

Vladimir Putin and the “Stalin Myth:” How Russia’s President Invokes Stalin to Fortify His Political Stature

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Abstract: Vladimir Putin has sustained his political leadership and power for more than eighteen years. Among the many theories that seek to explain his impressive tenure are hypotheses that the structure of the Russian political system has been rendered incapable of removing him, that Russian society genuinely desires leaders like Putin, and other reasons. The conceptual framework for understanding Putin’s extended reign in Russia will focus on his leverage of a political predecessor, Joseph Stalin, to extend his tenure. This paper analyzes Vladimir Putin’s use of Stalin’s historical presence for his own political gain. Vladimir Putin’s personal statements on Stalin are analyzed in the context of Russia’s current affairs. His positive, although sometimes contradictory, comments about Stalin’s leadership offer unique insight into the nuanced relationship between the contemporary Russian government and its infamous Soviet predecessor. The political and social psychological consequences of Putin’s orientation towards Stalin are also examined as insightful aspects of how Russian society has interacted with its tumultuous past.

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin, currently serving as Russia’s President for a fourth term, has sustained his political leadership and power for more than eighteen years. Among the many theories that seek to explain his impressive tenure are hypotheses that the structure of the Russian political system has been rendered incapable of removing him, that Russian society genuinely desires leaders like Putin, and other reasons. Many of these theories address core facets of why Vladimir Putin has maintained positions of political power for as long as he has- alternating between President and Prime Minister. The conceptual framework for understanding Putin’s extended reign in Russia could be cast in economic, political, sociocultural, or historical terms. Here, Putin’s leveraging of a political predecessor, Joseph Stalin, to extend the longevity of his power, will be examined.

The following discussion will analyze Vladimir Putin’s use of Stalin’s historical presence for his own political gain. Stalin’s figure and leadership must be addressed briefly, however, as well as the evolution of public and official perceptions of Stalin

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as a leader since the time of his death. When this foundation is laid, Vladimir Putin's personal statements on Stalin can be analyzed in the context of Russia's current affairs. His positive, although sometimes contradictory, comments about Stalin's leadership offer unique insight into the nuanced relationship between the contemporary Russian government and its infamous Soviet predecessor. The political and social psychological consequences of Putin's orientation towards Stalin can also be examined as insightful aspects of how Russian society has interacted with its tumultuous past.

Literature Review

The birth of the Stalin myth can be found in his presiding over the victory of World War II, cementing both the Soviet Union's "superpower" status and his own position as a "competent" and revered leader, worthy of heroic reputation. Shockingly violent repression and brutal policy was to be overlooked in light of Stalin's triumphal leadership and salvific command. Russians came to associate their "great power" identity with Stalin's leadership- evident most vividly today in the sentiments held by many in the older generations longing for a renewal of the "Soviet strength" featured during previous regimes.¹

The mythology surrounding his personage was woven through many venues, of which the attribution of all Soviet successes was a core building block. As Gill outlines in his paper "The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union," by maximizing Stalin's role such that he superseded Lenin and other contemporary Soviet leadership, Stalin was built up as unparalleled in "all fields of endeavor."² As the personality cult cemented his words as ultimate truth and his figure as "rooted firmly in the affections of those over whom he ruled," the evolving mythology clothed Stalin as a deity and savior.³ The arts, too, became a forum for myth-creation, as Soviet cinema and literature perpetuated the image of Stalin's innate superiority. Bazin documents the mythologization of Stalin's "genius" prowess as commander of the Soviet military in films about World War II, as Stalin is artistically portrayed as entirely separate from his advisors in designing successful war strategy.⁴ In literature, Stalin was unwaveringly praised as would be a deity in an ancient myth, an example of which is the following excerpt from "Hymn to Stalin" by A. O. Avdienko:

O great Stalin, O leader of the peoples,
Thou who broughtest man to birth.
Thou who fructifies the earth,
Thou who restorest to centuries,

1 Bill Keller, "The Stalin Generation, Where Nostalgia Dies Hard," *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 1989.

2 Graeme Gill, "The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union," *British Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 2 (April 1980): 169.

3 Gill, 171.

4 André Bazin, "The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema," *Film Criticism* 11, no. 1/2 (1986): 165-67.

Thou who makest bloom the spring,
 Thou who makest vibrate the musical chords...
 Thou, splendour of my spring, O thou,
 Sun reflected by millions of hearts.⁵

Stalin's ideological attack on creativity and abstraction in favor of "concrete" action and belief dramatically altered Russian collective thought,⁶ forcing all such activity through the filter of building a mythological narrative of himself. But the power of the Stalin myth was built also through the practices of iconography and traditional religious methods of narrative construction. "Worship of him is Byzantine," wrote John Gunther about Stalin's personality cult in 1947.⁷ The press was used to co-opt religious traditions of iconography and visual aids in devotion and loyalty.⁸ In doing so, the authorities were able to shift the rigor and commitment of religious devotion away from the church and toward Stalin.⁹ The ceremony surrounding Stalin's persona included also his interaction with children, as ceremonies and new sayings were employed to communicate his care for and love of the children of the Soviet Union. Kelly notes that the phrase "Thank You Dear Comrade Stalin for a Happy, Joyful Childhood!" was thoroughly posted in all possible contexts, positioning Stalin as the true caretaker and father of Soviet children.¹⁰ Such symbolic gestures became a point of normality, cementing the Stalin myth as an everyday reality.

Stalin's death in March of 1953 came as a shock to citizens across the Soviet Empire, and many Russians felt a genuine sadness; he was the only leader they'd known for the past thirty years and he had represented not only political leadership, but also moral and ideological leadership.¹¹ During the time after his death, Stalin's omniscient figure and character of infallibility were buttressed and reinforced by his imposing statues and divine positioning- the "quasi-religious myth," as Billington labels it, was psychologically satisfying in a way that made it challenging to eliminate.¹² The investigation into Stalin's tyrannical and brutal practices during the 1930's that followed his death, in addition to the recovery of "select" victim memories, represented a departure from an uncompromising

5 "Modern History Sourcebook: Hymn to Stalin," Internet History Sourcebooks, August 1997, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/stalin-worship.asp>.

6 James Billington, "The Irony of Russian History," in *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 590-597.

7 John Gunther, *Inside Europe* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 531.

8 Elizabeth A. Wood and Victoria E. Bonnell, "Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin," *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (1998): 165.

9 Ibid.

10 Catriona Kelly, "Riding the Magic Carpet: Children and Leader Cult in the Stalin Era," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 49, no. 2 (2005): 206-208.

11 Albert Marrin, "Into the Shadows," in *Stalin: Russia's Man of Steel* (Sandwich: Beautiful Feet Books, 2002), 210-235.

12 James Billington, "The Soviet Era," in *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 519-549.

narrative of Stalin's figure and the accompanying personality cult.¹³ Even during this time, however, his name was associated positively with the revered Lenin, being labeled "the great continuer of Lenin's cause" by the press and Soviet officials.¹⁴

Stalin's image, as depicted by Brezhnev's regime through the newly empowered state propaganda machine (schooling, intelligence services, cinema, etc.), was reestablished as an admirable and heroic figure- this "Brezhnevite myth of Stalin" would prove the enduring version in the following decades.¹⁵ While the Brezhnev years saw a return to a heroic portrayal of Stalin, the mythology surrounding his character became further detached from reality as the years passed. Russian collective thought came to embrace the Stalin narrative as a representation of its broader historical identity. Dubin outlines the two contradictory facets of Russian identity in the following way:

Behind Stalin the victor stands the image of Russia as a mighty power—strong, aggressive, armed, glorious... Behind Stalin the tyrant stands the image of Russia as victim—long-suffering, inexhaustibly patient, uncomplaining, eternally poor, willing to get used to and bear any burden... Moreover, these images are inseparable in the collective mind; they support and strengthen each other. They are two projections or two aspects of Russian identity, so that one aspect is activated, then another, depending on the situation and on the real or imagined interlocutor. The code name "Stalin" fuses them together.¹⁶

These apparently polemic images of Stalin give insight into how the Stalin myth remained useful for both the regime and the Russian people as distance from his death increased in collective memory. For the Russian people, Stalin's heroic image served undoubtedly as a point of pride- that is, pride in the strengthening and advancing of the Soviet Union as a world power, in the victory of the "Great Patriot War," etc. The opposing image, however, invokes a painful memory that serves to suppress resentment of tyrannical regime activity: because this piece of Russian identity is central to self-conception, suffering under tyranny is seen not as unacceptable, but instead as the continuation of a long tradition. And, thus, these opposing images allow the mythology to remain both balanced and survivable.

Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Stalin myth took a particularly damaging blow- Dubin notes that public sentiment toward Stalin reached an all-time low in 1989 and persisted into the early 1990s.¹⁷ The instability and economic crises of the 1990s, however, elicited a nostalgia for the Soviet era that manifested itself in a sense of humiliation and collective identity crisis felt by many Russians. During this resurgence in Stalin's positive mythology, the time under his leadership came to represent a "golden

13 Ibid.

14 Robert C. Tucker, "The Metamorphosis of the Stalin Myth," *World Politics* 7, no. 1 (October 1954): 42.

15 Boris Dubin, "The Stalin Myth," *Russian Politics & Law* 48, no. 4 (2010): 46–53.

16 Ibid., 48–49.

17 Dubin, 47.

age” of higher moral standards and orderly society.¹⁸ Khapaeva argues that the glorified image of Stalinist leadership (taking advantage of what she calls “partial amnesia”) is still actively used today in crafting a “unifying” narrative for Russians under one government.¹⁹ Indeed, others have described the concerning trend in the social embrace of the Stalin myth and Russia’s official and unofficial inability to reconcile with its past. In a *Foreign Affairs* article published in 2018, Nikita Petrov describes the respect and admiration for Stalin in today’s Russia, which he argues has resulted from an ambiguity on the part of the Russian government regarding the Soviet Union’s legacy (as well as Vladimir Putin’s fond appraisal of those years).²⁰ The “official memory” of the past (one that sanitizes and even glorifies years of repression) has been reinforced by the Russian government’s intervention in historical education.²¹

Others, however, see a decline in the Stalin myth as conceived above due to the passing away of generations that remember the Soviet era. Dubin argues that the Stalin myth will dissipate as witnesses die off and public attention to his image declines- those that remain loyal to the Stalin image, according to the data he uses, are mainly lower income and rural populations.²² He concludes, when writing in 2010, that “the Stalin myth, the Stalin symbol, no longer has active mobilizing power...”²³ The discussion below will argue the opposite: the Stalin myth is alive and well, spread across many Russian demographics and encouraged by Russian leaders (namely, President Putin). Further, the conception that historical distance from the Stalin era decreases the saliency of the mythological imagery surrounding his figure is refuted by the apparent persistence and enduring qualities of the myth. While the importance of Stalin as a real, historical figure may fade, the collective memory and sentiment of his legacy are manipulated and customized to meet the political goals of Russian leadership even today.

Analysis

The Stalin myth is not simply a fond remembrance of a historical leader, but a complex and highly nuanced collective memory that takes different forms in different contexts. To say that Stalin is a hero among Russians is an overgeneralization, and to say he is forgotten is a self-deception. Statistics from the Levada Center, a non-governmental polling and sociological research organization, reveal the faces that Stalin wears in Russian society today. To grasp the essence and character of the Stalin myth that the Russian political authorities nurture, these statistics can be viewed in light of statements from President

18 Dina Khapaeva, “Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society,” *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (2009): 359-94.

19 Khapaeva, 367.

20 Nikita Petrov, “Don’t Speak, Memory: How Russia Represses Its Past,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018.

21 Ibid.

22 Dubin, 47-50.

23 Dubin, 53.

Putin and observations of Russian official commemoration of the Stalin era “success” around the country today. Three core objectives compose the following analysis: illustrate the persistence and nuance of the Stalin myth in Russian society, explore the nature of official positions on Stalin’s legacy, and examine the political and social psychological constructs that sustain this myth. The identity politics employed by Putin’s regime allow for nearly seamless myth creation and maintenance. Psychologically, Putin’s ability to perpetuate the Stalin myth is buttressed by his charismatic leadership, to be discussed in more detail in light of relevant behavioral leadership theory. The following public statements and opinion polls will assist in understanding the mechanics of the political and psychological forces at work.

A public opinion poll conducted in late 2015 offers illuminating insight for understanding these varied and sometimes contradictory aspects of Stalin’s image. A question asking respondents to choose a description of Stalin they agreed with most revealed that the following option received the most responses at 34%: “Whatever flaws and failures are attributed to Stalin, the most important thing is that, under his leadership, Russia was victorious in World War II.”²⁴ Such a response illustrates the weighty influence that WWII (The Great Patriotic War) has on the popular conception of Stalin’s leadership. The large presence that WWII holds in Russian collective memory is featured in the opinion poll by Levada that asked respondents what happened 65 years ago in 1939, with 38% naming the beginning of WWII or the Great Patriotic War (far above any other option response rates).²⁵ The following quote from President Putin in a speech to at the Seliger National Youth Forum in 2014 makes obvious the connection between official sentiment and public opinion: “We can criticize the commanders and Stalin all we like, but can anyone say with certainty that a different approach would have enabled us to win [WWII]?”²⁶ The ambiguity and implied approval of Stalin’s leadership or “tyranny” in Putin’s question is not without consequences- acceptance of Stalin’s brutal methods by Russia’s highest official in public service communicates that leaders’ dictatorial decisions can be justified in contexts defined by that leader.

Following the polling response above addressing Stalin’s “flaws and failures” were two antithetical options that received a nearly equal split in numbers of responses: “Stalin was a cruel, inhuman tyrant, guilty of the murder of millions of innocent people” (21%) and “Stalin was a wise leader who led the USSR to greatness and prosperity” (20%).²⁷ A polarized response to a leader with the significance that Stalin holds in Russian history reflects the non-linear development of his legacy documented in the earlier sections of

24 “Perceptions of Stalin,” *LevadaCenter*, last modified January 20, 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/01/20/perceptions-of-stalin/>.

25 “Russian History,” *LevadaCenter*, last modified April 3, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/04/03/russian-history/>.

26 “Seliger 2014 National Youth Forum.” *President of Russia*. Last modified August 29, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>.

27 “Perceptions of Stalin,” *LevadaCenter*.

this paper. Though Stalin's human rights abuses are not hidden completely from view, the public's preoccupation with WWII seems to serve as a diluting agent in critically assessing the Stalin era atrocities.²⁸ Stalin's legacy, while eliciting polarized sentiment, nevertheless retains a largely positive character in collective memory. A solidifying and heroic event like WWII may explain the positive feelings toward Stalin as a historical figure even today, as public opinion polls in 2016 and 2018 ranked "respect" as the personal feeling receiving the most responses (28%²⁹ and 29%³⁰, respectively) behind only "indifference."

The "respect" that Stalin elicits in Russian society today is not merely civilian, but official, as well. In interviews with Oliver Stone, a film director in the United States, Putin defends Stalin against critics that label him as a tyrant. In fact, Putin goes so far as to claim that insulting Stalin, by implication, is insulting the Soviet Union and even modern Russia.³¹ To link Russia's national identity so intimately with Stalin's person reveals Vladimir Putin's perception of Stalin's place in Russian history. Stalin's formative contributions during the Soviet era play a vital role in Russian political identity and can be seen in official memorials such as his bust at the Kremlin Wall in Moscow.³² Honoring Stalin's legacy through memorial placement, public defense of his leadership, and usage of positive imagery through popular celebrations reinforces the Russian government's implicit official affirmation of Stalin-era decisions.

Further, Putin has gone so far as to criticize Lenin, the Soviet Union's beloved founder and revered first leader, in contrast to Stalin's leadership. In a speech during a plenary session of the Russian Popular Front's interregional forum, Putin argues that Stalin's conception of the USSR's autonomisation was correct, and that Lenin "planted [a bomb] at the foundation of our statehood" with his policies.³³ To elevate Stalin over Lenin in any respect is radical considering the place of honor reserved for Lenin in Russian historical thought. Beyond this, the "strong man" persona of Stalin's legacy continues to fulfill a longer tradition of Russian leaders looking to previous "strong men" to justify and assert their own hardline leadership. When asked if he agrees with Stalin's alleged claim that Russia needs a "strong leader," Putin ambiguously responded, "there are such traditions in Russia but it is not a question of a strong figure, although a strong figure is needed in power, it is a question of what is implied by this term."³⁴ Without explicitly endorsing autocratic leadership, he chose his words carefully to avoid a direct criticism of the principle. This type of "wordsmithing" is common among Russian officials when

28 "Russian History," *LevadaCenter*.

29 "Stalin," *LevadaCenter*, last modified June 10, 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/06/10/stalin-2/>.

30 "The Perception of Stalin," *LevadaCenter*.

31 Oliver Stone, *The Full Transcripts of the Putin Interviews: Oliver Stone Interviews Vladimir Putin* (New York, NY: Hot Books, an Imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), 25

32 "The Kremlin Wall," *Moscow.Info*, 2018, <http://www.moscow.info/red-square/kremlin-wall.aspx>.

33 "Meeting of the Russian Popular Front's (ONF) Interregional Forum," *President of Russia*, last modified January 25, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51206>.

34 "Interview to American TV Channel CBS and PBS," *President of Russia*, last modified September 29, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380>.

interacting with judgements of the Stalin-era.

Additionally, President Putin has shrewdly attempted to redirect focus away from the less palatable aspects of the Stalin era with appeals to “move forward” or “look to the future.” During a press statement following talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a journalist recalled one of Putin’s past rhetorical questions: “What was wrong with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact?” This preceded the journalist’s question about how Russia and Germany can cooperate on security while “assuaging” the fears of countries like Poland and the Baltics for whom the infamous Pact meant military occupation. Putin’s response was, almost predictably, “They need to step over their fears, move forward, stop living with the phobias of the past and look instead towards the future.”³⁵ In fact, Russian popular opinion aligns with the notion that the Pact was beneficial rather than wrong: 45% either fully or somewhat approved of the Pact, while only 17% fully or somewhat opposed it (leaving 38% of respondents unsure or knowing nothing about it).³⁶

Concerning monuments and other physical reminders of the Stalin era, the Putin government has continued symbolically honoring Stalin through statues and busts like the one at the Kremlin wall mentioned above, or those in museums across the country (notably, the bust in the Great Patriotic War Museum). At a news conference in 2013, President Putin was asked “What do you think of the view that we should restore the monuments to Stalin...in Lubyanka square?” (Lubyanka square is in Moscow, not far from Red Square).³⁷ Putin’s response includes first a comparison of Stalin to Oliver Cromwell in England as a fellow “tyrant” whose monuments have not been removed by the British government.³⁸ He continues in saying, “It is not about the symbols, you see. It is about respect for every period of our history.” Quoting another Russian leader, he asks “why destroy the monuments?” in communicating that, while social harmony should be preserved, the memorials have a place in honoring previous leaders.³⁹ This episode tacitly reflects the attitude that, to preserve a particular narrative, the past must be selectively overlooked, manipulated, or simply “airbrushed” with symbolic imagery.

The nuance of the Stalin myth for official memory, however, does not exclude attempts at semi-honest acknowledgement of the past. When socially unifying or politically useful, President Putin has interacted with the violence and repression of Russia’s past—specifically that of the Soviet years. At the opening of the “Wall of Sorrow” in Moscow in 2017, a memorial to victims of past political violence, President Putin addresses the

35 “Press Statement And replies to journalists’ Questions following Talks with Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel,” President of Russia, last modified May 10, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49455>.

36 “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” *LevadaCenter*, last modified September 26, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/09/26/molotov-ribbentrop-pact/>.

37 “News Conference of Vladimir Putin,” *President of Russia*, last modified December 19, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19859>.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

pain and suffering in Russian memory left by the Soviet era. He explains that “we and our descendants must remember the tragedy of repression and what caused it.”⁴⁰ The acceptance of a negative narrative for Russia’s past, though, escapes direct condemnation of Stalin as a leader (as his name is not mentioned in the speech at any point). Further, Putin follows the above statement with this illuminating caveat: “However, this does not mean settling scores. We cannot push society to a dangerous line of confrontation yet again.”⁴¹ Essentially, the message behind this claim is that the past must be tempered or modified for the sake of political or social unity.

The consequences of President Putin’s use of history, as mentioned above, carry significance in two core arenas: the political and the social psychological. Politically speaking, Putin’s conception of Stalin and the resulting official statements serve to justify his own decisions that may be perceived as “authoritarian” or controversial in a similar nature. Today’s high levels of respect and admiration among the Russian population for Stalin, despite his tyrannical leadership, may provide Putin with leverage in advancing his own “distasteful” policies. The belief that political unity in Russia is accomplished only under “strong leaders” plays a part in Putin’s fond recollection of Stalinist doctrines. This formulation of the path to political unity hinders substantial democratic progress and the development of democratic values that, in the eyes of Russians who lived through the 1990s, bring internal conflict and systemic chaos to the political establishment (a discussion of democratic development in post-Soviet Russia is too extensive for the scope of this paper, however). Though President Putin does not explicitly model his leadership or values after those of Joseph Stalin, he wields the mythology surrounding Stalin’s legacy as a tool for consolidation of political loyalty and singular political orientation in not only the political elite, but the middle and lower classes, as well.

The identity politics at Putin’s disposal are well-suited for the use of the Stalin myth. Because the mythology surrounding Stalin facilitates a type of unquestioning loyalty to authority in the face of crisis or external threat, Putin is able to employ such sentiments in his own leadership. The perceived threat of western imperialism or interference in today’s Russia, for example, can be politically cast as mirroring the existential threat posed during World War II. Stalin leveraged the threat of invasion to justify immense authoritarianism, as Putin seems to similarly pursue today. One example is the proposed “Sovereign Internet” legislation that would effectively create a closed internet within Russian borders that would allow the authorities to carefully design the type of content available to Russian citizens.⁴² Naturally, the identity politics of fear plays a key role in justifying such drastic measures, full of claims that foreign actors are threatening Russian pride and well-being through the spread of information on the internet. Thus, the myth

40 “Opening of Wall of Sorrow Memorial to Victims of political Repression,” *President of Russia*, last modified October 30, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55948>.

41 Ibid.

42 Ian Bremmer, “The Quick Read About... Russia’s New Internet Law,” *Time*, April 26, 2019.

creation comes to encompass not only Stalin's figure, but Putin's as well. The inability for Russia's populace to effectively deconstruct the mythology surrounding both Stalin and now Putin is a testament to the complex and dynamic process that has contributed to the myth creation.

Further, Putin's charismatic leadership relies on his ability to present a vision of an idealized future- in this case, that future resembles a glorified version of Soviet history. As Conger and Kanungo document in their paper on the behavioral attributes of charismatic leadership, they highlight the practices of developing an idealized vision and leveraging crisis to garner political support.⁴³ Stalin accomplished these goals through propaganda and repression, and Putin's political career has increasingly come to model a similar set of techniques. To consider Putin's statements in light of behavioral leadership theory suggests that his statements about Stalin are not simply wording errors or overly zealous speech-writing mistakes, but meticulously crafted points to elicit loyalty to himself from both the populace and political elite. If, indeed, Putin is employing such charismatic tactics to benefit from the popular momentum of the Stalin myth, he has largely succeeded.

In the social psychological arena, Putin's defense and endorsement of the Stalin myth can be understood not simply as a personal or political goal, but as a broader collective perpetuation of the myth through both repeated and enduring social representations, as well as established social repertoires. First, social representations of Stalin fulfill various cultural needs for Russian society such as "strong" and orderly leadership, competent defense against outside powers, portrayal of the Russian people as uniquely "enlightened" in a political or spiritual sense, or even a pan-Slavic unifying force in a subtler vein. Jovchelovitch explains the ways in which societies use social representations and alternative narratives to create mythologies that incorporate and reinforce key aspects of a society's history and cultural identity. The use of narrative principles in synthesizing characters and themes into a coherent "mythology" allows for justification and solidification of their social positions, as well as enhancement of social cohesion.⁴⁴ The heroic and admirable qualities assigned to Stalin serve to build the narrative and mythology that cyclically require future preservation and defense of his character from figures like President Putin.

In another respect, avoiding direct criticism of Stalin builds a particular "social repertoire" that allows for the self-preservation of the mythologized narrative. According to Potter and Wetherell, a social repertoire is a "recurrently used system of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena."⁴⁵ Such repertoires consist of both official and unofficial terms and ideas associated with a figure or event-

43 Jay A. Conger and Rabindra N. Konungo, "Perceived Behavioural Attributes of Charismatic Leadership," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 24, no. 1 (January 1992): 86-102.

44 Sandra Jovchelovitch, "Narrative, Memory and Social Representations: A Conversation Between History and Social Psychology," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 46, no. 4 (2012): 440-456.

45 Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior*, (London: Sage Publications, 1987).

Stalin and the Soviet Union under his leadership, in this case. Because the Russian government has never actively pursued policy to open up and reevaluate the “repertoire” of Russian collective thought surrounding Stalin, the glorified and sanitized repertoire of the past still plays an outsized role in social perceptions today. Despite having access to information about the Stalinist brutality, the overall repertoire for assessing Stalin remains archaic and attached to the past. Without intentional action from leadership at the top of the political establishment, little may change in the near future in Russia’s sentimental memory of Stalin. Vladimir Putin’s statements above confirm a lack of motivation to upset the status quo that Russian society has settled into when looking back at the Stalin era. Social repertoires impact not only the general populace, but Putin himself. His views of Stalin are far from original and are as much a product of his Russian heritage as they are a tool in his strategy of political longevity. Without an impactful shift in the repertoire, however, the potency of the Stalin myth will likely endure.

Conclusions

How can a society pick up the pieces of an identity broken by brutality, repression, and violence? Indeed, the Stalin era changed Russian identity in a way that may never be entirely resolved. As recounted above, the Stalin myth has adapted and evolved over the decades, and his legacy has impacted Russian identity in ways that permeate both official and unofficial culture. Vladimir Putin’s leadership has undoubtedly been influenced by the Stalin legacy, with arguably negative consequences. A restructuring of Russian identity that escapes the disproportionately looming Stalin myth will require multi-faceted and consistent approaches. The physical and political reminders in Russia of Stalin leave a complex form of collective memory for its people: one that feels the pain yet cannot shake off the gravitation to what it sees as a core aspect of its identity. Political ambiguity on the part of high-level officials make the reconciliation process more challenging.

It might be said that some pain is rooted too deeply to be healed through the passing of time alone. Policy-makers and advocates have reason to believe that, in the case of the Stalinist legacy discussed above, this statement is true. Strategies for healing and restoring Russian identity to stability without Stalin at its core can be designed by leaders in the country. To give Stalin an appropriate place in Russian history- as a leader that at one time carried out severely reprehensible acts- would help society move forward without forgetting the dangers of authoritarianism. It is not enough to simply tear Stalin’s image down, but to build up the Russian identity in the process as something to be embraced and proud of. Honest dialogue can serve as a mending point for the shame that many may feel about the past. These discussions can be had without conflict and instability only when leaders encourage such expression.

Rather than focus on eliminating Stalin from Russia’s historical narrative, artists, writers, community leaders, and others should instead work to build a Russian narrative

that accurately incorporates Stalin without allowing him to crowd out all other aspects of Russian self-perception. A narrative of Russian history without Stalin is equally untruthful as one that sanitizes his actions. It will be the task of both activists and policy-makers to build Russian society up in such a way that its foundations are solid without Stalin as a central pillar. A Russian identity that accepts and reconciles Stalin within a healthy self-image will allow for progress and restoration.

As Russians investigate the past, a proper framework for understanding Stalin's legacy should be established with the above rudimentary recommendations. The three popular conceptions of Stalin (hero, necessary evil, and mistake) must be reconciled into a unified narrative that holds a common meaning for all. An honest and authentic interaction with the person and actions of Stalin would propel Russia forward in striving to overcome a shadow of the past that retains a cold grasp on Russian society. To achieve this end, the pain of the past will need a reopening and resurfacing before true healing can occur.

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