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Fragmented memory

Stalin and Stalinism in present-day Russia

As contemporary witnesses disappear, collective memory in Russia is altering, writes the director of Memorial. The hardships of war and the Stalinist terror are being forgotten and Stalin is being remembered as the victor over the essence of evil.

The memory of Stalinism in contemporary Russia raises problems which are painful and sensitive. There is a vast amount of pro-Stalinist literature on the bookshelves: fiction, journalism and pseudo-history. In sociological surveys, Stalin invariably features among the first three "most prominent figures of all times". In the new school history textbooks, Stalinist policy is interpreted in a spirit of justification.

There are also hundreds of crucial volumes of documents, scholarly articles and monographs on Stalinism. The achievements of these historians and archivists is unquestionable. But if they do have any influence on the mass consciousness, it is too weak. The means of disseminating the information have not been there, and nor in recent years has the political will. However, the deepest problem lies in the current state of our national historical memory of Stalinism.

I should explain what I mean here by historical memory, and Stalinism. Historical memory is the retrospective aspect of collective consciousness. It informs our collective identity through our selection of the past we find significant. The past, real or imaginary, is the material with which it works: it sorts through the facts and systemizes them, selecting those which it is prepared to present as belonging to the genealogy of its identity. Stalinism is a system of state rule, the totality of specific political practices of the Stalinist leadership. Throughout the duration of this system, a number of characteristic features were preserved. But its generic feature (which arose from the very beginning of Bolshevik rule and did not disappear with Stalin's death) is terror as a universal instrument for solving any political and social tasks. It was state violence and terror that made possible the centralization of rule, the severing of regional ties, high vertical mobility; the harsh introduction of an ideology which could be easily modified, a large army of subjects of slave labor, and many other things.

Thus, the memory of Stalinism is primarily the memory of state terror as the defining feature of the age. It is also what links it in so many respects with today.

Victims, not crimes

Is that really what the memory of Stalinism means in today's Russia? I'd like to say a few words about the key features of this memory today. Firstly, the memory of Stalinism in Russia is almost always the memory of victims. Victims, not crimes. As the memory of crimes it does not register, as there is no consensus on this.

To a great extent this is because popular consciousness has nothing to hold onto from a legal point of view. The state has produced no legal document which recognizes state terror as a crime. The two lines in the preamble to the 1991 law on the rehabilitation of victims is clearly insufficient. There are no legal decisions that inspire any confidence — and there have not been any trials against participants of the Stalinist terror in the new Russia, not a single one.

There are other reasons too.

We killed our own people

When popular consciousness has to come to terms with historical tragedies, it does so by assigning roles of Good and Evil. People identify themselves with one of the roles. It is easier to identify oneself with Good, i.e. with an innocent victim, or better still with a heroic battle against Evil. Incidentally, this is why our Eastern European neighbors, from Ukraine to Poland and the Baltic States have no serious problems with coming to terms with the Soviet period of history, while in Russia, people identify themselves with victims or fighters, or with both at the same time. Whether or not this has anything to do with history is quite another matter — we're talking about memory, not knowledge.

It is even possible to identify oneself with Evil, as the Germans did (not without help from the outside), in order to distance oneself from this evil: "Yes, unfortunately we did that, but we're not like that anymore and we'll never be like that again".

But what can we do, living in Russia?

In the Soviet terror, it is very difficult to distinguish the executioners from the victims. For example, secretaries of regional committee in August 1937 all wrote death sentences by the bundle, but by November 1938 half of them had already been shot themselves.

In national, and particularly regional memory, the "executioners" — for example, the regional committee secretaries of 1937 — are not unambiguously evil: yes, they signed execution warrants, but they also organized the construction of kindergartens and hospitals, and went to workers' cafeterias personally to test the food, while their subsequent fate is worthy of sympathy.

And one more thing: unlike the Nazis, who mainly killed "foreigners": Poles, Russians, and German Jews (who were not quite their "own" people), we mainly killed our own people, and our consciousness refuses to accept this fact.

In remembering the terror, we are incapable of assigning the main roles, incapable of putting the pronouns "we" and "they" in their places. This inability to assign evil is the main thing that prevents us from being able to embrace the memory of the terror properly. This makes it far more traumatic. It is one of the main reasons why we push it to the edge of our historical

memory.

The search for a Great Russia

At a certain level, that of personal recollections, the terror is also a passing memory. There are still witnesses, but they are the last of their kind, and they are dying, taking with them the personal memories and experiences.

This leads on to my next point: memory as recollection is succeeded by memory as a selection of collective images of the past. These are no longer formed by personal, and not even family memories, but by various socio-cultural means. One significant element in determining this is the politics of history, ie the attempts of the political elite to form an image of the past that suits it.

Since the 1990s those in political power have been looking to the past to justify their own legitimacy. But if the government craved legitimacy after the collapse of the USSR, people craved identity. And both the government and the population looked for a way to make up for these in the image of a Great Russia, of which present-day Russia is the successor. The images of the "bright past", which the government proposed in the 1990s — Stolypin, Peter the Great and so on — were not accepted by the population: they are too remote, not closely enough related to the present day. Gradually and insidiously, the concept of Great Russia came to mean the Soviet period as well, particularly the Stalinist era.

The post-Yeltsin leadership saw that people were ready for another reconstruction of the past, and made full use of it. I do not mean to say that the government of the first decade of the 21st century intended to rehabilitate Stalin. It just wants to offer its fellow citizens the notion of a great country, one which is timelessly great, one which overcomes all ordeals with honor. The image of a happy and glorious past was needed to consolidate the population, to restore the continuity of the authority of state power, to strengthen its own "vertical" etc. But whatever the intention, against the background of the newly arisen panorama of a great power, which as ever is "surrounded by a ring of enemies", the whiskered profile of the great leader showed through. This result was inevitable and predictable.

The two images of the Stalinist era were in harsh contradiction. There was that of Stalinism, of a criminal regime responsible for decades of state terror. And there was that of an era of glorious victories and great achievements. Above all, of course, there was the image of the main victory — victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Conflicting memories of the Great Patriotic War

The memory of Stalinism and the memory of the war. The memory of the war became the foundation on which national self-identification was re-organized. A great deal has been written on this topic. I would only note one thing: what is currently called the memory of the war does not quite correspond to its name. The memory of the hardships of the war, of everyday life, of 1941, of imprisonment, evacuation, and the victories of war — this memory was extremely anti-Stalinist in the Khrushchev era. It was organically intertwined with the memory of the terror. Today the memory of the war has been replaced by the memory of Victory. This change began in the mid-1960s. At the end of the 1960s, the memory of the terror was banned — for a whole 20 years! By

the time this changed, there were virtually no soldiers left, and there was no one left to correct the collective stereotype with their personal recollections.

The memory of victory without the memory of the price of victory cannot, of course, be anti-Stalinist. So it does not fit in well with the memory of the terror. To simplify drastically, this conflict of memories goes like this: if state terror was a crime, then who was the criminal? The state? Stalin as the head of state? But we won the war against Absolute Evil, and so we were not the subjects of a criminal regime, but a great country, the embodiment of everything good in the world. It was under the rule of Stalin that we overcame Hitler. Victory means the Stalinist era, and the terror means the Stalinist era. It is impossible to reconcile these two images of the past, except by rejecting one of them, or at least making serious corrections to it.

And this is what happened — the memory of the terror receded. It has not disappeared completely, but it has been pushed to the periphery of people's consciousness.

Monuments

Under the circumstances, it is surprising that the memory of the terror has survived at all, that it has not become a Great National Taboo, but that it is still alive and evolving. Let us briefly review the means whereby we have managed to hold onto this memory.

The first and most obvious sign of the memory of historical events is the monuments. Contrary to popular opinion, there are a lot of monuments and signs in commemoration of the Stalinist terror in Russia — over 800. They were not erected by central government, but through the efforts of the community and local administration. Federal power has played almost no part in bringing this about. It has not been seen as a priority by the state. There has probably also been a certain unwillingness on their part further to legitimize this painful subject.

All of these sculptures, chapels, crosses and memorial stones immortalize the memory of victims. But there is no image of the crime, or the criminals associated with this memory. There are victims — either of a natural disaster, or of some other catastrophe, the sources and meaning of which remains incomprehensible to the popular consciousness.

In cities, most of these monuments and signs are not in central squares, but in remote areas, where the remains of the victims are buried. At the same time, many central streets are still named after the people who were directly or indirectly involved in the terror. The combination of present-day urban toponymics inherited from the Soviet era, while the memory of the victims is relegated to the outskirts — this is a clear image of the state of historical memory on Stalinism in Russia.

Books of memory

Books of memory are one reference point about the memory of Stalinism. These books, published in the majority of Russian regions, form a library of almost 300 volumes. They contain a total of over one and a half million names of people who were executed, sentenced to imprisonment in camps, or deported. This is a serious achievement, especially if we recall the difficulties in accessing many of our archives which contain materials about the terror.

However, these books do almost nothing for the formation of national memory. Firstly, they are regional books, and the contents of each one individually do not form the image of a national catastrophe, but rather a picture of a "local" disaster. The regional compartmentalization is matched by methodological discrepancies: each book of memory has its own sources, its own principles of selection, its own size and format for presentation of biographical information. This is because there is no common state program for publishing books of memory. The federal government also balks from its duty here.

Secondly, these memories are hardly a public matter: only a small number of copies are printed, and they are not even always received by regional libraries.

Memorial has posted a database on the Internet which unites the data base of the books of memory, supplemented by data from the Russian Interior Ministry, and also from Memorial itself. Here there are over 2,700,000 names. In comparison with the scale of the Soviet terror, this is a very small figure, and if work continues at this rate it will take several decades to compile a complete list if work.

Museums of terror

Museums. Here things are also not as bad as one might expect. True, Russia still no national Museum of state terror which could play an important role in crystalising the image of the terror in popular consciousness. There are fewer than ten local museums dedicated to the subject of the terror. But still, according to our information, the topic features occasionally in the exhibitions, and mainly in the archives, of around 300 museums across the country (mainly regional and city museums of local studies).

However, the common problems of memory of the terror play their part here too. In the exhibitions, the theme of the camps and labor settlements are usually embedded in displays about the industrialization of the region. The repressions themselves — arrests, sentences, shootings — are generally consigned to biographical stands and window displays. On the whole, the terror is represented in a very fragmented way, and only included in the history of the country in a provisional way.

Memorial places

Memorial places connected with the terror. Today these are mainly burial sites: mass graves of people shot during the Great Terror, and large camp cemeteries. But the secret surrounding the shooting was so great, and so few sources have been found on this topic, that today we only know of around 100 burial sites of people shot in 1937–1938 — less than a third of the total, according to our calculations. For example, despite much searching, it has not been possible to find even the graves of the victims of the famous "Kashketin shootings" near the Brick Factory by Vorkuta. As for camp cemeteries, we only know a few dozen of the several thousand that once existed.

In any case, the cemeteries are again only a memory of the victims.

Buildings connected with the terror in cities do not become places of memory — regional offices and buildings of the OGPU/NKVD, prison buildings and camp offices. Industrial objects built by political prisoners also do not become places of memory — canals, railways, mines, factories, combines and houses.

It would be very easy to turn them into "places of memory" — simply by hanging a memorial plaque by the entrance to the factory, or at a railway station.

Culture

Another means of furnishing popular consciousness with historical concepts and images is mass culture, primarily television. Television programs about the Stalinist era are quite numerous and diverse: glamorous pro-Stalinist kitsch such as the TV series "Stalin-life" compete with talented and conscientious screen adaptations of works by Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn. Viewers can choose their own preferred vehicles for reading the era. It would appear, alas, that the number of viewers who choose "Stalin-life" is growing, while the number who choose Shalamov is shrinking. This is inevitable. Those whose world outlook is formed by anti-Western rhetoric and endless rants by TV political analysts about this great country that is surrounded by enemies on all sides hardly need to be told which image of the past best accords with this outlook. And no amount of Shalamovs or Solzhenitsyns are going to change their minds.

School history curriculum

Finally, the most important institution for controlling collective ideas of the past is the school history curriculum. Here (and also to a significant degree in journalism and documentary television programs), the state's policy on history, unlike in many areas discussed above, is pro-active. This has the effect of making one appreciate that neglecting historical memory is not as dangerous as using history as a political tool.

In the new history textbooks, Stalinism is presented as an institutional phenomenon, even an achievement. But the terror is portrayed as a historically determined and unavoidable tool for solving state tasks. This concept does not rule out sympathy for the victims of history. But it makes it absolutely impossible to consider the criminal nature of the terror, and the perpetrator of this crime.

The intention is not to idealise Stalin. This is the natural side-effect of resolving a completely different task — that of confirming the idea of the indubitable correctness of state power. The government is higher than any moral or legal assessments. It is above the law, as it is guided by state interests that are higher than the interests of the person and society, higher than morality and law. The state is always right — at least as long as it can deal with its enemies. This idea runs through the new textbooks from beginning to end, and not only where repressions are discussed.

Conclusion: our historical memory is divided, fragmentary, passing away. It has been pushed to the periphery of popular consciousness. Those who hold onto the memory of Stalinism in the sense that we use these words are very much in the minority today. Whether or not this memory can become embedded nationwide; what information and what values need to be assimilated by popular consciousness, what needs to be done here — this is the topic for another discussion. Clearly, society and the state need to work together on this. Clearly, historians have a special role in this process. They bear a special responsibility.

*This paper was read at a conference on the History of Stalinism in Moscow on
5 December 2008*

Published 2009-03-02
Original in Russian
Contribution by openDemocracy
First published in *openDemocracy* (English version)
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