

Attitudes to Stalin show Ukrainians are not Russians

Taras Kuzio, University of Alberta | *Financial Times*, Apr 16, 2015

Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, likes to say that **Russians and Ukrainians are one people**. Such views are reminiscent of the Tsarist Russian Empire and negate Ukraine's recognition as a separate nation in the Soviet Union, whose collapse he laments as the "major geopolitical disaster" of the past century. Moscow, indeed, views the Ukrainian state as **at best a legend or fantasy**.

Yet Russians and Ukrainians hold widely divergent attitudes to their Soviet past. Nearly half of Russians believe the "sacrifices" (mass murder) made under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin were justified by rapid economic growth. Nearly 40 per cent of Russians view Stalin positively, according to **a poll by the Levada Centre**.

The pollsters say Stalin's rehabilitation has come about because the current Russian leaders "seek the legitimization and justification of their actions by resorting to the past. It gives them a certain endorsement."

When Putin came to power in 2000, most Russians had a negative view of Stalin. This has changed thanks to media and educational policies that have focused the public mind on Soviet industrialization and victory in the "Great Patriotic War" while ignoring the millions who were murdered. Re-Stalinisation began in 2007, when the west was courting Putin and Russia was a member of the G8. Putin ordered teachers and historians to revise their texts to write positively about Stalin as one of the most successful leaders of the USSR whose aim was "the restoration – political and territorial – of the Russian Empire".

Stalin's purges were henceforth to be viewed in a positive way because they created a **"new governing class, able to cope with modernisation"**. In Russia there is not a single monument to Stalin's crimes against humanity. Instead, the Russian Military History Society, a body created by Putin in December 2012, is planning to open museums dedicated to Stalin.

We would be rightly alarmed if half of all Germans believed the "sacrifices" of World War II were justified because Adolf Hitler had built autobahns and eliminated unemployment. Thankfully, Germany and Ukraine have consciously debunked and destroyed Hitler in the former case and Hitler and Stalin in the latter. Huge majorities throughout Ukraine (outside the Donbas and Crimea) view Stalin negatively and

describe the 1933 artificial famine, known as the holodomor, as a “genocide”.

De-Stalinisation has been taking place in Ukraine for nearly three decades. On April 9, Ukraine’s parliament adopted laws opening public access to Soviet archives (they remain closed in Russia), on Ukraine’s participation in the defeat of Nazism in World War II and no longer using the name “Great Patriotic War”, denouncing Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism and [banning their symbols](#).

Russia has condemned critical Ukrainian research and publications on Stalinism and the opening of monuments to his crimes and museums on the holodomor, which killed an estimated 4m people. Over 500 monuments in Ukraine to Vladimir Lenin have been toppled since the Euromaidan began in late 2013. [Russia condemned](#) Ukraine’s new laws for equating Nazism and Soviet totalitarianism.

Ukraine’s legislation is in keeping with laws adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Parliament to commemorate August 23 as a [Day of Remembrance for the victims of Stalinism and Nazism](#).

Russia’s re-Stalinisation has three outcomes.

Firstly, it underpins the choice to build an authoritarian Russian empire over a democratic nation state, which in turn means an inability to equate Nazi and Soviet crimes while ignoring Stalin’s [three-year collaboration with Hitler](#) in 1939-1941.

Secondly, Russia and Ukraine have been left with two very different identities after a quarter of a century of destalinisation in Ukraine and re-Stalinisation under Putin.

Thirdly, Russian television has become full of lies, disinformation and anti-western diatribe on a scale not seen since the pre-détente days of the 1950s and 1960s. One recent example is the [made-up reports](#) of the death of a young girl from Ukrainian shelling. The BBC’s Natalia Antelava remarked that such lies “fuel the hatred that drives this war”, visible in the execution by separatists of Ukrainian prisoners viewed as “fascists”, an act [condemned by Amnesty International](#) as a war crime.

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