a unifying force, even after 65 years. In polls, a majority consistently calls it the most important event of the 20th century. And next to the space flight of astronaut Yuri Gagarin, it is the only historical event that Russians see in a positive light. As sociologist Boris Dubin explains, this is because the symbol of victory has a unifying force that is "capable of integrating the entire 20th century" into a single narrative. And the name Stalin happens to be part of "reclaiming the Soviet era as something of our 'own,'" as Dubin puts it.

But the Stalin renaissance isn't just part of a larger dispute over what Russia was and what it is today. In fact, it has even more to do with the question of what Russia will become in the future - - and whether someone like Stalin can become a central mythic figure once again.

But how can a society that doesn't even have a clear picture of Stalin come to terms with these issues? Since the Kremlin leadership had the dictator's remains removed from the mausoleum on that October night in 1961, it has avoided a debate over his place in history.

### **'National Catastrophe'**

The Medvedev/Putin dual leadership has done little to change this. Admittedly, the president in October spoke of a "national catastrophe of Stalinist repression." But then, in December, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin defended his view that Russia underwent fundamental change under

Stalin, when it was transformed from an agrarian to an industrial country. "Nobody can today throw stones at those who organized and led us to victory," Putin said.

It was only in Katyn, where he joined Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in early April to **commemorate the 1940 murders** of members of the Polish elite by the Soviet NKVD secret police organization, that Putin admitted that Stalin had had a "personal responsibility" for the mass murders. The Kremlin placed Katyn files, which had already been known about for a long time, on the Internet last week, but it was done in conjunction with the tragic death of Polish President Lech Kaczynski near the site and by no means suggests the beginnings of a process of de-Stalinization.

Instead, the Kremlin chose to hide behind Moscow's mayor and the war veterans in the controversy over the Stalin posters. The actor Sergei Yursky called that approach "dangerous," saying that the leadership was still unwilling to define exactly who Stalin was.

As a result, the veterans are allowed to go on cultivating their distorted picture of the former commander-in-chief. Stalin apologists can still go unpunished as they declare their supposed moral superiority over Stalin's victims, who they insist are enemies of the people who were legitimately sentenced. Meanwhile, a growing number of young people worship the dictator as a "man of action" -- even though they never experienced his rule personally.

### **Disappearance into the Gulag System**

The family of Veniamin Marokov, 77, who lives in the provincial city of Lipetsk 400 kilometers southeast of Moscow, was among the victims of Stalinism. Marokov was only six when his father was convicted of spreading "counterrevolutionary propaganda" and disappeared into the gulag system.

During the war, when his classmates boasted about the heroic acts of their fathers, Marokov lied and told his friends that his father died in the war. The truth was that he never returned from the gulags. He was only the first of four victims of repression in his family.

Two uncles, one of them a priest, were deported. Marokov has a clear memory of a night in August 1941, when secret police burst into the apartment and took away his grandmother Yelizaveta, who was 60 at the time. "My mother almost went mad with grief, and she was constantly sending pardon requests to Moscow," he recalls.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, Markov gained access to official files which confirmed a suspicion his family had long harbored. The files contained photos taken by the secret police showing the haggard face of his grandmother, her lips pressed together and her gaze turned toward the ground.

He learned from the reports that Yelizaveta's daughter-in-law Tatjana had denounced his grandmother. She had told Stalin's investigators that the old woman had "waited impatiently for the Germans to enter Moscow in 1941" and was strictly opposed to her son joining the Red Army to fight against Hitler. Yelizaveta was convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and sent to a

camp. She survived, however, and after the war ended up living with her daughter-in-law under one roof again.

Such family accounts are common, says Marokov, but adds that very few people talk about their memories.

### **'No One in Our Family Had to Suffer Under Stalin'**

That's one version of the truth. But Anastasia Gromova sees things differently.

"My mother's parents were farmers in the Kaluga region. They came to Moscow in 1934, after having been recruited to work at the big Hammer and Sickle steel mill," she says. "No one in our family had to suffer under Stalin. My great-grandfather on my father's side was supposedly shot in the Far East, but in reality he drank himself to death. There is such a huge amount of exaggeration when it comes to Stalin."

Gromova is a modern woman. The 28-year-old works as an event manager in Moscow, and has just returned from trips to Argentina and India. If she didn't express her views openly in a LiveJournal blog, no one would ever imagine that she is the personnel director of the "Socialist Movement of Soviet Citizens."

She says she cannot forget how her father lost his job as a mechanical engineer after the fall of the Soviet Union, and how the family lost its entire savings in the 1998 economic crisis.

### **No Better than the Gulags**

No one helped the family at the time, says Gromova. She spent a long time searching for a political direction. First she was a liberal, she says, then an anarchist, and now she is a Stalinist.

"Why do we need a state?" she asks. "So that it will guarantee the basic conditions for business and security for the people. It did these things under Stalin, but it no longer does so today."

Don't the facts contradict those who are constantly getting upset about Stalin's regime, Gromova asks? "There were 35,000 police officers in Moscow in the 1940s. Today there are 100,000, but the number of murders is more than 10 times as high."

And what about the repression and Stalinist terror? Not even one in four inmates in the gulags was a political prisoner, Gromova claims, and points out that courts also make mistakes in the United States. "People say to me, you would talk differently if you had been incarcerated in one of the Stalin camps yourself. But then I say to them: Just drive 20 kilometers out of Moscow and you'll see how people live today. No better than they did in the gulag in those days."

### **Chronic Corruption**

The new Stalin debate stems largely from the conviction that Russia needs a strong leader again, particularly now that the global crisis has exposed the weaknesses of the Russian economy. The

Putin system has reached its limits, says Vladislav Inozemtsev, director of the Moscow-based Center for Post-Industrial Studies. "We are in a situation of serious stagnation and we don't know how to get out of it."

Even President Medvedev uses talks about Russia's "primitive raw materials economy" and "chronic corruption," and says: "Our economy ignores the needs of people. Russia's influence in the world isn't as great as we would like it to be."

Stalin used similar words 79 years ago. "We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this gap in 10 years," he said in 1931, before prescribing a course of brute industrialization for his country. He had smelting works and steel mills built, the railroads electrified and canals dug, and he drove the Russians to work faster. The Soviet Union became a major power.

The only way to modernize Russia is by authoritarian means, and the country needs another dictatorship -- albeit a "good dictatorship" -- to do so today, listeners recently heard on Ekho Moskvyy. For a brief moment, it became clear what currently has the Russian elite so preoccupied, namely the question of whether liberal reform or stronger government intervention is needed.

### **The Price of Progress**

Could it be that Stalin isn't just being rehabilitated by his supporters, but also because of Russia's new difficulties?

"You could say that his guilt lies in the fact that he didn't try to complete the great leap without bloodshed," argues political scientist Sergei Chernyakhovsky. Gorbachev tried it, he says, but no one is calling him a hero today. For Chernyakhovsky, the only successful leaders are those who are able to successfully solve a challenge of historic proportions. Stalin, he says, mobilized people in such a way that, for them, "Monday already began on Saturday." "Nothing comes from nothing," says Chernyakhovsky. "And there is a price to pay for progress."

Such views still encounter resistance. Why, then, didn't the Americans need a Stalin to become a superpower, asks journalist Alexander Bangerski? The initial conditions in Russia and the United States were about the same 200 years ago, he adds. "Why did Russia need mass shootings and the gulag, just to achieve far more modest results than its rival?"

For the average citizen who lives outside the pocket of affluence in Moscow and St. Petersburg and still barely ekes out a living, the situation is clear. The polling agency VCIOM found last year that 54 percent of Russians surveyed believed that Stalin's abilities to run the country were very high or higher than average. And when asked whether the grand objectives and quick results justified the sacrifices the Russian people made during the Stalin era, one in three respondents said "absolutely" or "yes, to a certain extent."

### **'In Those Days, People Like Putin and Medvedev Would Have Been Shot'**

"Finally, finally, public opinion has turned around again after a phase of anti-Stalinism," says historian and writer Yuri Mukhin, who runs the leading Stalin website. According to Mukhin, Stalin tried to maintain his connection to the people, while the current elite merely get richer at the people's expense. "The Russians would understand," says Mukhin, slipping into the language of the Stalin era, "that in those days, people like Putin and Medvedev would have been shot."

Mukhin is very popular, because most Russians don't know how brutal the Stalin dictatorship really was. They are just as skeptical about the figures relating to the great terror as they are about reports on the Katyn massacre.

Is it really that difficult to discover the truth about Stalin? Oleg Naumov can provide one answer to this question. He is the director of the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, the former central party archive of the Soviet Union.

He spreads out his treasures in his office not far from the Kremlin. One of the pieces is Stalin's red party book, where bears the number 000 0002 and was issued on May 29, 1936, which contains receipts for the leader's membership dues. According to the record, in 1948 he earned a monthly salary of 10,000 rubles and paid 300 rubles a month in party dues.

### **Locked Away**

Another piece is a copy of Lenin's work "The State and Revolution," in which Stalin scribbled notes in red, including on the cover. He made a particularly large amount of notes in the section dealing with control over the class that is to be oppressed. Also using a colored pen, the Kremlin leader corrected secret maps of the front in January 1945, when the Red Army was on the outskirts of Kaliningrad.

Naumov's "Fund 558" contains 16,174 files, including a collection of Stalin's documents locked away in two windowless concrete towers. Only a decade ago, the Kremlin gave him another 1,700 documents from the so-called Presidents' Archive. "No one knows exactly how many of Stalin's documents are still in existence," says Naumov.

How can a country investigate its past under such conditions? To make matters worse, many documents, most of them containing sensitive information about Stalin's foreign policy, are still classified. Naumov has a few hundred of them in his collection.

Doesn't the law require the release of the documents after 30 years? The archive director smiles. It isn't automatic, he says, adding that the relevant commission is completely overwhelmed by its task of examining these documents. Only recently, says Naumov, representatives of the FSB, Russia's domestic security agency, stopped the release of a speech by the later NKVD director Nikolai Yezhov to intelligence agency employees in 1934. The FSB officials noted that the speech "still revealed far too much about the operational work of his agency."

## **Time to Look at Stalin's Legacy**

Nevertheless, the opening of the archive is expected to continue. Naumov has signed an agreement with Yale University, under which Americans and Russians will jointly establish an electronic archive of all non-classified Stalin documents within three years.

The time has come to take a serious look at Stalin's legacy, the archive director believes. He is convinced that it will promote the truth: the truth about the camps, Katyn, the war and the Battle of Rzhev -- no matter what happens on May 9.

Perhaps Russia will find out who Josef Vissarionovich Stalin really was, after all.