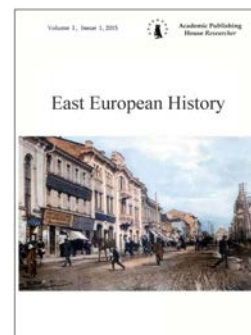


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The Phenomenon of the Historical Memory of Stalinism in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus

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Abstract

Some twenty five years ago, we witnessed the breakup of the Soviet Union, with the now-former Soviet republics gaining (or regaining) state sovereignty. That marked the end of the history of a country that had been preconceived as a state of a totally new type, hoped to be turned into the “Worldwide Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”.

Yet, researchers still use the term ‘post-Soviet’ in relation to those independent states, as to many of them the various issues and achievements of the Soviet past still bear some relevance for this day and age. In Belarus and Russia, the attitude of both the authorities and the public toward the Soviet past and Soviet history has mostly been a complicated one. This array of issues definitely incorporates the history of Stalinism in all its dimensions and ramifications. Presently, the objective analysis of the historical experience of the Stalin period of the Soviet history is becoming, afresh, a matter of common civic significance.

It has become the primary objective of national historiographies to “develop new national histories” and alter the paradigms created in the Soviet years. The search for national self-identification is naturally accompanied by criticism of the previous historiographical model, which was intended to provide a historical rationale for co-existence within a single state. It is worth noting, in this regard, that historical science performs the function both of “a policy oriented toward the past” and of a science that shapes the future.

Keywords: Russian Federation, Republic of Belarus, Stalinism, USSR, social sciences and humanities, historical memory.

1. Introduction

Russia and Belarus are currently going through the process of seeking out ways to self-identify and foster the national idea. A highly critical role in this path is played by historical memory. The fundamental concepts of historical memory (also referred to as collective memory, cultural memory, public memory, or social memory), developed by German culturologist J. Assmann, consist in that historical memory constantly undergoes reorganization in alignment with the demands of the modern age and due to the social activity of contemporaries. According to Assmann, “the past does not present itself as an elementary force of nature – it is a cultural construction” (Assman, 2004: 50). Thus, our notion of the past ceases to be invariable, and the

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terms 'historical memory' (i.e. our notion of the past) and "history" (i.e. the past) are not synonymous.

2. Methods

Forasmuch as most terminology is the object of discussion in the social sciences and humanities, it is, above all, worth explaining the meaning (one out of many that are used and discussed) one puts into the term 'historical memory'. The author concurs with the construal of historical memory as an aggregate of society's scientific, quasi-scientific, and extra-scientific knowledge and mass notions of the common past. Historical memory is a complex sociocultural phenomenon dealing with the conceptualization of historical experience (real and/or imaginary), and is, concurrently, the product of manipulating mass consciousness for political purposes (Repina, 2012: 4-6). Sociologist A. Lastovskii suggests focusing, for analytical purposes, on a few specific levels of historical memory which are interrelated in social practice: an array of descriptions, ideas, and images of the past formed by power discourse; collective quotidian (fragmentary and contradictory) notions of the past; individual memory which is socially mediated and connects the individual with the social stratum (Lastovskii, 2009: 88-89).

Changes in the historiographical complex are associated with the change of methodological paradigms in the science of humanities and deal with the political (carrying into effect a new national objective) and organizational (putting together your own structural and human resources framework) components. The vision of the past, in the end, is determined by the historical situation the historian is working in.

3. Discussion and results

In the last decades, both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, as well as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, have been experiencing a "return to history". History has found itself mobilized for the cause of national unity, i.e. the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have found themselves at the stage of "nationalization of history", which Western Europe went through back in the 19th century (Vasil'ev A.). This has led to a boost in the relevance of the past, a spike in attention toward history, and to its active politicization (Bordyugov, Bukharaev, 2011; Istoricheskaya politika, 2012).

3.1. Russian Federation

Based on the findings of sociological surveys, the role of knowledge of the past in shaping the identity of Russians is huge. When asked the question 'What comes to your mind first and foremost when you think of your nation?' 48 % of survey participants responded with the answer 'our past; our history' (Levinson A.). Among the prominent figures of the past coming recently back into the foreground is Joseph Stalin, whose name many Russians associate with the image of the Soviet Union as a "superpower". If in 1989 the people's ratings of Stalin in the roster of the greatest historical figures totaled just 12 % (Lenin – 72 %, Peter I – 38 %, Pushkin – 25 %), in 2012 Stalin was now top of the rankings with 49 % (Sotsiologi porassuzhdali...). When asked the question 'Were the numerous casualties sustained among the Soviet people during the Stalin era justified by the great goals set and great results achieved in the shortest period of time, 45% responded in the affirmative in 2015 (versus 25 % in 2012). There is also an increase in the number of those inclined to deem Stalin's decease the "loss of a great leader and teacher": if in 2010–2013 this stance was shared by 18–19 %, in 2015 the number was now 24 % (Sotsiologi zafiksirovali...).

"Stalin is alive rather than dead" is a conclusion reached by experts at the Carnegie Foundation (Sotsiologi porassuzhdali...). A headline in the April 2015 issue of 'Ogonek' magazine read even wilder than that – 'Lethally Alive'. The article spoke of the determined attempts to bring Stalin's name back into the streets, and into the textbooks (Ogonek, 2015: 16). Quite in the same vein, Italian researcher M. Ferretti notes in her article 'Russia and Stalinism: A Memory Disorder' that "the entrancement with Stalinism gives away the tremendous pressure of the past, which just won't become a thing of the past, once and for all" (Ferretti, 2003: 43).

Yet, Russians are well aware of crimes committed under Stalin. Over 40 % of respondents admitted that millions (or even tens of millions) of people were killed under Stalin. When asked the question 'What do you, personally, associate Stalin's demise with?' 55 % responded with the answer

“an end to the terror and mass repressions; release of millions of innocent people from prison” ([Stalin i my...](#)).

That said, *quaere*: So how come, knowing this, millions of Russians are treating Stalin as a *persona grata*? The revival of the cult of Stalin is no accident – it is due to a set of specific reasons. One of the most crucial of these is that Stalin’s name is linked to the nation’s victory in World War II (referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War), i.e. that iconic historical symbol the cherishing attitude toward which is binding together virtually the whole of Russian society.

Another aspect of history which is of no less importance is the one linking Stalin’s name to the “greatness of the Soviet nation”. Most of the liberal principles that were popular among Russian elites and the general public in the first years following the breakup of the Soviet Union now tend to be rejected in present-day Russia. Present-day Russian discourse is dominated by imperial consciousness, with priority, in picking the nation’s most popular personages of the past, given to historical figures who match the imperial idea. In extrapolating Russia’s current status in the world onto the Soviet past, respondents tend to be guided by, above all, the symbols of sovereign prestige and regard the Stalin period as the time when the Soviet (Russian) state reached its greatest power.

According to researcher V. Khristoforov, “under Stalin the USSR was a strong state, one that was feared. In the minds of people brought up in the Soviet time, ‘fear’ appears to be a synonym for ‘respect’” ([Khristoforov V.](#)). Russia’s current foreign policy, supported by most of its citizens, is predicated, just like “under Stalin”, upon power, and in this situation Stalin is, surely, viewed as a paragon of what a state leader is supposed to be. Based on his analysis of several public opinion surveys, sociologist B. Dubin reports that since the mid-1990s more than half of Russians have acknowledged the countries of the West to be “Russia’s adversaries, keen to resolve their problems at its expense and eager to inflict damage on its interests whenever possible”, and Western culture, as most of the respondents believe, “has a negative impact upon the state of affairs in Russia” ([Chernyavskii G.](#)).

With the public’s attitude towards the West and “Western way of life” getting increasingly negative in Russia, the notion of the “Soviet way of life” as a paragon of what it should be seems to be gaining ground among many Russians today. That is, the change of attitude toward Stalin, as a symbol of the Soviet era, is also closely associated with the change of attitude toward the era itself. A significant factor in this process is the “historical policy” pursued by present-day Russia. The term ‘historical policy’ is used to mean a set of practices employed by the political forces in power seeking to institute, using the state’s administrative and financial resources, certain interpretations of historical events as dominant ([Miller, 2009: 6-23](#)).

Today’s Russian historical policy is aimed at replacing the “traumatic version” of national history, i.e. the notion of history as a chain of traumas or a single, monolithic trauma. The principal way to get over traumatic experience is to create a historical narrative by means of which past experience is styled into a certain entirety within the frame of which events begin to acquire sense ([Repina, 2012: 15](#)).

The new Russian version of “heroic history” is built not so much on real events of the past as on historical myths. The term ‘myth’ is construed by the author as a generalized notion of reality that combines moral and aesthetic mindsets and unites reality with mysticism. In other words, it is a notion that is always highly illusory, yet is one that, due to its ethical and artistic attractiveness, can greatly influence mass consciousness ([Konorev, 2012: 332](#)).

In the view of researcher A. Svyatoslavskii, “Stalin today is perhaps the most vivid illustration of the chasm between a real historical figure and the way that figure is presented within the cultural field – and it is this chasm that is the subject of memory studies. To put it in crude terms, today you are free to make anything you want out of Stalin” ([Svyatoslavskii, 2012: 291](#)). As is suggested by the authors of an article in ‘Ab Imperio’ magazine, today’s historical policy tends to present Stalinism as a simplified image in a “cheap popular print” (“[Suverennaya demokratiya](#)”, 2009: 355).

Sociologist L. Gudkov suggests that it is not about Stalin but about the myth of a powerful chief, efficient manager and generalissimo. According to the scholar, we are currently witnessing in Russia a well-directed campaign aimed at exonerating Stalin, a sort of “perpetual, quiet rehabilitation” ([Stalin s nami?](#)). Compensatory self-identification with the Soviet past, as is noted in the article in ‘Ab Imperio’, presupposes not just glorifying the nation’s former might but also deliriously defending the “honor and dignity” of the old regime. This is what constitutes a significant difference from similar paroxysms of national pride in others: with present-day Russia,

it is no longer just about the “glorious past” – the past is starting to gain relevance in today’s political discourse and to actually dictate the logic of behavior (“[Suverennaya demokratiya](#)”, 2009: 349).

In the context of the above opinion, it appears curious to compare the attitude toward the “Stalin myth” in Russia with that in the rest of the post-Soviet independent states. Thus, for instance, in Ukraine, according to head of the ‘Ukraine Barometer’ sociological agency V. Nebozhenko, the authorities seem reluctant to conduct this kind of research, forasmuch as Stalinism and Leninism are regarded as either a thing of the past already or as part of Russian ideology ([Ukraina snimaet Lenina](#)). In 2012, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commissioned the conduct of a sociological survey on the topic ‘The Perception of Stalin’ in Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Respondents in all of these states were asked the same questions. As a result, it was discovered that the memory of Stalin is being forced out the fastest in Azerbaijan. The survey recorded a generally negative attitude toward Stalin’s image in Armenia and a generally positive one in Georgia ([Stalin s nami?](#)).

3.2. Republic of Belarus

Unfortunately, to date Russian sociologists have evinced little interest in what people think about it in Belarus, and it looks like the Russian public has not really had the chance yet to check out this kind of information from Belarusian researchers. Consequently, you can now encounter in scholarly publications all kinds of highly contestable statements regarding the attitude in present-day Belarus toward Stalin, or toward the “Stalin myth” to be exact. Thus, for instance, A. Svyatoslavskii asserts that, based on his personal observations, “in certain former USSR republics (namely Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), Stalin’s image is oftentimes associated with a successful national (as it used to be called back then) policy” ([Svyatoslavskii, 2012: 302](#)).

Having said that, notions of Belarus as a sort of “communist preserve” continue to also prevail among Western researchers. Thus, for instance, in the view of German historian S. Trebst, Belarus is among the states characterized by a type of memory culture where “authoritarian elites openly lean on the communist model and even go as far as to assert this model is actually what the future lies with” ([Trebst, 2004: 55](#)). Speaking of the Belarusian consciousness being, in a sense, frozen, the author is of the opinion that in larger measure this is inherent not to Belarusian society but the nation’s scientific community.

In analyzing a special issue of ARCHE, a well-known Belarusian magazine, devoted to issues related to historical memory and historical policy in Belarus, historian A. Bratachkin notes the scarcity of sociological research in Belarus into the issue of historical memory and historical policy and the insufficient degree to which the “collective memory” of Belarusians has so far been explored ([Bratachkin A.](#)). Collective memory forms via the complex interaction of specific reminiscences and stereotypes of consciousness. Memory culture is poorly susceptible to results of academic, including historical, research, that are not adapted for a wider audience; it is, above all, the product of historical policy.

The historical policy of present-day Belarus is going through the process of formation. Belarus’s political leadership and society both seem to be having hard time determining clearly its position between the East and the West, between Russia and Europe. According to Belarusian historian V. Shadurskii, the republic “has yet to achieve consensus with regard to collective historical memory and come up with an optimal model for the co-existence of the two state languages. The Belarusian nation still remains poorly coordinated, divided into several large identity groups with unstable borders” ([Shadurskii, 2014: 22](#)). Based on an analysis of the process of political transformation of Belarusian society, the scholar has identified three specific stages in the development of the historical policy of the Republic of Belarus: the late 1980s – May 1995 (attempting to build Belarusian identity on an ethnic basis); May 1995 – the early 2000s (embarking on a course for the creation of the Common State of Belarus and Russia); the early 2000s – to the present (bolstering Belarus’s sovereignty via the pursuit of a multi-vector policy and formation of the independent political identity of Belarusian citizens) ([Shadurskii, 2014: 10](#)).

The findings of sociological surveys reflect the specificity of the historical memory of Stalin and Stalinism in Belarus. Based on data from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (2008), Stalin’s role in the history of Belarus was rated as positive by 8 % of

respondents, ambiguous – 27 %, negative – 44 %, and 21 % had difficulty providing a reply. A similar survey, conducted by the ‘Eurasian Monitor’ research agency (2009), produced the following results, respectively: 19 % (positive), 18 % (ambiguous), 55 % (negative), and 9 % (difficulty replying) (Lastovskii, 2009: 96). According to data from the Independent Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research, the average 5-point scaled score on Stalin equaled 2.63 (Novosti NISEPI, 2009: 31) in 2009, while the number of respondents looking upon Stalin as the “beau ideal of a politician” shrank between 1996 and 2012 from 10.8 % to 3.9 % (Belorusskii panteon).

It has been observed that Belarusians are not really much into political figures of the past altogether. The highest scores have, actually, been garnered by historical figures who were involved in their time in cultural and enlightening activity. Among those whose contribution to the nation’s history has been rated the highest are Francisk Skorina (85 %) and Euphrosyne of Polotsk (84 %) (Lastovskii, 2009: 98).

4. Conclusion

Historical memory, as a dimension of social memory, has been reflected in the formation of the various pantheons of national heroes and antiheroes in the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. On these becoming independent states, there immediately ensued the consolidation of citizens into the single Belarusian and Russian nations. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, both states necessitated their intellectual elites to work out a strategy for building the nation and national identity, calling for a determined effort to achieve these goals. As much as the characteristics of the above process are similar with both states, there is a relative difference. This difference lies in the attitude in terms of assessing the degree of heterogeneity (or homogeneity) of the post-Soviet space. What has become today Russia’s base for historical policy, governing its role and place in the new geopolitical situation, is the “imperial project”, which incorporates both the Soviet period of history and the “Stalin myth”, as one of the period’s most crucial components.

The Republic of Belarus has produced a historical narrative of its own, which is predicated upon quite a complex combination of notions of national, European, and Russian (Soviet) history and the choice of new historical myths and historical personages corresponding to those myths. Soviet history and its Stalin period are increasingly perceived as imperial history and tend to recede into the background in contrast with national history and culture, their myths, symbols, and memory. What is being witnessed in Belarus today is a decline in the significance of Soviet identity, with the priority shifting to its European counterpart.

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