

Dilemma over Stalin: Confronting the Great Patriotic War and the Reputation of Russia

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Russians' perception of Stalin's reputation is strongly dualistic. In the frame of state and war he is perceived as a hero, whereas in the frame of people's private sphere of life he is labelled a criminal. In this respect we do not see any drastic changes since the turn of the 1990s and 2000s. Stalin's popularity started to increase during Yeltsin's presidency and after that it has stayed quite stable. The new feature is that people, and in particular the younger generation, perceive Stalin as a historical figure without strong normative connotations and want to remember him as a part of the country's history.

The focus of this article is the popular perception of Stalin's role in Russian history. Stalin's role in Russia represents the essential parts of the Russian state's history within the frame of patriotism, the continuation of the historical state, civilisation, and strong institutions. He is a heatedly disputed person in Russia and abroad and his name and politics, Stalinism, have multi-dimensional meanings that can symbolise several, even opposite things for different people and even for the same people. Putin's statement on Stalin in his interview with Oliver Stone is an example of the difficulties and different dimensions of Russia's history politics: "Excessive demonization of Stalin is used by foes to attack the Soviet Union and Russia."¹ Discussing the history of politics, the question is not what the 'real' history is but how it is interpreted and received. As Ernest Renan has written, "getting its history wrong is part of being a nation"².

Popular perceptions of Stalin are not easy to analyse and surveys must be treated with some reservations. In this article conclusions have been drawn from the Levada Center and the Russian

¹ Putin in an interview with Oliver Stone. PBK: 16.6.2017.

² Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) surveys, assuming that they indicate the approximate development of popular opinion and mirror some features of the societal atmosphere.

Stalin's growing popularity figures in different surveys have given rise to asking whether we can speak about a revival of Stalin's cult in Russia. In attempting to find an answer we might ask: do we have evidence or signs of a revival of the Stalin cult, how should we interpret Stalin's growing popularity in surveys during recent years, and to what extent has this been the result of a conservative turn in Putin's history politics?

Conceptually, this chapter relies on discussions framed by history politics and its role in the identity building of the state. In this respect we are discussing the state-citizens relation and the question of the conservative turn in Russia. The chapter asks how conservatism is constructed and disseminated by means of the instrumental use of peculiar interpretations of history. The question why and for what purposes conservatism is constructed is relevant but in this article it has left in a secondary position. Putin published an article on the National question in 2012 in which three basic features of the Russian state were defined: it is a *historical state*, it has a single uniting *cultural code*, and it must have *strong institutions*.³ These three features of the Russian state form the reference points on conservative history politics in this chapter.

Conservatism in Russia's history politics is defined in this chapter as an interpretation of history. It involves picking out events and periods of history that fit with traditional values and culture as debated in contemporary discussions. Its main features have been said to be state centrism, authoritarianism, spiritual (orthodox) values, traditional understandings of the family, national values and national exceptionalism, and a belief in the civilisational development of the world. These features and Putin's conspicuous references to conservative thinkers like Ivan Ilyin and rulers like Alexander III have usually been perceived as evidence of Russia's conservative turn in 2011-2012. Richard Sakwa has called it a cultural turn in Russian politics, comprising promotion of social, political and cultural themes in official political discourse. The turn has been connected to the 2012 presidential election and to Putin's drive to consolidate the core of his electorate. Conservatism as such is not a new feature in Russian politics not to speak of Russian culture. Already in the early 2000s the United Russia party defined its policy as "liberal conservatism", that is economic liberalism

³ Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia: Natsional'nyi vopros." *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 23.

https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html.

coupled with political and cultural conservatism. In a broader context it has been connected to a response to the pressure of modernisation and Westernisation and recently to globalisation.⁴

Although I have taken as a standpoint the above-mentioned features which characterise Russian conservatism, I have to add some reservations to this generalisation. Scholars have paid attention to the problems of a one-dimensional characterisation of Russian conservatism. Paul Robinson has pointed out that, on the one hand, there are “scholars who view conservatism as an ideology of immutable values that transcend time and space. For others conservatism is a natural attitude in favour of existing institutions, which manifest itself in entirely different ways in different times and places, according to what the existing institutions happen to be.”⁵ This temporally and spatially framed double dimension of conservatism helps us to avoid oversimplifications and also to explain some features of its existence in Russia which seem at first glance contradictory and incomprehensible.

Michael Freeden’s notion that conservatism is a positional ideology, and that the content of its political programme will vary from nation to nation is important. He points out that ideologies, like conservatism, can be approached from three scholarly perspective. The first one, which he calls genetic, is important in this chapter. Genetic means answering the question: how did a particular set of political views come about? Freeden’s second perspective is functional, which answers the question: what is the purpose or role of a particular set of political views?⁶ Our focus is to investigate the relation of conservatism and history politics, that is to say ask how conservatism has been built upon and driven from peculiar interpretations of history and for what purpose. Freeden’s third perspective is semantic in answering the question about the implications and insights of a particular

⁴ Richard Sakwa, “Can Putinism Solve its Contradictions?,” *Open Democracy*, 27 December.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/can-putinism-solve-its-contradictions/>; Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 215; Sanna Turoma and Mjør, “Introduction: Russian civilizationism in a global perspective,” in *Russia as Civilization: Ideological Discourses in Politics, Media, and Academia*, eds. Kåre Johan Mjør and Sanna Turoma (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 19.

⁵ Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, 7-8.

⁶ The second is functional and the third is semantic. Freeden Michael, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3.

https://helsinki.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/358UOH_INST/1h3k2rg/alma9927930163506253

set of political views, in terms of the conceptual connections it forms. This aspect is also left aside in this chapter although the question is relevant.⁷

In history politics the conservative turn is obvious if we define conservatism as continuation and as the adaptation to the demand of change according to one's own national traditions and values. Paul Robinson has pointed out that Russian conservatives have not always resisted change and the attempt to conserve has not always prevailed. Conservatives have often attempted to manage and soften the impact of change and make sure that they are kept within the framework of what is understood as Russia's nature, its history, and its traditions.⁸

What has come to be known as Neo-Eurasianism is the most elaborate of the various conservative ideologies that emerged in Russia in the 1990s. It maintains that Europe is not a model of development but represents a specific mode of development that cannot be reproduced: Russia must "unlearn the West" and reject the imperialism of European identity.⁹ The claim of Russian separate development, a unique historical development as a civilisation, challenged the claim of Russian liberals of the 1990s, who considered that Western civilisation was the universal goal of mankind.¹⁰ Civilisational discourse should be seen in the context of broader, global tendencies and as a part of a response to its consequences, which are in each of the cases rooted in the local intellectual context and premises.¹¹ The thesis on Russian civilisation is usually based on Orthodox Christianity as a long and unbreakable continuity of history, language, cultural heritage and traditional values.¹² These core elements of conservatism received new weight in Putin's constitutional reform of 2020. Faith in God was added to the constitution in defining it as a core value bequeathed to Russians today by their ancestors. Its formulation that Russian was a "state-forming language" gave a new ethnonationalistic flavour to the definition of the Russian state. So far Putin has avoided direct references to ethnicity in defining the

⁷ This aspect has been discussed in several articles and books, one of the most recent being Paul Robinson's *Russian Conservatism*.

⁸ Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, 3.

⁹ Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2008), 1.

¹⁰ This echoed Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis.

¹¹ Sanna Turoma and Mjør, "Introduction," 3.

¹² Traditional values is a vague concept since their definition is always situational and depends on the hegemonic power of the societal discussion.

Russian state, and he has emphasized the multi-ethnic and multicultural features that constitute Russian civilization.

An illustrative reaction of the political elite during the winter 2011-2012 demonstrations was Putin's political responses during the presidential campaign and his often referred to newspaper article on the Nationality question, published in *Novaya Gazeta*. Many of its elements have been implemented in the new recently amended constitution. It constituted several essential concepts to which Putin has returned later on his speeches. In the article Russians were denominated "state-forming people" and their "great mission" was "unite and strengthen civilisation."¹³

Although flirting with Russian nationalism, Putin did not define the "historical state" in terms of ethnicity but as civilisation based on Russian culture and values that have also been adopted in minority nations. The Russian culture forms a "single cultural code" of the state's development and Russians' mission is to unite and strengthen Russian civilisation by their language, culture, and "worldwide-kind-heartedness" (Dostoyevsky). Civilisation is part of the self-identity of people that is driven from a single cultural code and from common values. According to the article, this challenge has to be met by a humanitarian education that consists of the Russian language, Russian literature and Russian history. Putin also welcomed Russian traditional confessions – meaning in practice the Russian Orthodox Church – contribute in the educational system, social sphere and in the armed forces.

Finally, the protection of Russian civilisation and the historical state relies on the third element of the article, "*strong institutions*". The essential task of strong institutions is to prevent by all means possible separatism, social and ethnic unrest and disorder. In 2013 Putin continued his discussion on Russian civilisation, the role of history and traditional values in his Valdai Club speech. He referred to conservative 19th-century philosopher Konstantin Leontyev's concept of *state civilization*.¹⁴ Leontyev's claim is that Russia has evolved into 'blossoming complexity' as a state civilization,

¹³ Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia: Natsional'nyi vopros". *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 23.

https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html.

¹⁴ The concept of state-civilization was also mentioned once briefly in his 2012 article but in his Valdai speech it acquired a new importance. Turoma and Mjør have pointed out that the young conservative academic expert Mikhail Remizov had brought the concept into discussions in 2005. Robinson, *Russian Civilization*, 18.

reinforced by the Russian people, the Russian language, Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church and the country's other traditional religions. In his 2013 speech Putin underlined that the state-civilizational model had been the way in which the Russian historical state had been developed. That model has to be supplemented by a civic identity based on shared values, patriotic consciousness and a sense of obligation to the state. He also underlined traditional values in opposition to the Western "excesses of political correctness" that had led to the denial of their roots, including Christian values, moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual.¹⁵

In this article on Russia's conservative history politics Putin emphasized the state-centred concepts of patriotism, strong institutions and the historical state, which Russian citizens had reasons to respect. He reiterated the old demand how history should be written in Russia: "It's time to stop taking note only of the bad things in our history, and berating ourselves more than even our opponents would do... . We must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of."¹⁶ Kåre Mjør has pointed out that traditionally conservatism has been concerned with the state and statehood and this is also true of Russian conservatism. However, its major concern has not been institutions in this respect but "rather, the state is an idea and hence a means of identity construction".¹⁷ This brings to the fore state symbols and history, like the events of the Great Patriotic War (GPW), which can be used for identity construction.

War and Stalin

The Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 and Victory Day celebrated on 9 May are formative events for Russian nation building and self-understanding. Victory Day is the most popular festival after the New Year celebration, and a person's own, or family members' or friends', birthdays. The official narrative of the war is preserved by law, and the war's history is part of the politics of Russian identity and has been apparent in both her foreign and domestic politics. In Russia, challenging the major narrative of the GPW, or behaviour interpreted as disrespectful to the GPW, has political and legal

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin 19 September, 2013. Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>

¹⁶ Putin, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club."

¹⁷ Mjør, Kåre Johan, "Russia's Thousand-Year History," in *Claiming a Past in Contemporary Russian Conservative Thought*. In *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*. Edited by Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (Leiden: Brill, Eurasian Studies Library, 2020), 300.

consequences.¹⁸ On the other hand, the GPW is a politically divisive issue between Russia and her Western neighbours, and it has triggered constant disputes over history between them.

A new statement on the Great Patriotic War, the country's "foundational myth",¹⁹ was added to the amended constitution. It concerned the protection of "the historical truth and future of our country" and is well in line with Putin's statements on Russian history and state identity. It declares that Russia "honours the memory of defenders of the Fatherland and protects historical truth". The formulation following it and defining the content of historical truth is symbolically clear but obscure in terms of legislation. The formulation "Diminishing the significance of the people's heroism in defending the Motherland is not permitted"²⁰ legalises and legitimises contemporary policy that constrains critical discussion on the history of the GPW.

These new developments have led to a dilemma in Russian history politics. Stalin is an inseparable part of the major symbolic resource of the state, the Great Patriotic War and the heroism of the people narration that people are obliged to protect as historical truth. The unresolved challenge of Russian leadership has been how to write the history of Stalin's period so that it unites the nation around the idea of the Russian historical state, and advances a reconciliation and dialogue between the families of the oppressed and the oppressors.²¹

Stalin's popularity and Putin's policy

In 2005 Russia and its neighbours found themselves in a fierce dispute over the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty and the characterisation of Soviet power in the Baltic states. The dispute came to a head when the Baltic and some former eastern European states refused to participate in the 60th Victory Day

¹⁸ One of the latest examples of this has been the charge against Alexei Navalny for defaming a World War II veteran. *Moscow Times*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/01/20/navalny-due-in-court-wednesday-on-charges-of-defaming-war-veteran-a72656>.

¹⁹ The importance of the Great Patriotic War in Russia's identity and national cohesion has been discussed by many researchers. President Yeltsin started the contemporary annual Victory Day military parades as a part of his symbolic politics to promote a national consensus in 1995. Olga Malinova, "Constructing the 'Usable Past': the Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, edited by Barbara Törnquist Plewa and Niklas Bernsand (Leiden: Brill 2018). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366671_006

²⁰ The State Duma 12 March, 2020. <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/48039/>

²¹ See the role of Russian Orthodoxy in Elina Kahla's chapter in this volume.

commemorations in Moscow. In 2009 a group of members of the Duma drafted a “memory law” in order to protect the history of GPW against its falsification, but at that time it did not pass into law. However, in that same year President Medvedev nominated a “Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests”, but it did not achieve any significant outcomes, and was disbanded in February 2012. In 2010 President Medvedev launched a “de-Stalinisation campaign” to separate Stalin and USSR’s victory in the Second World War, but after a couple of efforts it too dried up. After three years, the political atmosphere in Russia had changed significantly: it had experienced the opposition’s winter demonstrations of 2011-12, Putin’s re-election in the presidential elections in the midst of the demonstrations, the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis in autumn 2013, the annexation of Crimea and war in East Ukraine in 2014. Media in the West and Ukraine published toxic comments comparing Putin’s policy with Stalin and Hitler. On the Russian side, the new rulers in Kiev were labelled Nazis. In this atmosphere the Russian parliament reviewed a bill criminalizing the “rehabilitation of Nazism” and Putin signed it into law in 2014. It was one step forward in the state-driven control of history.

In 2017 in the interview with Oliver Stone, Putin repeated his view that the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty was a *realpolitik* necessity to protect the interests of the Soviet Union by avoiding immediate confrontation with Nazi Germany. In the same interview he denominated Stalin a historical figure, comparing him to such leaders as Napoleon Bonaparte and Oliver Cromwell. It caused a small-scale criticism abroad, but in Russia the broader audience was more or less indifferent or moderate in their comments. The first time Putin publicly presented a new interpretation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty was during his meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on 10 May 2015, a year after the annexation of Crimea. The change of his view is significant since six years earlier on a visit to Poland (then) Prime Minister Putin denounced the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact as unacceptable from the moral point of view.²²

A closer look at the surveys uncovers a more complex perception of Stalin than we see at first glance from the figures indicating the population’s generally positive attitude to him. Perceptions of Stalin are not divided only on the basis of positive or negative associations. Formulation and framing of survey question matters a lot, and often positive associations become quite contrary when asking different questions. A more careful reading shows that the perception of Stalin is actually complex and ambiguous and depends on the questions and timeframe of the survey.

²² *The Moscow Times* 11.5.2015.

The Levada Center's survey on the most outstanding person of all nations and in all times, published on June 26th 2017, caused major headlines by reporting that Russians ranked Stalin in first place and Putin second. This, along with some other surveys in which more than half of the respondents' stated that they 'respected' Stalin, has given commentators and the media grounds for a narrative about a Stalinist turn under Putin's regime.

Contrary to the dominant interpretation of the survey's outcome, it can also be read in a much more moderate way, despite having Stalin-Putin in tandem in the lead. The first observation is that the positive perception of Stalin did not start to increase from the annexation of Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis in 2013/14 or as a result of Putin's presidency, but was already beginning during Boris Yeltsin's term. The real leap occurred already between 1994 and 1999. In 1994 the proportion of respondents who endorsed the claim that Stalin was the most outstanding person in Russian history was 20%, but at the end of Yeltsin's presidency in 1999 it had already jumped to 35%. This has been the biggest change after the collapse of the USSR. The lowest level (12%) of Stalin's endorsement in these surveys was during the last years of the Soviet Union. Stalin was rated the tenth most outstanding person by the survey's respondents and before him were two generals, Aleksandr Suvorov, the hero of the Patriotic War against Napoleon, and Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov, the hero of the GPW.²³ Several Russian cultural figures were also valued ahead of Stalin.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is still worth asking what happened during Yeltsin's presidency that popular opinion turned to increasingly appreciate Stalin? What symbolical and political meanings was attached to Stalin, and for what reasons did positive views of Stalin leap by 15% to the level where they are today?

Table 1. Outstanding persons

Outstanding persons: Levada 26.6.2017	1989	1994	1999	2003	2008	2012	2017
Stalin	12	20	35	40	36	42	38
Putin	-	-	-	21	32	22	34
Pushkin	25	23	42	39	47	29	34

²³ Stalin perceived Zhukov as a competitor and removed him from the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Ground Forces in 1946. After Stalin's death he returned to power, becoming Deputy Defence Minister in 1953.

Lenin	72	34	42	43	34	37	32
Peter I	38	41	45	43	37	37	29
Gagarin	15	8	12	12	14	24	12
Tolstoy L.	13	8	12	12	14	24	12
Zhukov	19	14	20	22	23	15	12
Ekaterina II	-	10	10	11	8	11	11
Lermontov	5	5	9	10	9	8	11
Lomonosov	20	13	18	17	17	15	10
Suvorov	17	18	18	16	16	12	10
Mendeleev	13	6	12	13	13	12	10
Napoleon	6	19	19	13	9	13	9
Brezhnev	-	6	8	12	9	12	8
Einstein	9	5	6	7	7	7	7

Source: Levada Center 26.6.2017.

A conspicuous feature of this survey is that President Yeltsin did not even reach the 6% threshold to get onto the list. Negative feelings about Yeltsin, 56%, had been at the highest after his resignation in 2000 and the lowest, 36%, in 2014.²⁴ One possibility that explains these figures is that Stalin's popularity has something to do with negative associations with Yeltsin or his politics, although the development can also be a parallel phenomenon without any kind of causal relation between them.

In order to answer the question, to what extent the impact of Putin's and Medvedev's history politics has been different, we will next compare surveys on Stalin's positive or negative image in the timeline covering both presidential terms. At first glance it looks as if Medvedev's attempts to reassess Stalin's role in history gained some results. In the timeline between 2001 and 2016, the lowest proportion of positive answers occurred during Medvedev's presidency between 2008 and 2012, when they dropped 6-8 per cent to an average 30 per cent level of respondents.²⁵ It is also noteworthy that during Putin's presidency, between 2001 and 2006, although Stalin's positive perception was high, at the same time his negative perception was even slightly higher than the positive. The biggest change during Putin's term occurred in 2006-2008 when negative perceptions slumped by 15 per cent. The flow from negative to indifferent had started already in the beginning of Putin's term, and their proportion had rocketted from 12 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2008. Although the same trend continued during Medvedev's term (2008-2012), we also see a flow from the positive side to the indifferent or hard to say response.²⁶ This indicates that people became confused and have reconsidered their views of

²⁴ Levada Center 26.1.2015

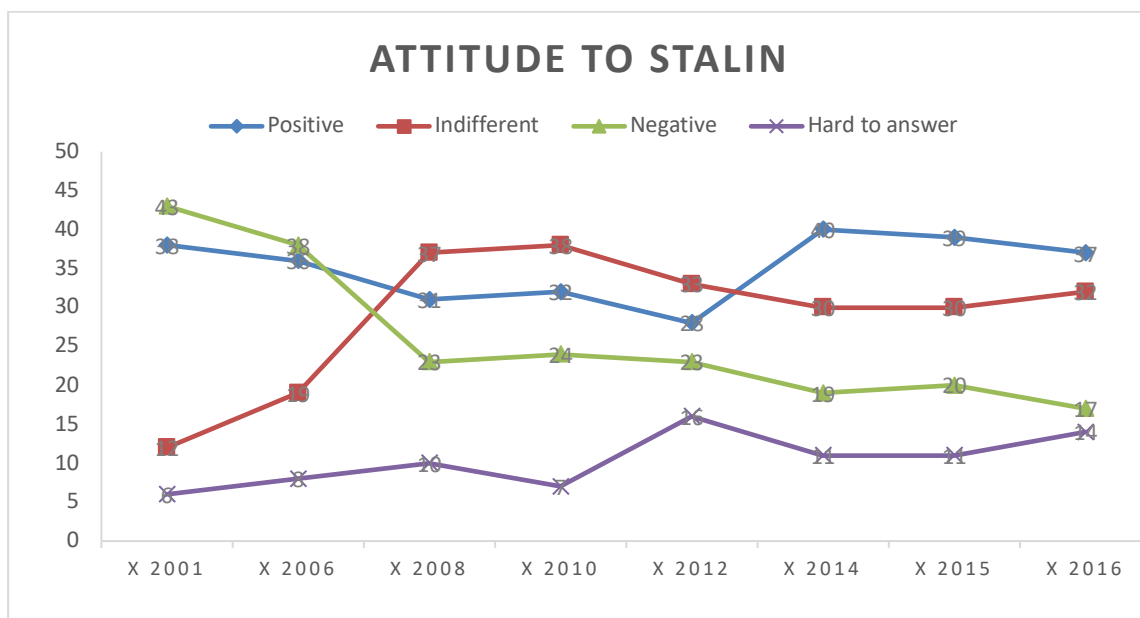
²⁵ Levada Center 25.3.2016

²⁶ Levada Center 25.3.2016

history, and also probably of society. The big proportion of indifferent respondents and the lower level of negative perceptions of Stalin became a permanent feature in surveys done after 2012. These results indicate that Putin's and Medvedev's history politics have not had a significant influence on the direction how the perception of Stalin has developed since a positive trend had already started before their terms. In these figures we do not see significant changes. However, diminished figures of negative perception and their flow to indifferent can be interpreted as at least an indication of a changing political atmosphere in society.

Conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 marked a clear change in Russia towards a more intolerant and authoritarian-conservative climate. Consequently, the proportion of those who perceived Stalin in a positive light increased statistically significantly, namely 12 per cent between 2012 and 2014. Before that, between 2001 and 2012, the proportion of respondents perceiving Stalin in an absolutely positive light had been constantly downwards, and the proportion of indifferent and hard to answer responses increased to 15 per cent until it dropped to about 8% after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. It looks as though the outcome of the political crisis was the polarisation of popular opinion and its turn towards a more conservative-statist direction.²⁷

Graph 1: Attitude to Stalin



Source: Levada Center 25.3.2016

²⁷ Levada Center 2015; Levada Center 25.3.2016.

Fear and respect

Positive attitudes to Stalin are connected directly to his role as a state and war leader, and in this respect we can say that Russia's conservative state-centred, patriotic interpretation of history establishes favourable grounds for his popularity. In the survey three alternatives were offered when respondents were asked their personal positive attitude to Stalin: *admiration*, *respect* and *sympathy*. About 70 per cent of those who had a positive attitude to Stalin defined it as *respect*.²⁸ In this context, respect (*уважением*) has the connotation of the high status of the respected person, for example a leader, superior or older person. In Russia, the association of the state and politics and *fear* and *respect* often go hand in hand. One indication of that is the surveys made between 2000 and November 2014, in which on average of 65 per cent of respondents answered that they preferred to live in "a large country that is respected and sometimes feared by other countries" rather than a "small, comfortable and non-threatening country".²⁹ The result supports the argument for Russia's commonly accepted conservative, state-centred and authoritarian interpretation of history.

The conclusion that the positive perception of Stalin is strictly framed by matters of state and war is also supported by the survey in which respondents were asked about the negative side of Stalin's reputation out of the state frame and in the context of peoples' personal lives. To the question of whether respondents agreed that Stalin was a merciless, inhuman tyrant, and guilty of the death of millions of innocent people, a clear majority, 68-62 per cent agreed with this in 2008, 2012, and 2016. However, we can also see a declining tendency in the approval rate, although it is worth remembering that changes have occurred within the margin of error. It is also noteworthy that the approval rate for the claim of Stalin's tyranny does not have a direct causal link to respondents' positive and negative perceptions of him as a state leader. In 2016, 42 per cent of respondents who agreed with the claim that Stalin was a tyrant and murderer, still believed that Stalin's role had been positive in Russia's history.³⁰ This indicates at least indirectly peoples' endorsement of the idea that citizens are

²⁸ Levada Center 25.3.2016.

²⁹ Levada Center, 2014.

³⁰ Levada Center 25.3.2016.

subjugated to the interests of the state, as Putin has repeatedly defined the idea of the Russian historical state and demanded that citizens were loyal to it.

Table 2: Role of Stalin in Russian history³¹

In your opinion, what kind of role did Stalin play in our country?	February 2008 (in %)	March 2013 (in %)	December 2014 (in %)	March 2016 (in %)
Absolutely positive	10	9	16	8
Relatively positive	29	40	36	46
Relatively negative	25	22	21	24
Absolutely negative	13	10	9	6
Hard to say	22	19	19	17

There is an almost inconceivable contradiction between the different perceptions of Stalin, which leaves many questions open. The attitudes to the state seem to be deeply dualistic. On the one hand, there is a private sphere of life and history which touches family and friends, and on the other, there are collective state-related issues encompassing the state's institutions, leader and people's responsibilities to the state. The state and people's lives are treated as separate issues and they are measured with different scales. That dichotomy comes up in the surveys which tell us that Stalin is perceived as a tyrant and was guilty of killing millions of innocent people, and at the same time he is respected as a state leader who made the country great and led it to glory. The latter claim was affirmed by 50% and denied by 37% of respondents in 2008. The approval rate diminished by 3% to 47 per cent in 2012, but was again 57% in 2016.³² The 10 per cent change in approval figures between the end of Medvedev's term in 2012 and the change in the general atmosphere after the Crimean annexation in 2014 and subsequent events is significant, and it is hard to explain in any other way than as a response to Russia's deteriorating relations with the West and her neighbours.

The difference that people make between themselves and the state is also confirmed by the outcome of two other surveys. When asked whether you in person would like to live and work in a country

³¹ Levada Center 25.03.2016.

³² Levada Center 25.3.2016.

that is led by a leader like Stalin, 60 per cent of respondents answered no and 23 per cent yes in 2016. A notable feature is that the proportion of negative answers, 74 per cent in 2008, had declined significantly, by 14 per cent, in 2016.³³ We can read from the survey that the turning point was in 2008-2012. The result is somewhat confusing if we remember that the change started to evolve during Medvedev's presidency, which saw the most significant attempt to rewrite the role of Stalin in the GPW. Some commentators have connected Stalin's popularity to criticism of weak and corrupted leaders that were compared to Stalin's resolute measures to root out corruption and inequality.³⁴

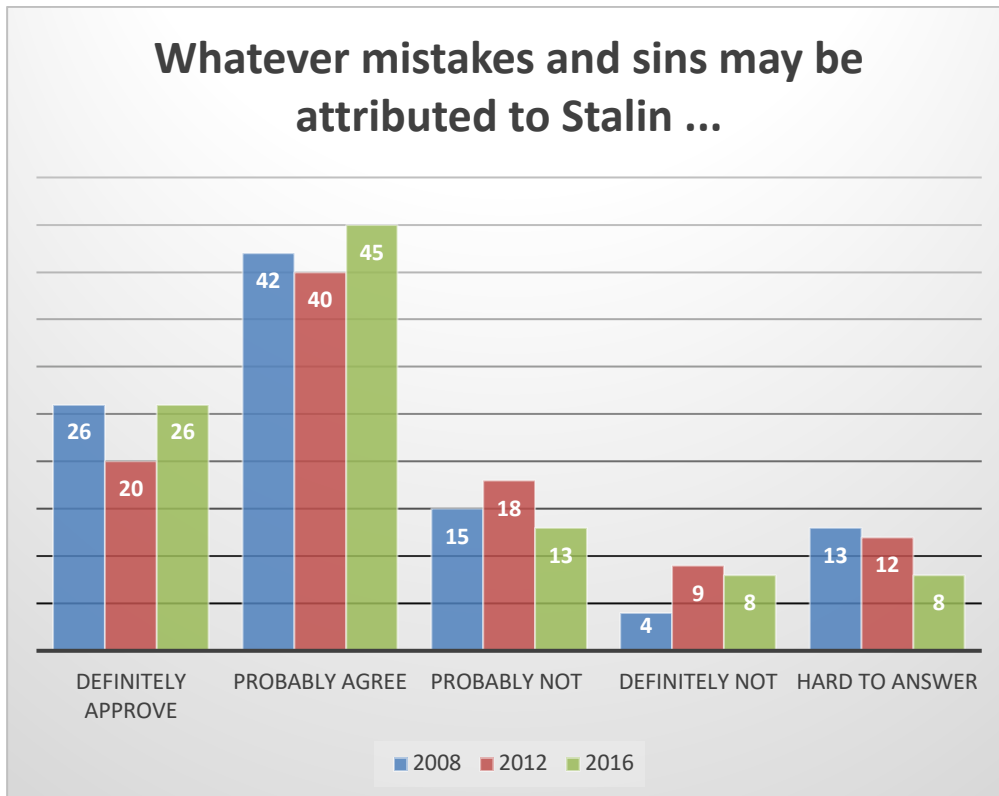
All surveys indicate without exception that the essential source of the positive perception of Stalin is his role as a wartime commander, as the following table shows. Respondents were asked to respond to the claim that "Whatever mistakes and sins may be attributed to Stalin, the most important thing is that, under his leadership, our people were victorious in World War II"?

Graph 2: Whatever mistakes and sins may be attributed to Stalin, the most important thing is that, under his leadership, our people were victorious in World War II"?³⁵

³³ Levada Center 25.3.2016.

³⁴ See Leontii Byzov, "Uroven odobrenia Stalina rossijanami pobil istoricheskii regord," *RBK* 25 November, 2019. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/04/2019/5cb0bb979a794780a45>.

³⁵ Levada Center 25.3.2016.



The essential question rising from these surveys is to what extent are we able to make conclusions about a Stalinist turn in Russian public opinion? Surveys show inescapably that, at a certain level, Stalin is respected, but to what extent are there grounds for claiming Stalin's rehabilitation or a revival of the Stalin cult? Rather than speaking about the rehabilitation of Stalin the question is about conservative history politics and in particular about the interpretation of history through the lenses of authoritarian statism, which have fed popular opinion's cynically positive perception of Stalin's role in Russia's state history.

Medvedev's attempts to rewrite history

To understand why Dmitrii Medvedev's presidential term appears to be in some respect a statistical exception, we have to discuss the development of Russia's history politics of that time. Although our interest is in history politics, we have already also seen that it has definitely not been the only factor influencing the development.

After Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 and glasnost in the second half of the 1980s, the next attempt at de-Stalinisation occurred thirty years later during Medvedev's term in 2008-2012. It was launched as a part of Russia's modernization politics, and was an attempt to re-establish Russia's

relationship with the West. The campaign led by the top leadership,³⁶ had two targets. First was a response to the challenge posed by the former eastern European countries to Russia's dominant interpretation of the GPW and Stalin's role as a commander-in-chief. Furthermore, the campaign also had a domestic aim; it was a significant state-led attempt to give a new, authorised, non-ideological statist interpretation of the GPW and Stalin. In doing so, it contributed to the dispute between patriots and communists on the one side, and liberals and anti-Stalinists on the other.

The new narrative positioned Russia's future with the other big European powers (without the Stalinist "dark history") as somehow a continuity of the anti-Hitler alliance and the liberator of Europe. However, there was also another (counter)stream, which defined Russia as a unique Eurasian imperial power and civilisation continuing its own separate historical form of state and political system. Within this framework, Stalin was often perceived as a historical necessity, comparable to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, as President Putin formulated it later in 2017.³⁷

After the Munich speech in 2007³⁸ and the war with Georgia in 2008, Russia had become trapped in a vicious circle of history argumentation with her neighbours, and this harmed her political goals, both foreign and domestic. The 2010 Victory Day commemoration offered the chance for the regime to present a new interpretation of Stalin and the GPW. President Medvedev's statements in May 2010 are remarkable illustrations of the attempt, which was even defined in some media comments as a sign of "the third wave of Russian de-Stalinisation". Medvedev and PM Putin recognised Stalinist crimes publicly, they condemned the Katyn massacre as a crime, and Medvedev blamed Stalin and his henchmen for it.³⁹

³⁶ The full trio, President Medvedev, PM Putin and Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov contributed to the orchestrated campaign of de-Stalinisation.

³⁷ *The Moscow Times* 11.5.2015.

³⁸ In 2007 at the Security Conference in Munich, Putin criticised the USA for unipolar dominance of the world and its "almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations", declaring Russia's defiant stance to this hegemony.

³⁹ Lipman, Masha. 2010. "The Third Wave of Russian De-Stalinization." *Foreign Policy* December 16, 2010. Retrieved 26.1.2018 from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/16/the-third-wave-of-russian-de-stalinization/>

On May 7, 2010 *Izvestiia* published President Medvedev's interview on Stalin's role in the Great Patriotic War,⁴⁰ and it was followed by a new, symbolically-strong message from the Victory Day parade, when for the first time in history troops from NATO countries marched in Red Square. A revised interpretation of the Second World War, and denunciation of Stalin's crimes, were intended to make Russia a more acceptable partner for the West and Russia's neighbours.

In the *Izvestiia* interview, Medvedev stressed that Victory Day did not celebrate the victory of Stalin, his totalitarian regime and his generals, but was the victory of the people. The headline of *Vedomosti* (7.5.2010) declared: 'Medvedev: "People won the war, not Stalin"'. In fact, Medvedev defied public opinion in denouncing Stalin's crimes without any reservations related to the GPW: "So, despite the fact that he (Stalin) worked hard, despite the fact that under his leadership the country flourished in certain respects, what was done to our own people cannot be forgiven." Medvedev attempted to distance victory in the war from the Soviet Union – a "totalitarian regime" which pursued its own interests after the War in Eastern Europe – and to shift the credit for the victory to the people and the Red Army.⁴¹

However, Medvedev's interview was walking a tightrope when he aimed at praising victory in the war and thereby keeping patriots and Stalin's admirers⁴² satisfied, while simultaneously condemning Stalin and appealing to the West and to Russian liberals. Stalin as the commander-in-chief and the GPW proved to be an unbridgeable gap in Russia's statist history politics. Medvedev made a concession to those who still admired Stalin as a war leader, but at the same time he made clear the state's negative stance to Stalin. For the first time in Russia's history, Stalin's pictures were forbidden on the streets during the Victory Day commemoration.

Besides taking a stern stance on Stalin's crimes, Medvedev also referred to other sources of pain in Russia's relations with its neighbours, namely the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries:

⁴⁰ Dmitry Medvedev, "Interview" in *Izvestiia*, May 7, 2010. <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/295>>

⁴¹ Dmitry Medvedev, "Interview."

⁴² He admitted that veterans and people of *their* generation had the right to admire Stalin because of their wartime experience: "Everyone has the right to their own opinion. These personal assessments have nothing to do with official attitudes towards Stalin."

“But the historians’ art and the ordinary person’s common sense lie in the ability to distinguish between the Red Army and the Soviet state’s mission during World War II and the events that followed. Yes, this can be very hard to do in real life, but it has to be done. I repeat: without the Red Army, without the colossal sacrifice the Soviet people laid on the altar of war, Europe would be a different place. There would be no prosperous, flourishing, steadily developing Europe today, that is for sure. One would have to be deaf not to heed these arguments.”⁴³

Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov continued in the same vein in connecting Russia’s anti-Stalinism with the country’s reliability as an international partner when speaking in the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2010.⁴⁴ He spoke for the new relationship between the United States, Europe and Russia and the need for wider cooperation: “New Russia has officially condemned Stalinism, and never advocated its ideology and practices.” He did not hide the motivation of the new history politics in describing Russia’s future expectations of Europe: “This (9 May 1945) is our common victory. The victory of those values that make us human. We all want the same for our children and grandchildren – peace, prosperity, mutual respect, free exchange of ideas in an open society. In other words, we want a common future.”

Medvedev expressed Russia’s future horizon even more forthrightly than Lavrov when he gave reasons for the “Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests” he had established in 2009.⁴⁵ Medvedev admitted that the motivation for establishing the Commission was the “falsification of Russia’s war history” by some politicians who were trying to score political points. After that, he defined the role of the Commission in classical terms of history politics: “Its aim is to address the question of what future we will build, what memory we will leave our children and grandchildren, what they will know and think about the war and what lessons they

⁴³ Interview in *Izvestiia*, May 7, 2010. <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/295>> [accessed 12.02.2013]

⁴⁴ Address by Sergey Lavrov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Parliamentary Assembly Session: 26 to 30 April 2010*, Strasbourg, 29 April 2010. <http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/pa_session/april_2010/20100429_disc_lavrov_EN.asp?> [accessed 12.02.2013]

⁴⁵ The Commission did not have any real achievements and was terminated in 2012.

will learn from it.”⁴⁶ His arguments resemble those that President Putin used after his re-election in 2012.

As it soon became clear, the de-Stalinisation campaign was not only difficult but ultimately it also failed to reconcile a divided Russian popular opinion and rebuild relations with the West. The outcome was that in surveys on Stalin, the confusion increased and the proportion of respondents who ticked the indifferent response increased considerably. However, there is one clear change in our time frame (in 2008) although it is not possible to interpret it as a result of Medvedev’s attempt to rewrite history. The exception concerns the question of Stalin’s role in state development. In 2008 the proportion of positive respondents dropped to 39 per cent, compared to a 14 per cent higher proportion (53%) five years earlier and in 2009, when it returned to a higher level, 49 per cent.⁴⁷ In this respect, the explanation of this exception is something else than Medvedev’s state-led initiatives since the survey was published in February 2008. The development led to this outcome evolved during the last year of Putin’s presidency.

There are also some indications that the attitude to history in particular among the younger generation has changed somewhat. In contrast to the memory politics of the Soviet Union, it seems that people would rather remember and deal with the negative sides of history than forget them. In VTsIOM⁴⁸ a survey was asked whether respondents think that it is necessary to erect memory plaques, busts, portraits, and quotations of Stalin in public places. Before the question, the respondents were informed that one of Moscow’s high schools had hung a memory plaque for Stalin on the wall. 62 per cent of all respondents answered positively, and the strongest support came from the youngest cohort of respondents. 77 per cent of respondents between 18 and 24 years of age endorsed the need to remember Stalin. The difference of support between them and the oldest, Soviet generation, over 60 years old, is big. Among the oldest generation support for Stalin’s commemoration was 25 per cent smaller than among the youngest. The strongest (57%) motivation for all respondents who answered positively was rather neutral: Stalin “is part of our history, our children have to know about him”. The second reason supported by 18 per cent was to show gratitude to Stalin for the victory in the GPW. This was a somewhat unexpected result in the light of the aforementioned surveys concerning the popular perception of Stalin’s role as a state and war leader. It is also worth pondering

⁴⁶ Izvestiia 7.9.2010.

⁴⁷ Levada 25.3.2016.

⁴⁸ VTsIOM 20.7.2017.

on the reasons why the youngest generation supported most the commemoration of Stalin. The reasons often mentioned have been the lack of knowledge of the younger generation on Stalin's crimes, as well as history teaching in schools, patriotic education and a nationalistic political climate.

That said, although the major reason for supporting the commemoration of Stalin in different ways can be interpreted as a rather neutral 'historical fact', the undertone of the motivation is to see him in a positive light. This became clear when respondents were asked whether they wanted to set up memorials for those who suffered under Stalin's crimes. Only 28 per cent wanted to remember this dark side of Stalin. It is also noteworthy that the youngest cohort of respondents between 18 and 24 years old answered most positively (33%) of all respondents (28%) to this question.⁴⁹ These surveys give us to some extent contradictory results if we juxtapose them with the often discussed generational approach to Russia. A quite common expectation has been that after the passing away of the war veterans and the older Soviet generation the younger generations will introduce a more liberal climate into Russia. Surveys which have been used in this article indicate that attitudes and popular opinion are multifaceted phenomena and these results do not provide strong evidence to confirm the claim or to disapprove it.

Conclusions

The research question we wanted to answer in this article was, do we have evidence or signs of a revival of the Stalin cult, how should we interpret Stalin's growing popularity in surveys during recent years, and to what extent has this been the result of a conservative turn in Putin's history politics? The question was discussed within the frame of the Russian conservative turn and history politics.

We do not find evidence from surveys to claim a rebirth of Stalin's cult or that a positive perception of Stalin has increased in a statistically significant fashion during Putin's presidency. It has grown significantly from the last years of the USSR but the real leap to the higher, contemporary level occurred already during Yeltsin's second presidential term. After that, during Putin's and Medvedev's terms, the positive perception of Stalin has stayed stable in surveys, prevailing approximately within the margin of error with the exception of a couple of short-term, temporary changes.

⁴⁹ VTsIOM 20.7.2017.

These temporary changes have mostly occurred during crises, and they have not only influenced the popular perception of Stalin, but also peoples' broader interpretation of Russian history. In this respect, the role of the conservative turn and history politics has played a smaller role in the development and changes of Russia's political climate and people's attitudes to their own history, Stalin, and Putin than external crises, internal discontent and growing criticism of the leaders.

Societies in crisis or under threat usually seek strong leaders and stability, and this is also evident in Russia in her conservative cultural turn. One embodiment of that mood has been that that Putin's strong presidency has been endorsed in many surveys. Putin's support has rocketed since the Ukrainian crisis, and Stalin and the founding father of the Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinsky, have improved their support ratings. In this context, Stalin's popularity is not a separate zone of public opinion but rather a part of the global phenomenon that has resently brought to power many authoritarian and populist leaders. In writing this we have not yet seen the effect of Navalny's imprisonment and the accompanying demonstrations on popular opinion and Putin's ratings.

It is also indicative that moving from the state level to that of individuals, norms, and values, the perceptions of Stalin change. In this respect he is perceived as a leader who is guilty of crimes and the destruction of innocent people, which cannot be forgiven. This has also been the openly-declared position of all Russia's presidents.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the GPW has been an essential source of Russia's new identity politics, with President Yeltsin establishing the tradition of its contemporary annual commemoration with parades as a part of his national consensus policy. In this canon, Stalin is part of the nation's patriotic narrative, the guarantor of the nation's existence, and is thus inseparably attached to the state and its survival through glorious victories. Against this background, Medvedev's attempt to detach Stalin as a Soviet dictator from victory in the GPW, which itself represents an epoch-making event and an essential identity marker of Russia's history, was an almost impossible move.

As long as the glorified version of the Great Patriotic War appears to be the founding element of Russian state identity, representations of Stalin as the commander-in-chief will be unavoidably intertwined with the glory and success of the Russian state, leaving the sufferings of individuals and even nations overshadowed. Although the nation's basic need to establish a common glorious narrative of the past easily leaves alternative narratives in the margins, the popular perception of Stalin is dominated by the dichotomy of individual and state frameworks. From the individual

perspective, Stalin is condemned as a ruthless and criminal dictator, but in the state frame he is respected as a saviour of the state and nation.

It is noticeable that in surveys on Stalin as a national leader, quite often almost half of the respondents are indifferent, a quite stable one third has a positive perception of him, and about 20 per cent has had in recent years a negative perception of him. The tendency during the last ten years has been a decreasing proportion of negative perceptions, increasing the proportion of indifferent respondents. We also see some indication of a new, evolving phenomenon in approaching state history without normative ideological or political attitudes as the aforementioned VTsIOM survey on commemoration of Stalin shows. This feature can be interpreted as a counter reaction to, on the one hand, the Soviet history politics of forgetting, and on the other, the normative anti-Soviet history politics of the 1990s. Patriotic education and a lack of knowledge of Stalinism can also explain part of this reaction. The non-normative state history underlining the state's continuity through all periods of history matches perfectly with Putin's declarations on how to interpret history, a line that can be denominated conservative, state-centred history politics.

However, we do not have any reason to believe that the history of Stalin has ended, or that Stalin's presence in Russian discourse and the contestation of his role in the fate of the state and people is over. There is a state-led identity politics embedded in patriotic education and the supply of symbols like the commemoration practices of GPW, the Immortal Regiment parade captured by the United Russia Party, the military Victory Day parades and the prevailing conservative cultural values of society which support Stalin's positive reputation. This policy has been challenged by the international and academic research community, discussions crossing borders, critical citizens and a wide popular opinion denouncing Stalin's repression, defining him as a criminal, and the majority opinion who do not want the Stalin type of leadership to return to power.