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Attitude to Stalin Reveals Russia's Considerable Divide

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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It is ironic that the monument to the victims of Stalin's terror — which the country has been waiting for since the former Soviet dictator died on March 5, 1953 — will be erected in Moscow at the order of President Vladimir Putin, a man who once called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century."

Not only that, but Putin is reviving Stalinist symbols and practices one after another — the Stalin-era anthem, ultra-patriotic P.E. programs, basic military training in schools, pompous military parades on Red Square and the blue cap brims worn by modern security service officers. These are all meant to reaffirm "the greatness of the state" but not to advance the prosperity of the people — the country's greatest asset.

What's more, the human rights organization Memorial explains that for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country once again has political prisoners under Putin.

Just the same, the monument will soon go up in the very heart of the city. It will be located not

at Lubyanka, under the windows of the sinister NKVD-KGB building where the Solovetsky Stone now stands, but not so far from there either — at the corner of Prospekt Akademika Sakharova and the Garden Ring.

That links the name of Sakharov, the great physicist and dissident, with the names of millions of victims of Stalin's terror. In addition, the monument will be visible to the millions of people who drive on the Garden Ring every year. According to Memorial head Arseny Roginsky, the spot is not perfect, but isn't bad and is highly visible.

What's more, the first full-fledged Gulag Museum will open in Moscow on Oct. 30. The city of Moscow allocated a large building with a separate territory and funds for the reconstruction of a historic building. The museum will feature a wealth of exhibition materials and advanced multimedia. This is the first time that a full-fledged monument and museum will appear in Moscow — the former nerve center of Soviet state terror.

Furthermore, Putin directed the government to develop a concept for a policy to perpetuate the memory of the victims of political repression, a document signed into force by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Aug. 15. That is major news when considering that the era former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began in 1985 of opening archives and rehabilitating the millions of victims of repression practically ground to a halt in 1997.

The Human Rights Council (HRC) under the president and Memorial played an active role in developing that concept. The document states that the establishment of a state based on the rule of law and respect for human rights and freedoms is a prerequisite to the perpetuation of the memory of the victims of repression. It also states that it is unacceptable to deny the historical fact of mass repressions or to justify political terror.

The concept calls for memorializing the repressions by creating an entire infrastructure — monuments, museums, books listing the names of the victims, memorials at execution and burial sites, etc. — throughout the country by 2017. That year marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the 80th anniversary of Stalin's Great Terror that reached its horrible peak in 1937.

The monument, museum and policy concept are the product of many years of effort by Andrei Sakharov, Dmitry Likhachev, Yury Afanasyev, Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Sergei Kovalev, Arseny Roginsky, Memorial and the Association of Victims of Illegal Political Repression. The Human Rights Council headed by Mikhail Fedotov as well as the HRC Standing Committee for Historical Memory headed by Sergei Karaganov played a major role in recent years and accomplished a great deal of practical work.

An impressive 336 different entries were submitted for the open competition to design the Moscow monument. Of those, a distinguished jury of historians, public figures and specialists selected 10 top designs and then narrowed it down to three finalists. The winner will be announced in the coming days.

Most importantly, the monument's construction is financed by contributions from individual Russians. The task before the designers and jury is to create a world-class memorial that fully expresses the tragedy people experienced and that will communicate at an emotional level with future generations.

Of course, finally erecting a monument in the capital to the victims of mass state terror does not mean that Russia has overcome its tradition of state violence and legal abuses or an end to people's feelings of helplessness and fear that the state itself has cultivated. Russia is still a very long way from accomplishing that. But the monument and state museum will be of great educational and cautionary value. That is why the long-awaited monument is both important and necessary.

Paradoxically, a second and parallel process has started of putting up monuments to the chief executioner himself — Josef Stalin. They have been going up all over Russia, most recently in Penza, Lipetsk and Vladimir, bringing the total number of Stalin monuments to more than 40.

Such actions were impossible under former Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev and Gorbachev, as well as former President Boris Yeltsin. They were all consistent and tough anti-Stalinists. Glorifying Stalin only became possible under Vladimir Putin.

Of course, it is absurd to erect monuments to the victims of repression while simultaneously raising monuments to the very person responsible for their death. That is not a sign of reconciliation and tolerance, but an open manifestation of deeply conflicting values. It reflects the deep split in modern Russian society, the mixing of absolutely incompatible things and a fundamental failure to distinguish between good and evil.

It means that it remains impossible to reach a public consensus on such fundamental principles as the inalienable rights of the individual and the proper relationship between ordinary citizens and those in power. Unfortunately, the simultaneous erection of monuments to a bloody executioner and his defenseless victims indicates that the civil war that began in Russia in 1917 still continues 100 years later.

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