



Stalin Edges Out Putin in Russian Poll on Greatest Figure in World History

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June 27, 2017

As a student at a British university in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was struck by the number of Marxist students and professors I encountered. (That British universities remain a hotbed of leftism was confirmed recently, when large numbers of British university students turned out to vote for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the recent general election.) As someone born behind the Iron Curtain, I found the intellectuals' attachment to Marxism puzzling and sometimes, like when I was told that the people of Eastern Europe "betrayed" Marx's ideas, objectionable.

Later I realized that ideology, like religion, can form a core of personal identity and changing that identity is almost impossible. That appeared to be especially true of my university professors, who spent most of their professional lives promoting Marxism. Few people, I suspect, have the time and the energy to evaluate their core beliefs in the face of new evidence, and the courage to embrace ideas they spent their entire lives despising.

In any case, coming to terms with one's own delusions is a difficult task that is not limited to individuals alone. Entire nations can remain beholden to some very strange ideas. In a recent poll conducted by the Levada Centre in Moscow, "Russians were asked to pick the ten greatest individuals of all time." They "have picked Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin as the greatest figure in history... beating President Vladimir Putin into joint second alongside poet Alexander Pushkin."

A similar poll conducted in 2016, found "a gradual improvement in perceptions of Stalin." In that survey, "40 percent of Russians thought the Stalin era brought 'more good than bad,' up from 27 percent in 2012." In January 2015, *The New York Times* reported, "a majority of Russians (52 percent) said Stalin 'probably' or 'definitely' played a positive role in the [history of the] country." Depending on how you count it, Stalin might have been responsible for as many as 15 million deaths. And, he was not even Russian!

After the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russians never undertook the kind soul-searching that the Germans undertook after the fall of the Third Reich—a task that was made all the more difficult by positive comments about Stalin made by the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, closure of the Soviet archives and state control of the media.

I think that coming to terms with the past in Russia is even more difficult than elsewhere. Generations of Russians have toiled to build communism. Hundreds of millions of people have

lived and died fulfilling idiotic production quotas and repeating equally idiotic mantras about a better tomorrow that never came. And to what avail? By the time when it collapsed, the Soviet Union was worse than a failure. It was a joke.

I think that it is this sense of national humiliation that is at the root of the Stalin nostalgia. The Russians may have been poor and miserable, but at least, back during the Cold War, the world respected and feared them. To reject Stalin and the Soviet Union is tantamount to recognizing that Russia's economic backwardness and millions of needlessly extinguished lives cannot be blamed on others. It amounts to no less than taking ownership of Russia's own mistakes and humiliations. That takes strength, courage and introspection that few people—be they Russians or not—possess.

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