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Coming to Terms With the Soviet Past

By Sarah E. Mendelson

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On Oct. 30, Russia commemorated the victims of political repression, including tens of millions of innocent Soviet citizens arrested, brutalized, sent to labor camps or executed under Stalin. Until recently, the date has passed with scant notice outside small groups of dedicated human rights activists. The lack of fanfare symbolizes a larger reluctance of contemporary Russia to come to terms with the horrors of the Soviet period. Russia is hardly an exception. Many societies have trouble acknowledging unpleasant aspects of their recent histories, substituting uncomfortable silence or outright denial for frank and painful discussion.

At the same time, however, the process of Russia's recognition of its tragic Soviet past has started. For example, President Dmitry Medvedev marked Oct. 30, 2009, with a recorded video blog in which he unambiguously denounced the Stalin-era repressions: "Millions of people died as a result of terror and false accusations — millions. ... There is no justification for repressions." Medvedev also decried the lack of knowledge about this dark episode, particularly among young people. His simple message: Russia must do more to commemorate the victims of Stalinism.

Earlier this year, after decades of official denials, Russian authorities acknowledged that Soviet NKVD troops — not the Nazis — murdered 22,000 Polish officers and others at the Katyn forest massacre in 1940. They delivered secret files concerning the incident to Polish investigators.

The need for public truth and openness about the Soviet past was a main theme during the Valdai Discussion Club in September, an annual gathering of Russian and Western pundits. In addition, Sergei Karaganov, who has close ties to the authorities, characterized Russia in a comment in the July 27 issue of Russia in Global Affairs as "a big Katyn, strewn with nameless graves of the millions of victims of the regime." Karaganov warned that silence regarding the crimes of Stalin continues to thwart Russia's political progress.

These and other recent developments demonstrate growing support among Russia's political and intellectual elites for a more open and far-reaching public discussion of the Stalin era, something that the country's human rights activists have been advocating for years. But where does the public stand on this issue? To find out, we surveyed 2,009 Russians ages 20 to 59 as part of a project funded by the Ford Foundation and carried out by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The Moscow polling firm, Levada Center, conducted the survey.

Our data verify that Russians have limited knowledge about the Stalin-era repressions. Only 28 percent correctly indicated that "millions or tens of millions" suffered, 31 percent cited lower figures, 24 percent simply did not know, and 17 percent had never even heard about them. This manifestation of "absent memory" is especially pronounced among 20-year-olds: 35 percent of them have not heard of the repressions. Analogies are problematic, but imagine if 35 percent of Germans in their 20s had never heard of Hitler's genocidal actions. The best informed are the 14 percent of respondents who knew of a relative who had been unjustly arrested — particularly the 8 percent whose relatives were sent to a camp, executed or disappeared. They know more about the Stalin era and hold more critical views.

Our data also show a robust desire to learn more. Forty-five percent agree that "it is important to learn about the Stalin era to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past," while only 24 percent said the country should "move forward and avoid stirring up the past." Among those who had heard of the repressions, 72 percent agreed that the government should do more to make people understand their true scale, and 83 percent agreed that the government should do more to commemorate the victims.

Overall, our survey reveals widespread public interest in starting a national conversation about the Stalin era, as Medvedev attempted one year ago. Human rights activists should take heart that their efforts to encourage such a conversation resonate with the public and have received some support from the top. Indeed, we found that the public views human rights activists on these issues with admiration and respect. All of these data suggest that a coalition of activists, scholars and officials might come together to devise national and local strategies to promote greater knowledge both about victims and perpetrators through schools, public monuments, the arts and mass media. One approach might be to encourage the 16 percent who do not know whether any relatives were victimized to obtain information about their families using the country's freedom of information act, which came into force in January 2009.

Knowing more about what happened is a necessary first step to genuine de-Stalinization. Russia's politicians, public and human rights activists have a great opportunity to work together to explore the truths about the Soviet past. If they seize this opportunity, Russians will be poised to teach other countries valuable lessons about both the necessity and the possibility for societies to reconcile with painful episodes of their past. Let's hope they choose the truth over silence.

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