

The Wrong Kind of Monument

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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History has always been an inflammatory topic in Russia, and this is particularly true when the topic of discussion is whether the Soviet Union played a positive role in history.

On Wednesday, for example, the Georgian parliament approved a resolution making Feb. 25, 1921 — the day Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union — “Soviet Occupation Day.” Several weeks before that, Moldova’s acting president, Mihai Ghimpu, proclaimed “Soviet Occupation Day” on June 28. In January, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, just before he was lost his re-election bid, conferred the title of Hero of Ukraine on anti-Soviet, nationalist leader Stepan Bandera. In the Baltic states, anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiment surrounding the five decades of Soviet occupation and the high number of subsequent executions, deportations and imprisonment of Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians has not abated — and perhaps increased — in the past 20 years. In Poland, the 1940 Katyn massacre, in which more than 20,000 Polish officers were executed by the NKVD, has served as a central historical event that Poles have used to call the world’s attention to Soviet crimes.

These are just a few of the numerous historical debates dividing Russia, the former Soviet

republics and the Warsaw Pact countries regarding the history of the Soviet era, the role of Stalin and Lenin and the criminal nature of the Soviet Union itself.

How has Russia handled the divisive issue of Soviet repression, executions, deportations and other government crimes? As for crimes against the citizens of other countries, the Russian leadership during the past year took a large step forward when it finally acknowledged the full tragedy that occurred at Katyn. In a number of speeches, both the president and the prime minister directly and unambiguously condemned the Stalinist regime and its crimes against its own people.

But what have the leaders done to acknowledge the crimes against Russia's own citizens? Overcoming the diverse legacy of dictatorship requires the state and society to make long-term and whole-hearted efforts toward the reconstruction, understanding and acceptance of historical truth. Only that will make it possible to fully consolidate the Russian state and society on a free and democratic foundation.

To achieve that, Russia must create and continually develop an extensive and modern "infrastructure of remembrance" to mark the crimes committed by the Soviet regime, just as post-World War II Germany has done.

Information about Nazi crimes is ubiquitous in Germany. There are millions of critical books, documentaries and fictional films on the Nazi era. There are more than 60 museums depicting the Nazi period of German history. Thousands of monuments and commemorative plaques to victims have been erected. The condemnation of Nazism and its crimes as well as the memory of the victims and the heroes of the resistance serve as the moral foundation of modern German society.

A similar "infrastructure of remembrance" has been created in former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as in a number of former Soviet republics. A Memorial to the Victims of Repression has been constructed in Astana, and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev has personally opened similar museums and monuments throughout Kazakhstan — a territory where 1.5 million people were deported.

Unfortunately, none of this exists in Russia. What's more, the Soviet ghost continues to define the face of Russia 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Major thoroughfares and public squares continue to carry the names of Lenin, Marx and Engels. Practically every Russian city has streets named after Cheka founder Felix Dzerzhinsky, Cheka official Moisei Yuritsky, revolutionary Valerian Kuibyshev and Bolshevik leader Mikhail Frunze, not to mention the obligatory Marxist theorist Rosa Luxemburg and German socialists Clara Zetkin and Karl Liebknecht. A statue of Lenin stands on the central square in practically every Russian town and city, and the Siberian city of Barnaul boasts three Lenin statues on Leninsky Prospekt.

The efforts to restore historical truth are carried out almost exclusively by historians and social activists — for example, from the Memorial human rights organization. But they have limited manpower. The list of all the victims of repression is only 25 percent complete, and for many, the locations where they were shot and buried remain unknown. In a country that for decades conducted state-sponsored terror, there are too few monuments, commemorative plaques and museums.

The country's leadership has approved the idea of building a large memorial complex in Moscow to commemorate the victims of Soviet repression and teach Russians about Soviet crimes, but the project has not moved forward. It must be completed. In addition, Russia's leaders should support the construction of museums in all major and medium-sized cities, and monuments to Soviet repression should be erected in the very center of towns and villages all across Russia.

Thankfully, the first step has been taken. Later this year, a monument to the victims of repression will be completed in the historic district of Barnaul. The monument will consist of a sculpture titled "Farewell," by acclaimed Barnaul sculptor Prokopy Shchetinin. The project was funded in part by the Boris Yeltsin Fund and businessmen Mikhail Zadornov, Mikhail Prokhorov, Dmitry Zimin and Alexander Lebedev. State Duma Deputy Andrei Knorr, a native of the Altai region, has also played an important role in developing the Barnaul monument.

Barnaul, the capital of the Altai region, is indeed a good place to jump-start efforts to build monuments to Soviet repression in the regions. During 10 years of repression in Altai, 42,464 people were convicted of "political" crimes alone. Of those, 15,727 were shot, 12,348 were given sentences of 10 years or more in the camps and another 9,921 received sentences of five to nine years in the camps. Another 107,344 people — Germans, Poles, Ingush, Kalmyk and others — were subjected to repression for their ethnicity and other criteria. Symbolically, in Altai alone, the number of people who fell victim to state-sponsored repression amounts to roughly the same number of Altai residents who gave their lives fighting against Nazi Germany in World War II.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

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