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Religious Icon Depicting Stalin Elicits Outrage in Russia

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A religious icon depicting Soviet leader Josef Stalin has sparked controversy in Russia's Saratov region, Region64 news site reported this week.

The icon, which portrays Stalin standing beneath the Virgin Mary and flanked by Soviet field marshals, was presented as a gift to employees of the Engels Air Base by the Izborsk Club — a patriotic Russian group that has previously urged Russian defense reform to mitigate against a possible nuclear strike from the United States.

The icon was presented by Izborsk Club director Alexander Prokhanov during a ceremony Tuesday in which an Orthodox priest recited a prayer before blessing the icon and sprinkling it with water from the Volga River.

The local Orthodox Church archdiocese said the priest who led the service had been wrong to do so, describing the icon as a "brazen provocation" and based on a "perversion of religious and patriotic sentiments," the Ridus.ru news website reported.

"It does not constitute an icon in the proper sense of the word," Church authorities were

quoted as saying.

Prokhanov acknowledged what he referred to as the "mixed response" the icon has received, but defended its depiction of Stalin. He told Region64 that the Izborsk Club holds Russia's World War II victory sacred, as "the triumph of the saints over hell."

A recent poll by the Levada Center revealed that 39 percent of Russians hold a positive view of Stalin, with 45 percent agreeing that the sacrifices made by the Soviet people under Stalin's rule were justified in light of the country's rapid development.

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