

The rehabilitation of Stalin—an ideological cornerstone of the new Kremlin politics

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29 February 2000

The replacement of Boris Yeltsin by Vladimir Putin as president of Russia signifies not only a change in the personal composition of the Kremlin leadership, but also a shift in political emphasis. By forging an alliance with the Duma (Russian parliament) Communist Party faction under Gennady Zyuganov, the Kremlin has departed from its official liberal-democratic orientation, and now regards Stalin's heirs as its strategic partners.

This change in course did not take place overnight. It was already being prepared under the cover of the Yeltsin regime. But now the Kremlin no longer feels the need for concealment and is announcing its change in ideological orientation. It is not doing this by means of an official document. Instead, a number of influential political newspapers and commentators are expressing what the Kremlin, for understandable reasons, does not wish to say on its own behalf. Among these organs are the newspaper *Nyezavissimaya Gazeta*, which is controlled by oligarch Boris Berezovsky and editor-in-chief Vitaly Tretyakov.

Taking the occasion of Joseph Stalin's birthday to review the Duma elections, *Nyezavissimaya Gazeta* published an article on December 22, 1999 that is presumably the most accurate reflection of the new Kremlin line to date. The article is entitled “Stalin—Our One and All”, with the subheading “Russian Reformism as a Dictatorship”.

The article, penned by Tretyakov, attempts to justify authoritarianism and dictatorship as necessary and civilising instruments of change in Russia, while at the same time seeking to rehabilitate Stalin in public opinion as “one of the great statesmen of the twentieth century”.

It must be admitted that the article contains some valid insights—especially where the author underscores the correlation between the current regime and Stalinism. “We have no idea”, writes Tretyakov, “how much in our private lives—not to mention politics or the state—originates from what Stalin *developed personally*, or was conceived and developed under his *personal* leadership. Most important of all, however, is the fact that our entire ‘*nomenklatura*’-based, bureaucratic system was almost completely cut to size by and for Stalin. Genetically, today's government official is a Stalinist, even if he has an anti-Stalinist attitude.”

All of that is entirely correct, as are some of the characteristics of Stalin's reign that Tretyakov describes: “In actual fact, Stalin re-installed the empire and the monarchy (albeit, not a hereditary monarchy). The nation, the state and the reforms were of greater

value to Stalin than the population, the people or the individual.”

This is followed by an, in some ways, insightful characterisation of today's Russian politicians. “And are our reformers of a different calibre than Stalin?” he asks, and then continues: “The enlightened *chekist* [secret policeman] Vladimir Putin, the enlightened hard-line reformer Anatoly Chubais and the enlightened oligarch Boris Berezovsky—these are, in effect, three of Stalin's faces in today's world.”

But what is Stalin? “The quintessence of Russian pragmatism” and the “quintessence of Russian reformism in its cruelty, inhumanity and brutality—rarely effective and usually a failure.”

We agree that Stalin lives on in today's Russian politicians. But how can Stalin be the “quintessence of Russian reformism”? And, indeed, what is meant by “Russian” reformism? Does this include the October Revolution of 1917, for instance, with its clear-cut internationalist perspective, since it introduced great reforms? If, on the other hand, what is meant is harshness and brutality, these are aspects that have emerged throughout the history of the world up to this very day. What is so specifically “Russian” about them?

The author does not attempt to disentangle these contradictions. His assignment is to crudely adapt history to the current political requirements of the Kremlin. This rapidly becomes clear as he continues.

“Stalin created the ideal monarchy,” Tretyakov writes, “but, of its two possible products—a *nomenklatura*/government official class or a civil society—he could only bring forth the former. Therein lies his limitation. That is his curse.”

This a false balance sheet. Contrasting a “nomenclature/official class” with a “civil society” is fallacious in the light of Soviet history (providing, as is apparently the case, one is to understand the latter as meaning a society with a bourgeois structure). As Trotsky already pointed out in the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had come into being as a privileged social stratum, was merely a transitional phase in the formation of a new class of capitalist owners, i.e., the basic element of a “civil society”. The only force which could have stopped this counterrevolutionary process was the working class.

Far from preventing the restoration of capitalism and the victory of “civil society”, Stalin actually paved the way for it by “creating” the *nomenklatura*. And it is precisely *because* of its origins in the *nomenklatura* that today's Russian capitalism is so corrupt and criminal.

Further along in the article, the author attempts to place Stalin at

the same level as great figures of history, comparing him in particular with Peter the Great. “Stalin, of all leaders, was the one who put into practice the geopolitical and industrial legacy of Peter the Great [the Russian czar who ruled from 1682 to 1725]. And more than that—he surpassed it.”

“Peter the Great was a reformer and oriented to the West,” Tretyakov continues. “True, he was a dictator, but an enlightened one. And was Stalin not a reformer? Was he not enlightened?” For Tretyakov, the only difference between Stalin and Peter the Great is that Peter was oriented to the West, while Stalin was “a Byzantine who believed in Russia as a special form of civilisation.”

The article ends with the following thoughts: Stalin did many “terrible” things, but also much that was “honourable” and “good”. So: “Don’t badmouth Stalin. Stalin is our one and all, just like Pushkin. Two poles of Russian—and, not least of all, political—culture.”

The political significance of the *Nyezavissimaya Gazeta* article is obvious: the intention is to rehabilitate Stalin and make his legacy part of state politics in the interests of the new ruling class. As for the quality of the arguments put forward to this end, the whole construction rests on sophistry and historical falsification.

Tretyakov simply ignores the historical background. The fact that Peter the Great was a reformer, Stalin came along later in history and both of them “dirtied their hands” is no proof that Stalin was also a reformer. Determining the actual historical significance of an event or historical figure requires examining which *social forces* this person based himself on, and in *whose interests* and *towards what development of society* he acted.

Merely posing this question is sufficient to demonstrate the immense difference between historical figures such as Peter the Great and Stalin. Peter fought against centuries-old Russian backwardness and isolation. He based himself upon the most progressive social forces of the time, promoted the development of individual initiative and directly addressed the necessity of incorporating the experience of Western Europe into Russian society and closing ranks with developments in the West.

By founding Saint Petersburg, he opened a window to Europe and broke with the Muscovite-Asiatic traditions of the past. He forced the boyars [Russian nobles] to shave off their beards and fought against the system of hereditary official positions engendered by patriarchic traditions. Peter availed himself of barbaric methods and not infrequently settled accounts cruelly and brutally with his opponents. But he pushed Russia forward, and did not need to lie in the process, because his intentions and words were one with his deeds.

Stalin was a completely different type of politician. To become dictator of the Soviet Union, he had to break with his revolutionary past. He thus did not incorporate the best values of modern civilisation—on the contrary, he was the embodiment of nationalist reaction against the greatest revolutionary movement in the history of the world.

Stalin revived the worst aspects of Russian backwardness which had been openly and mercilessly swept aside by the October Revolution. Instead of recognising the supremacy of world economy, Stalin cultivated the restricted and nationalistic concept

of “socialism in one country”. Instead of promoting creative activity and free thought, he organised inquisitorial trials and witch-hunts. In his politics, he based himself upon the new caste of privileged bureaucrats and destroyed the best elements of society—first and foremost the leaders of the revolution and broad sections of socialist intellectuals and workers. Stalin pulled the country back. That is why lies and the continual rewriting of history became necessary elements of his method.

If there is one event in Russia during the past two centuries that could, in a certain sense, be called a continuation of Peter’s reforms, it is the October Revolution of 1917. Both events provided the country with a mighty impetus for developing from backwardness to civilisation. Both events brought forth outstanding leaders and cultural progress. As opposed to this, the Stalin regime embodied counterrevolution and historical retrogression. It paved the way for the catastrophe that befell Russia in 1991.

Equally monstrous is Tretyakov’s construction of a connection between Stalin and Pushkin. They do not form “two poles of Russian culture”. Or, to be more precise, they do form these two poles, but in a completely different sense than Tretyakov would have us believe.

If one is to follow the *Nyezavissimaya Gazeta* editor’s train of thought, Pushkin is the quintessence of Russian culture, and Stalin is the quintessence of Russian politics. But in actual fact, there are *good* traditions of “Russian culture, including politics” and there are *bad* traditions of Russian culture and politics. Pushkin and the Russian Revolution of 1917 belong to the first category, Stalin to the second. These two traditions stand in contradiction to each other—they do not supplement one another.

Pushkin’s distinctive traits were free-mindedness, independence, a farsighted European outlook and disdain for all forms of “jingoist” patriotism. As opposed to this, Stalin combined within himself the worst elements of Russian backwardness: inertia, narrow-mindedness, prejudice and despotism.

This, then, is the balance sheet: The necessity of rehabilitating Stalin and his methods of “state leadership” is the clearest expression of the new Russian capitalism’s place in history. Incapable of solving the problems of Russia’s population, it attempts to survive by invoking the darkest shades of the past. That in itself is reason enough why it must be banished to the realm of the shades as quickly as possible.



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