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Stalin Lives On, 60 Years After Death

By Jonathan Earle

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A rally marking the anniversary of Stalin's death. **Igor Tabakov**

Yury Fidelgoltz, a Stalin-era gulag survivor, has an answer ready when he hears people pine for the "good old days" under Uncle Joe.

"My answer is clear. If Stalin came to power now, you wouldn't talk like that because he'd snap your necks!" Fidelgoltz said, leaning forward in his chair, his blue eyes narrowing during a recent conversation in his apartment in Moscow.

Fidelgoltz, 85, was a 20-year-old aspiring actor when he was sentenced to a decade of hard labor for anti-Soviet scribblings in his private diary.

He served six years, from 1948 to 1954, before his release, the result of a liberalization policy in the wake of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's death.

Fidelgoltz is one of thousands of survivors who have lived to see the 60th anniversary of Stalin's death Tuesday, a reminder of the human cost of Stalin's 30-year rule.

Other reminders of Stalin's regime are all around us — from the Moscow metro that millions of Muscovites ride to work, to the country's UN Security Council seat and nuclear arsenal.

Some say Stalin even lives in the language and mentality of the country's officials, whom critics accuse of a Stalin-like tendency to use violence to solve problems.

"He's very much alive," said human rights leader and former Soviet dissident Lyudmila Alexeyeva.

Experts and human rights leaders say Stalin, still a controversial figure, is a bellwether for the nation's anxiety about the present, and a potent symbol that the government exploits and abuses at its own risk.

Stalin ruled Russia from 1922 to 1953, during which time he oversaw the country's rapid industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, and the Allied victory in World War II, as well as a system of political repression that saw millions imprisoned and killed.

He left his mark on the map of Russia, adding the Kuril Islands — seized from Japan just before the war's end — and the Siberian republic of Tuva, while also creating the Leningrad region and the Jewish autonomous region.

Also, under Stalin, the Soviet Union became a nuclear power and gained permanent membership on the UN Security Council, where Russia has made headlines in recent months by blocking Western-backed proposals to pressure Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Closer to home, Stalin ordered the construction of Moscow's metro system, the iconic Seven Sisters skyscrapers, and what is now the All-Russia Exhibition Center.

"It's the architecture of a totalitarian utopia," with monumental scale, expensive decor and elements of historical styles from classicism to Gothic, said Natalya Samover, head of Arkhnadzor, a group that promotes architectural preservation.

But experts agreed that Stalin's most important legacy is the debate he inspires between supporters, who tend to see him as a strong, incorruptible leader, and detractors, who see him as bloody tyrant.

The ambivalence that Russians feel toward Stalin is apparent in a recent public opinion poll by the independent Levada Center.

Forty-nine percent of respondents said the dictator played a positive role in Russian history, while 55 percent associated his death on March 5, 1953, with the end of terror and repression and the liberation of millions of innocent people from imprisonment.

By comparison, only 18 percent said his death meant the loss of a great leader and teacher.

Lev Gudkov, the Levada Center's director, said that when it came to Stalin, Russians suffered from a kind of schizophrenia that is increasingly turning into indifference as the years pass.

Other indicators suggest that his popularity has increased in recent years. The percentage of respondents who call him the most outstanding historical figure jumped from 12 to 36 percent

between 1989 and 2008, according to Levada Center polls, a matter that Gudkov partly blames on Putin-era propaganda.

Beginning in 2000, Putin's government has "very quietly and equivocally" improved the image of Stalin and the Soviet era, tying Stalin to the Allied victory in World War II and praising the modernization that took place on his watch, Gudkov said.

Portraits of Stalin on city buses commemorating Victory Day in St. Petersburg have appeared, as well as a quote praising Stalin inside the Kurskaya metro station that reads, "Stalin reared us on loyalty to the people. He inspired us to labor and heroism."

Senior government officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, have expressed support for going back to Volgograd's World War II-era name, Stalingrad. The city recently provoked a nationwide discussion when it approved a measure to revert back to its old name on six war-related holidays.

There was also the appearance of a school history textbook in 2008 that praised Stalin as an "effective manager" whose campaign of terror was a rational step toward modernization.

The strategy has gone hand-in-hand with Putin's own brand of authoritarianism, which has included its own modernization and anti-corruption campaigns, as well as a call for stability, Gudkov said.

Alexeyeva, the rights leader, put it more bluntly. "The regime wants to be a dictatorship like Stalin's, perhaps without the bloodshed, but they want everyone to fear and praise them and keep their mouths shut," she said.

But was Stalin's era the utopia of order, quality services and clean streets that many supporters say it was? Oleg Khlevnyuk, a Stalin expert and senior researcher at the Russian National Archives, said no — these ideas have little to no foundation in reality.

The crime rate was very high under Stalin, bureaucrats did steal, and average people lived exclusively poorly and often starved, he said. As for the Soviet Union's great-power status, "Maybe they feared us, but I can't understand what joy that brought to regular people," he said.

What these myths are really about are anxieties regarding contemporary Russia. Concerns about corruption, crime, Russia's status and the standard of living give birth to an imagined past, he said.

"There are political forces that are ready to play this Stalin card, but nothing would work for them if there weren't this public yearning. It's politically dangerous for the government, but they have to say something positive because there are a lot of people who like Stalin," Khlevnyuk said.

Opposition activists have accused the current government of being Stalinist. References to "1937" — the height of the Great Purge, which saw 725,000 executions over two years — have been frequent since the Kremlin began ramping up restrictions on critics and nonconformists last year.

But Khlevnyuk, the archivist, said Putin's regime has almost nothing in common with Stalin's.

"Of course, we're absolutely not living in a Stalinist country. There's no comparison," he said. Today, Russians enjoy private property, open borders and increased integration with international systems, and are free from strict ideological controls and mass repressions, he said.

Vyacheslav Nikonov, a Duma deputy with the ruling United Russia party and grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, one of Stalin's closest associates, seconded that assessment.

"The system of government that existed under Stalin doesn't exist anymore. I can say that to you officially. The way the Russian government is currently organized has nothing in common with it. It's a different system of decision-making, of management," he said.

In public remarks, Putin has attempted to toe the line between praising Stalin's achievements and condemning his abuses.

During his annual call-in television show in 2009, Putin said that the Soviet Union had industrialized under Stalin and that nobody could "throw stones" at those who led the Soviet Army to Berlin in World War II because defeat would have been "catastrophic."

But, he said, these achievements were reached at an "unacceptable" cost: Millions suffered from repressions, and crimes were widely committed against the Russian people.

On another occasion, he condemned the idea that Russia should return to, or needs, a totalitarian regime, which he said would "kill peoples' freedom and creativity," thereby derailing the economy, society and political sphere.

Nonetheless, Stalinist sayings have a way of popping out of officials' mouths, giving some the impression that the great dictator might have friends in high places.

"One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic," is an oft-quoted saying, attributed to Stalin, as is, "It's not important how they voted, it's important how they counted the votes," said Sergei Lukashevsky, director of the Sakharov Center.

While there are few avowed Stalinists among the elite, many have a Stalinist mind-set, said State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, a former Communist Party member, currently of the A Just Russia party.

"A significant portion of the elite thinks in a Stalinist way, meaning with suspicion, mistrust and a tendency to use violence to solve problems. But you won't find a significant number of people in power who would admit to wanting to return to the Stalinist era," he said.

The Communist Party, unsurprisingly, holds more than a few exceptions.

"Compare the results: We can talk about the methods, some things are controversial, some are tragic, but look at the results. If you want to talk about victims, chalk up 15 million to the current regime — Russia's demographic loss," said Sergei Obukhov, a State Duma deputy with the Communist party.

Of equal concern is sympathy for Stalin within the country's security services.

Andrei Soldatov, an intelligence analyst at Agentura.ru, said Stalin's influence lives on in the structure of the Federal Security Service, a successor agency to the KGB, as well as the mentality of many who serve in it.

Russian counter-intelligence has a central office, as well as offices in almost every city, a sprawling network that allowed it, during the Stalinist era, to process large numbers of prisoners for repressions, he said.

"As a result, it's much bigger than MI-5, and this structure was in no way reformed and exists to this day," Soldatov said.

Stalin promoted a siege mentality that remains to this day, an idea that Russia is surrounded by enemies bent on weakening and destroying it, a mentality that's still convincing for many, Soldatov said.

But could the excesses of the Stalinist era happen again?

"I think it could easily be repeated because there hasn't been any kind of study of what happened. The Stalin era has been extremely mythologized, for opponents and supporters alike. There's very little objectivity out there, unfortunately" said Ponomaryov.

Fidelgoltz, the gulag survivor, said, "I want it to never happen again: Stalinism, those years when the very best dreams of humanity were eclipsed by wickedness."

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