

Dealing With a National Meat Grinder

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The Soviet era was comprised of two roughly equal parts. During the first half, which lasted from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 until Stalin's death in 1953, the country was put through an extraordinary reign of terror and a radical experiment in social engineering and national reorganization. Counting the two world wars, in which Russian losses were also huge, the country endured a bloodletting of proportions unprecedented in history. Over the course of 36 years, at least 50 million people — although the number is probably much higher — were killed, expelled, starved or died in the gulag.

The second half was an attempt to deal with the consequences of that national meat grinder, to restore relative normalcy and to adapt the Communist system to the realities of the 20th century. That period lasted slightly longer, 38 years, and culminated in the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The nation that emerged in 1991 is therefore the creature of the Soviet era and reflects both its failures and successes. It is a surprisingly divided nation, considering that it had been so deliberately and brutally homogenized. Divisions in today's Russia are many, but the most

important one concerns the attitude toward Stalin and his policies. One side regards Stalin as a butcher who drowned the nation in blood, while the other sees Stalin as a strong leader who built a great nation, admittedly by harsh means. In other words, the choice is whom you identify with: the murderers or the victims.

But here is where it gets tricky. This choice is completely arbitrary. In Stalin's Soviet Union, there was no such division. Under him, the system was a mixture of despotism, human sacrifice, pagan cult and brutal modern ideology. There was no "us versus them" as in the U.S. Civil War, which featured the North against the South, or the civil rights movement, which pitted African Americans against the white establishment. In the Soviet Union, no ethnic, geographic, religious or ideological lines were ever drawn. Proletarian origin, ideological purity or loyalty to Stalin — or even personal friendship with him — never gave anyone protection from being purged. The prison guard and the inmate were indistinguishable and often switched places. The system was both totalitarian and totally irrational and unpredictable, and today's Russians are heirs to both sides.

The reign of terror is what makes this division in today's Russia different from the 19th-century debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles. Now, it is based on an all-too-real political model.

The division will determine Russia's future. The anti-Stalinists believe that Russia needs to reform its political system, society and economy and rejoin the international community. Stalin's admirers, meanwhile, want Russia to remain separate and even to undo key economic and social reforms of the past 20 years.

There is so little common ground that it often seems that this national rift will never be healed. But it will be. As Russia slides back toward an ersatz Soviet Union and grows increasingly corrupt and isolated under the pretext of building a strong state, the anti-Stalinists will simply leave, as so many educated, independent-minded people have already done. But more to the point, Russia's ethnic makeup is changing. Largely because of the policies pursued by Stalin and his successors, the once-populous nation is dying out. Its indigenous population is being replaced by immigrants from the former Soviet empire and China. They and their children will have different concerns and will no longer care whether Stalin was a bloody despot or a great leader.

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