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Stalin’s Record Approval Rating Is a Sign of Growing Discontent

The country is yearning for a "hero" of the past to correct the ills of society.

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Mikhail Tereschenko / Moskva News Agency

Stalin played a positive role in Russia’s history; he was a respected historical figure, a majority of Russians polled by the independent polling organization Levada Center said earlier this week. Both approval of Stalin’s historical role (70 percent thought it was positive) and respect for him (51 percent expressed “respect,” “admiration,” or “sympathy” for the Soviet dictator) were the strongest since the early 2000s.

Levada sociologists say large parts of the Russian population that previously expressed no opinion about the former Soviet leader, especially young people who were born or grew up after the Soviet Union ended, now often support favorable characterizations of Stalin.

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Stalin, who headed the Communist Party of the USSR between 1922 and 1953, is viewed more positively than the last Russian czar, Nicholas II; the founder of the Soviet state, Vladimir Lenin; the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev; or Boris Yeltsin, who was post-Soviet Russia's first president. The figure who is viewed almost as favorably as Stalin is Leonid Brezhnev, who led the Soviet Union in its heyday, between 1964 and 1982.

The survey results caused a stir in Russia's independent public sphere, which reacted in print media, on some radio stations, online, and on social media. Many commentators saw them as frightening, while others said they did not reflect Russian society's true attitudes.

The argument quickly turned into a heated debate over the relevance of public opinion polls in a society heavily influenced by propaganda and the way polling organizations pose their "Stalin questions."

"Do you think the human casualties that Soviet people took during the Stalin era were justified by the lofty goals and results that were achieved at the shortest possible time?" This wording is a showcase example of a bias that is built into the question itself, the St. Petersburg political scientist Vladimir Gelman, who teaches at the University of Helsinki, wrote on Facebook. In answering this question, 46 percent of those polled said yes, 45 percent said no.

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A similar question posed differently receives different answers. "Some think that mass political repressions during the USSR time can be justified, some think no justification is possible. What point of view would you agree with?" In answering this question, posed by the Foundation of Public Opinion (FOM), only 17 percent of respondents in 2014 said the repression could be justified; 53 percent said no justification was possible.

Ironically, the FOM, which often works on government-funded projects, is not considered independent, whereas the Levada Center was designated a "foreign agent" by the Justice Ministry and is respected as a research center fully independent of the Kremlin's interests.

Yuri Levada's 1980s sociological project studying the "Soviet simple man" ("prostoi sovyetsky chelovek," or just "chelovek sovyetsky") was conducted in the late 1980s. The expression "*Homo Sovieticus*" was popularized by the Russian émigré writer Alexander Zinoviev in a book of the same name published in 1982 and is often still brought up as an explanation for Russian society's attitudes today.

"Sovyetsky chelovek has somewhat changed. He's been fed, he's changed his clothes, he's bought a car and owns a home. But he still feels insecure and vulnerable. And he's just as aggressive toward his neighbor," Lev Gudkov, the director of the Levada Center, wrote in The Moscow Times recently.

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Ever since the late 1980s the sociologists in the ambit of Yuri Levada (1930–2006), the

founder of the polling group, have operated under a theory of a "*Homo Sovieticus*," a type of conformist Soviet citizen longing for a strongman, Gelman wrote. Few social scientists outside the Levada Center subscribe to the notion of an individual personality type dominating a society.

The current use of the "Soviet man" category is more politically and ideologically driven than based on the state of the art in social psychology, the political scientist Gulnaz Sharafutdinova concludes in her recent scholarly article on the subject.

And yet the 70 percent who say Stalin played a positive role in Russia's history cannot be explained away by scholarly bias. Levada's results do sound true, if eye-opening to some.

"Time passes, the events recede further and further," the political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann told BBC Russia. "The people see him as a kind of King Arthur."

State propaganda matters too, Schulmann said: "Stalin is being touted as the victor in the war and a wise leader."

The Stalin of the mass culture supported by Russia's state-run media is not a historical figure. "The Stalin meme is not the real man, but what has remained in folk memory. He's seen as a symbol of iron discipline and the last word in the battle against greedy bureaucrats, who defy any authority," Schulmann concluded.

Stalin's growing "approval rating" is thus a sign of public discontent rather than support for the ruling bureaucracy.

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Indirectly, this interpretation is confirmed by the current mood among Russian society. Support for an imaginary Stalin is growing, while support for the current ruler, Vladimir Putin, is declining. In January, public trust in Putin fell to 33.4 percent, the lowest on record, according to the state-owned Russian Public Opinion Research Center. That reflects a fall of more than 30 percentage points from the high Putin enjoyed in 2015, after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Putin's approval rating as published by the Levada Center, which normally yields higher percentages, has also shown a significant decline: 64 percent of those polled approved of Putin in March of this year as opposed to 85 percent in March 2015.

Apparently, the Kremlin's long-standing policies aimed at stopping what it calls the "demonization" of Stalin have finally produced results. Just as Putin wanted, the Russians see Stalin as "a complex figure." They do not deny the repressions took place, but neither do they demonize Stalin.

The dictator has thus become normalized as a historical figure responsible for all good things associated with the Soviet period in Russia's history: the victorious war, the rockets, the science, the fear and respect from enemies and allies.

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One unintended consequence, though, is that Stalin, cleared of his crimes, has become an incorruptible leader, a fairy-tale avenger expected to punish the thieving bureaucrats of today's Russia, the very bureaucrats who have been promoting the former Soviet dictator.

It is not a dark *Homo Sovieticus* hidden in every Russian that is at play here. Rather, it is a naïve belief in a superhero from a fabled past who can come and set things straight — a poor choice of hero in this case but almost inevitable under the circumstances. And this yearning for a superhero to correct the ills of society seems part and parcel of human nature.

It is what draws people to stories about Superman, Batman, and Iron Man. Russians endowing Stalin with the mantle of a corrective superhero, however, risk being trapped in their fairy tale of choice.

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