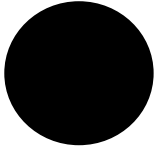


## REFLECTIONS

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### “Rehabilitating” Stalin

*Nina Khrushcheva*

More than 200 books have been published recently in Russia examining the Stalin era. Yet “examining” may be the wrong word, for most of these books treat Joseph Stalin with kid gloves and are filled with unabashed nostalgia for a great but vanished past, for a time when the Soviet Union was feared, admired, even respected. Not content with extolling Stalin, some apologists posthumously slander Nikita Khrushchev’s son, Leonid, killed in the Second World War and now claimed to have turned Nazi.

In one such a book, *Stalin: The Second Murder*, Yelena Prudnikova, a St. Petersburg journalist, insists: “If it weren’t for the Khrushchev execution [the denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress] we wouldn’t have come to such a sorry state, when every foreigner could teach us life. Since then we have lived increasingly useless and dirtier lives,” because “the second, true murder of Stalin was also a murder of his time, his generation, the murder of his people.” As a result, Prudnikova continues, “the country, deprived of high ideals in just a few decades has rotted to the ground,” bringing all the “evils” of the new post-Soviet freedoms when “homosexuality has become rampant and Tampax commercials are allowed on television.”<sup>1</sup>

Prudnikova’s answer to that typically Russian question—Who is to blame?—is shared by many. She is not alone in seeing Nikita Khrushchev as a “pygmy” who “traitorously” exposed Stalin’s politics in his “Cult of Personality and Its Consequences” speech of 1956. But it’s not just

Khrushchev who raises the ire of Prudnikova and other writers. Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin are also guilty because it was their policies of *glasnost*, democratization, and economic liberalization that completed the destruction of the Soviet Union. While Khrushchev is certainly the main villain, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are also accused of having destroyed the Russian people’s “faith” in Russia as *the* great nation ruled by monumental (if oppressive) leaders.

In the late 1980s, when communism was collapsing and *glasnost* was taking hold, many Russians ravenously sought out the facts of their history. What had caused the famines of the 1930s, and were they planned? How many people died in the purges? What did Khrushchev actually say about Stalin in his secret speech?

At the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, held in February 1956, Khrushchev had denounced Stalin’s oppressive policies, thus starting the period of Soviet history usually referred to as *otpepel*, or “the thaw.” According to Khrushchev, Stalin’s main crime was the arbitrary liquidation of thousands of party members, intellectuals, and military leaders, which had contributed to the initial Soviet defeats in the Second World War. Khrushchev criticized what he called Stalin’s “pernicious cult of personality” and the former dictator’s use of terror as an instrument of policy. As a result of the “de-Stalinization” campaign launched by the speech, some prisoners in the notorious Gulag were released; others were posthumously rehabilitated. Even so, the de-Stalin-

ization process carried out during “the thaw” was a timid affair: many groups of political prisoners—including at least 6 million kulaks (members of the peasant middle class) and former Soviet leaders such as Nikolai Bukharin, Leon Trotsky, and their supporters—were unacknowledged until the *glasnost* era.<sup>2</sup>

However, once the truth began to be uncovered, the horrors and the scope of the terror were too overwhelming to take in. Moreover, after the freedoms of perestroika and the anarchy of the early post-Soviet years, it became apparent that many, if not most, Russians were uncomfortable living without control from above. Yes, the old system may have been murderous, but how great were our victories! The old rulers had given us a sense of orderly life and protected us from the rigors of freedom. So what if Stalin ruled by fear? That was just a fear for one’s life, we now say. What really frightened us was that we would have no one but ourselves to blame if democracy turned into disarray and capitalism into corruption.

Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin’s comrade-in-arms and international affairs guru, who lost his government posts at the start of the anti-Stalinist campaign in the mid-1950s, later prophetically predicted: “The time will come when Stalin’s name will be rehabilitated. It will happen by public demand. His name will rise and take its glorious place in history.”<sup>3</sup> Molotov was right: in addition to a recent spate of proposals to erect monuments to the “great leader” in several Russian towns, in April the Communist Party of the Russian Federation under the leadership of Gennady Zyuganov voted to invalidate the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, to send former Gulag prisoners back where they belong (never mind that most of them are now dead), to cancel out or erase Khrushchev, and to rehabilitate Stalin. (There was a movement to rehabilitate Stalin’s reputation once before, in 1969, to commemorate what would have been the former leader’s ninetieth birthday. But

Leonid Brezhnev, responding to a petition in which members of the intelligentsia argued that glorifying a leader who had imprisoned and murdered millions of his country’s citizens would be a disgrace to the nation, put a stop to the effort.)

The good news is that, despite the nostalgia for the years of Soviet glory, immortalizing the memory of “the leader of all peoples” is opposed by 53 percent of Russians, with only 36 percent in favor. But “only” 36 percent is an enormous number in a country where at least 20 million died in Stalin’s purges.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the bad news is that it’s not just a few leftover Communist ideologues who insist that Stalin was a great leader. According to recent polls, he is second only to the much-admired Vladimir Putin in the public’s estimation. Indeed, President Putin is often praised for dealing firmly with the “dishonest” oligarchs and the “irresponsible” press. Reviving an old slogan from the Stalin era—“Lock ’em up, then we’ll have order”—many Russians insist that Putin’s clampdowns on the oligarchs and the press, and his reining in of local authorities were necessary steps. They agree with Putin that it was important for the Kremlin to regain control of politics and the economy. Only by this means could Russia’s sovereignty be protected and its security guaranteed; only by this means could Russia regain its international prestige. We are, in fact, eager to sing Putin’s praises—a hit pop song goes, “I want one like Putin”—and to make chocolate statues of this oh so pleasantly sweet modern autocrat. While Stalin cautiously built himself an official image that concealed from the *demos* that he was squat and pockmarked, Vladimir Putin has no need to hide his flaws because the fear of freedom makes many Russians even more eager adherents to the cult of personality.

Some observers of the Russian scene argue (not entirely incorrectly) that Russia’s current infatuation with Stalinism (and its approval of Putinism) is a reflection of post-

socialist despair—moral, material, physical. The Russian people (and their leaders), they say, have a deep need to feel better about themselves and their country. In his 2005 State of the Nation address, President Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union “a real drama” for the Russian people and “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” for the world. Indeed, for many Russians, the demise of the Soviet political system and the breakup of the Soviet empire resulted in a truncated historical narrative, which carried with it the loss of national identity.

The criticism and condemnation of the Soviet past during the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras bred resentment among staunch Communist ideologues. But it was during the Yeltsin years that the negation of the Soviet past began to have an impact on the Russian public at large. Russia’s leaders refused to grant that anything of value had been achieved during the Soviet era. Thus, as Russia was taking its first wobbling steps toward capitalism in the 1990s, one heard the same bitter complaint over and over: “We should have been defeated by the Nazis. Look at how much better off Germany is than we, the victors, are. We too could have prospered.”

In his last work, *Culture and Explosion*, the late Russian cultural historian Yuri Lotman finds an explanation for Russia’s tendency to swing from one extreme to the other in a centuries-long split between

Slavophiles (nationalists) and Westernizers (proponents of individual responsibility). It is this divided self that has prevented Russia from moving into the future, either by refusing to acknowledge or by trying to perpetuate the past. Russian culture, unlike

that of the West, Lotman suggests, embodies an underlying binary logic of opposition: Russians think of their social reality in terms of absolutes with no neutral ground or possibility of compromise.<sup>5</sup>

By dismissing communism, we (unintentionally) made worthless the beliefs of the millions of Soviet citizens who fought in the Second World War. It is not a question of whether they were right to hold the beliefs they did; but by

“eliminating” their past we negated their sacrifice. Meanwhile, for many Russians the declaration of Russia’s independence in 1990 represented the low point in the country’s history. “Independence” was followed by years of near-anarchy, when over 50 percent of Russia’s population, including teachers, scientists, doctors, and the military, saw their quality of life fall, with many more millions of Russians finding themselves outside of the borders of the Russian Federation. What could reenergize the Russian sense of achievement? One way would be to celebrate the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, which turned the Soviet Union into a world power, and which the public, rightly or wrongly, associates with Stalin’s name.



Leonid Khrushchev, c.1940

In preparing to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of victory over fascism this past May 9, the Kremlin seized every opportunity to reaffirm Russia's greatness by broadcasting special television programs and Soviet patriotic movies, by honoring former war heroes (ironic, given that veterans recently lost their social benefits), by ordering the display of the red Soviet flag, with its hammer and sickle, throughout Russia. Stalin's name was mentioned countless times during these celebrations, providing, at least temporarily, an answer to another typical Russian question—What is to be done? The answer is that we are to go “back to Stalin,” to the great statehood.

Lotman identifies this desire for a “firm hand” as a paradox of tyranny: weak states become “strong” by establishing a controlling government and depriving people of the freedom to make their own decisions.<sup>6</sup> Such states are generally impotent when it comes to solving the fundamental problems of modern society but effective in weakening alternative approaches to governance.

This brings to the fore another paradox: while tolerating some of the worst despots in the world's history, Russians have historically shown an almost apocalyptic fear of change, especially change in leadership. The end of a certain order is considered by many as the end of order altogether, as this shift tends to bring unexpected and fearful results. Reformers especially evoke this kind of fear: they breed change and unpredictability. “Better a devil we know,” Russians say.

Thus, in Russia, more than in other cultures, power is subject to inertia, which creates a favorable environment for despotism. The leader embodies power and is supported by the population regardless of the policies he implements. This, I believe, is at the heart of Russians' devotion to Stalinism and of their distrust of democracy, which many of my Russian contemporaries now call “*dermocratiya*” (shitocracy).

They faithfully cite Vyacheslav Molotov: “With Stalin we all followed the directions of his strong hand. When the hand got weaker, each started to sing one's own song.” In interviews given during the 1970s and 1980s, Molotov blamed the “reformers,” and mostly Khrushchev, for opening up the system, for “letting out a beast that brings horrible harm to our society. It's called democracy, humanitarianism, but it's simply a bourgeois influence.” For Molotov and others like him, nothing good could have come out of “bourgeois” Khrushchev, who sold out to the West by visiting America in 1959, bringing back the washing machine, and allowing for domestic production of the *uber* bourgeois Pepsi-Cola. In fact, Khrushchev's “crimes” went much further. “What kind of a political leader is it,” Molotov asked, “whose son [Leonid Khrushchev] was some sort of traitor?”<sup>7</sup>

#### *The “Sins” of the Sons*

Since the early 1970s, confusing accounts have surfaced in the yellow press concerning Khrushchev's older son. Until a few years ago, these diatribes were mostly dismissed as KGB propaganda. But at the time when the country is remembering its sacrifices and celebrating its victory in the Great Patriotic War as an antidote to its feelings of insecurity, Senior Lieutenant Leonid Khrushchev, together with his father, has become a favorite scapegoat of contemporary patriots.

For example, Marshal of the Soviet Union Dimitry Yasov starts his bestselling memoirs, *Hardship of Fate*, by exposing “the unattractive truth” about Khrushchev's son. “It is well known that Leonid actively worked with the [Nazis].”<sup>8</sup> Yasov doesn't say how this is known, but the implication is clear: “Like father like son.” But consider the source: Yasov was the Soviet minister of defense who led the coup against Gorbachev's own “bourgeois influence” in August 1991. A political criminal only a decade ago, today Yasov has become a

hero—last fall, President Putin awarded him the prestigious Order of Merit.

For those who would rehabilitate Stalin, Leonid's "betrayal" and Khrushchev's "murder" of the Generalissimo form the basis of a dark tale. According to Molotov, Khrushchev "was angry at Stalin because his son was executed by the Soviet authorities during the Great Patriotic War. Nothing would have stopped him from dirtying Stalin's name."<sup>9</sup>

The origins of this story go back not to the 1940s, but to 1969, around the time of the abandoned celebrations to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of Stalin's birth.<sup>10</sup> At the time, Khrushchev's name was rarely mentioned by officials—the Brezhnev bureaucracy didn't want to remind the public that a less rigid, more open Soviet system "with a human face" was indeed possible—but a whispering campaign about Leonid's and Nikita's betrayal of socialism was begun by the KGB and disseminated by Communist officials. It was the practice at the time for ranking members of the Communist Party to travel around the country to explain important Politburo policies to the public. Mixed into these talks on foreign affairs, the Cold War, the Soviet Union's status in the world, and Communist ideology were murky hints about the immoral Leonid and his father's revenge on Stalin.

The story goes as follows: Leonid became a military pilot through his father's political influence. (During the war, Lt. Gen. Nikita Khrushchev served as a political commissar at various military fronts.) The 26-year-old Leonid, up to no good, allowed himself to be captured by the Germans and began serving in the Nazi SS, overseeing other prisoners. Stalin was enraged by Leonid's traitorous behavior (all the more so because his own eldest son, Yakov, had been captured by the Nazis in 1941), and he ordered that the young Khrushchev be "stolen" from captivity (this having been accomplished either by Soviet

military intelligence or by partisans, depending upon the source). Stalin then arranged for a military tribunal to sentence Leonid to death (according to a few sources, it was the Politburo that had the final word). Nikita begged for his son's life, but Stalin was unforgiving: "What should I say to the other fathers whose sons your Leonid betrayed?" This was 1943. Thirteen years later, Nikita finally got his revenge. Before delivering his anti-Stalin "secret speech," he is said to have confided to some of his comrades: "Now I can avenge my son, much like Vladimir Lenin punished Tsar Nicholas for his brother Alexander."<sup>11</sup> (Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's brother, was executed in 1887 for preparing an assassination attempt on Nicholas's father, Tsar Alexander III.)

In most of the published accounts of Leonid's treachery and his father's revenge, the word "allegedly" never appears, despite the fact that no documentary evidence is cited. But, we are told, there is an obvious reason for this lack of evidence: after Stalin's death Khrushchev simply destroyed all the documents showing his son's guilt. What is inconvenient for the authors of these accounts, mostly former KGB officials and military officers, is that, unable to imagine a free and democratic Russia, they didn't think of destroying the documents that prove Leonid's innocence. Documents in the military, state, and family archives confirm that the young Khrushchev was a loyal soldier, not a traitor.<sup>12</sup> There is even a letter to the family from the Office of the General Procurator of the Russian Federation, dated May 2004, verifying that Leonid was never a Nazi hostage. Nor was Leonid executed by Stalin. He died in 1943 in an air battle (also confirmed by the Procuracy) over central Russia. However, the fact that his remains were never found (as often happened during the war), allowed the myth of his betrayal, Stalin's condemnation, and Khrushchev's revenge to take hold.

There are other holes in this KGB mythology.

If Leonid had truly been up to no good, wouldn't he have taken advantage of his father's rank to find a safe position in the Soviet equivalent of the National Guard, as that other privileged child, George W. Bush, did during a different war? And if Leonid, a son of an important Politburo member responsible for Soviet political ideology during wartime, had become a willing hostage of the Third Reich, why didn't the Nazis use this information to promote their cause and to encourage others to surrender? When Yakov Stalin was captured, his father was offered a trade: the return of his son for the release of a German general. Unfortunately for Yakov (and for millions of other captured Russians), Stalin believed all hostages were betrayers and spies, and he rejected the offer. In 1943, Yakov was shot while trying to escape from the Nazi camp at Sachsenhausen. Even despite Yakov's refusal to cooperate, Nazi propagandists made use of his name in flyers and radio broadcasts to the Soviet Union. No one ever saw flyers with Leonid's name on them. But since the whole construction of the myth of Leonid Khrushchev's treachery is based on the familiar binary opposition formula—"great Stalin, pygmy Khrushchev"—the captivity story must assert the same simple logic: Yakov Stalin was a hostage and behaved like a true hero, so in the accounts of the fantasists Leonid, too, would be a hostage, but unlike Stalin's son, he would be a traitor.

However, neither the head of the partisans, Panteleimon Ponomarenko, nor the head of military intelligence, Pavel Sudoplatov, who allegedly were responsible for the operation to recapture Leonid, ever mentioned, either in private or in print, participating in such an operation. In fact, General Sudoplatov in his recent book, *Special Operations*, specifically denies the story about Leonid: "Nothing of the sort ever took place."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, if Stalin had given an order to punish Leonid, why would the military (of which Stalin was commander in

chief) have awarded the young Khrushchev the Order of the Great Patriotic War for his service to the country, his second war medal? The documents confirming the awarding of this medal are available in both the state military archives and the Khrushchev family archives, and the medal itself is in the possession of the family.

However, the accounts of Leonid Khrushchev's alleged betrayal, with their undocumented details, appear more believable to many Russians than the documented and verifiable facts. As with most myths about the past, the rumors about Leonid and Nikita Khrushchev reflect the morality and character of our present. We are willing to excuse the lack of documentation in these written accounts because most of them come from the pens of decorated generals and marshals in military uniform—the heroes of our victorious past and the saviors of our uncertain present. We cannot expect them to provide evidence for their assertions because of the "secretive nature of their intelligence and security jobs." This sympathetic attitude toward the security forces on the part of many Russians is also key to understanding the widespread support for President Putin, whose current cabinet is filled with former security officials. How quickly we have forgotten the revulsion with which only a decade ago we discovered the horrible truth about the murder of millions by the country's security forces "for the good of the nation."

"Feeling good" about one's nation is important if the nation is to move forward. However, the moral measure of a nation is not how it celebrates its victories, but how it comes to terms with the dark corners of its past. What does it say about today's "great" Russia, which, in preparing to honor its fallen of six decades ago, has been engaged in the posthumous assassination of Nikita Khrushchev's son?

As imperfect as "the thaw," *glasnost*, and privatization were, Russia's leaders during those periods sought to reckon with the fail-

ures of the past. Molotov could not conceive that Nikita Khrushchev, who had been Stalin's right-hand man for decades, would have started the de-Stalinization campaign for anything other than personal interest.<sup>14</sup> But at his ouster in 1964, Khrushchev knew the extent of his triumph in moving his country away from Stalinism: "My greatest achievement," he said, "is that today I am ousted by a voting process." Only a decade earlier he would have been sent to the Gulag, if not to his death. Similarly, the conclusion that Gorbachev and Yeltsin instigated the changes that took place under perestroika and post-socialist democratization because they genuinely wanted Russia to be a freer, more "normal" country is rejected by contemporary Stalinists. According to them, the "unnecessary" freedoms of the 1990s were simply meant to weaken powerful Russia for an easier takeover by the West.

With so many Russians ready and willing to believe the story of betrayal by the Khrushchevs, father and son, and eager to rehabilitate "Uncle Joe" Stalin, Marshal Yasov may be closer today than he was 14 years ago to achieving his goal of ending "the nightmare of freedom" in Russia. ●

## Notes

1. Yelena Prudnikova, *Stalin: Vtoroe Ubiistvo* [Stalin: The second murder] (St. Petersburg: Neva, 2003), pp. 7–9.

2. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), pp. 270–72.

3. Quoted in Felix Chuev, *Molotov: Poludnerzhavnyi Vlastelin* [Molotov: A semi-tsar] (Moscow: Olma Press, 2000), p. 369.

4. Twenty million is a very conservative estimate. Various sources cite as many as 40 million killed. For further information on Stalin's victims, see "Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm," at <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm#Stalin>.

5. Yury Lotman, *Kultura i Vzryv* [Culture and explosion] (Moscow: Gnozis, 1992).

6. See also Edward Kennan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *Russian Review*, vol. 45 (April 1986).

7. Chuev, *Molotov*, pp. 422–23, 433.

8. Dimityr Yasov, *Udary Sudby: Vospominaniya soldata i marshala* [Hardships of fate: Memoirs of a soldier and a marshal] (Moscow: Kniga i Biznem, 2000), pp. 43–44.

9. Chuev, *Moloto*, p. 421.

10. Valery Lebedev, "Lzhedmitry: Vymyshlennyy rasstrel nesushchestvuyushchego syna Khrushcheva" [False Dmitry: Execution of Khrushchev's imagined son], *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, January 26, 1996, p. 14.

11. See *Epokha Stalina: Sobytiya i Lyudi* [Stalin's epoch: The people and events] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2004), pp. 595–601. In this fascinating encyclopedia—fascinating in the sense that it reads as if we are still in the early 1980s, as if the postcommunist years never happened—of six pages dedicated to Nikita Khrushchev, only three deal with his long political career, while another three are devoted to the Leonid story.

12. Alexander Sherbakov, "Leonid Khrushchev ne byl predatelem" [Leonid Khrushchev was not a traitor], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 27, 1998, p. 7.

13. Pavel Sudoplatov, *Spetsoperatsii: Lubyanka i Kreml, 1930–1950* [Special operations: Lubyanka and the Kremlin, 1930–1950] (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2003), p. 260.

14. Taubman. *Khrushchev*, pp. 116–17, 274.