The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Communists Mark Anniversary of Stalin's Death

By Alexander Winning

March 05, 2013



Communists honoring the late Soviet leader at his grave on Tuesday. **Alexander Winning**

Hundreds of Communist Party faithful laid flowers and wreaths alongside the Red Square grave of Josef Stalin on Tuesday in a ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of the Soviet dictator's death.

The ceremony, which was led by senior party figures, drew roughly 300 people, mainly pensioners from the capital and the surrounding region, who brandished Soviet-era flags as they paid tribute to the country's wartime leader.

Communist Party branches in Pskov, Murmansk, Volgograd, Dagestan and North Ossetia held similar wreath-laying ceremonies and rallies in honor of Stalin.

While Tuesday's gatherings reflect lasting admiration for Stalin's leadership among pensioners and Communist loyalists, opinion polls show that attitudes to Stalin remain

ambivalent in society more widely.

"Stalin raised Russia from its feet. He stood at the helm of the Soviet government for 30 years and raised it to the heights of its greatest victories," Communist boss Gennady Zyuganov said, after inspecting a wreath alongside the grave, which stands meters from the Kremlin's walls.

"[President Vladimir] Putin and [Prime Minister Dmitry] Medvedev should pay heed to his example. They peddle oil and gas, whereas Stalin mobilized the nation to great deeds," said Zyuganov, who has headed the Communist Party of the Russian Federation since its creation in 1993.

In comments to journalists, Zyuganov emphasized Stalin-era military achievements, citing the fear that Soviet tanks and missiles cast in enemy ranks, and praised the joint efforts of Stalin and Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin to boost literacy levels in the early decades of the Soviet Union.

"Foreigners who came to Russia in Stalin's days noted how much he achieved in the 20 years after his rise to power," Zyuganov continued. "In 20 years, our current leaders haven't managed to produce a new type of plane or car. They haven't even managed to produce the simplest of cell phones."

Describing today's Russia as "in disarray," Zyuganov said that only a new age of socialism could save the country from its current woes and that China's soaring economic growth is testament to the effectiveness of socialism as a political system.

Standing close by, Nikolai Kuzmin, secretary of the Communist Party branch in the Moscow region town of Pravdinsky, nodded in assent, telling a reporter that "my heart aches when I look at Russia today."

"Many falsehoods have been told about Stalin, who was the most exceptional commander-in-chief the Soviet army ever had," he said, proudly wearing his father's Stalin-era soldier's uniform.

Viktor Krichkov, a pensioner, said Stalin's greatest achievement was saving the "Russian ethnicity," which was in danger of being crushed under foreign influence.

Clutching a bunch of red carnations with both hands, Krichkov beat off claims that Stalin had terrorized Soviet citizens with the gulag prison camp system through which some 18 million people are said to have passed.

"If you compare the number of prisoners in Stalin's day and the number today, the difference is a matter of a few percent," he said.

Last month, the Federal Prison Service said there were almost 700,000 inmates in Russian jails, while a Harvard University report said that almost 2 million people were imprisoned in 1938 at the time of Stalin's Great Purge.

Positive assessments of the Stalin era — which resounded across the country on Tuesday — are shared by 36 percent of the population, 3 percent of whom still marvel at Stalin's achievements, state-run pollster VTsIOM said Tuesday.

But 25 percent of Russians harbor resentment toward Stalin, and 30 percent can't make up their minds, the VTsIOM survey found.

These figures have changed little in recent years, even though archivists are still uncovering evidence of Stalin's involvement in terrifying acts of political repression.

On Tuesday, historians from human rights group Memorial released a report titled "Stalin's Hit Lists," which documents how Stalin and members of his close circle sentenced tens of thousands of Soviet citizens to death by giving written approval to "hit lists" drawn up by the NKVD secret police.

The same day, Memorial published excerpts from interviews showing how those persecuted under Stalin reacted to the news of his death in March 1953.

"While people wept on Moscow streets, the whole camp celebrated. We flung our hats in the air and cried out loud, 'The mustachioed one has kicked the bucket,'" wrote Yevgeny Chernonog, sentenced to eight years in the gulag for criticizing the state-sanctioned 1949 epic movie "The Fall of Berlin."

"It was really something, a jubilant party. And the security guards didn't interfere, they just squinted and said, 'Look at the Fascists celebrating,'" Chernonog wrote.

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