

END NOTE

ATTITUDES TO SOVIET PAST REFLECT NOSTALGIA, PRAGMATISM

By Taras Kuzio

The past year has witnessed the emergence of three distinct trends in approaches both in Russia and some other CIS states to their shared Soviet legacy. One such trend is nostalgia for the relative security of the Josef Stalin era. Second, certain anniversaries of former republican or Soviet leaders are commemorated, while others are ignored. Third, in the ongoing process of state building, both Belarus and Russia are reintroducing Soviet symbols, either together with tsarist ones (in the case of Russia), or in an adapted form (Belarus).

In March 2003, outpourings of nostalgia were seen across Russia on the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death. The Public Opinion Foundation found that 36 percent of Russians viewed Stalin in a positive light, compared to the 29 percent who viewed him negatively. The Russian State Archives, and those of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Federal Protection Service, prepared an exhibition on the Stalin era, including some personal effects and letters from Soviet citizens written on his death.

Vladimir Malynkovitch, a Russophile Russian-speaking liberal based in Kyiv, is alarmed by this high level of nostalgia for Stalin. In his opinion, Russian television now shows more Stalinist films than it did during the Leonid Brezhnev era, when Malynkovitch was briefly arrested as a member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group and then expelled from the USSR.

Meanwhile, the leaderships of CIS states are selectively commemorating the anniversaries of certain Soviet leaders. In January 2003, Moldovan President and Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin bestowed the Order of the Republic on former Moldovan Communist leader Ivan Bodiul on his 85th birthday. Bodiul was first secretary of the Communist Party of Moldavia from 1961-80. In March, the Russian State Duma voted to commemorate the centenary of the birth of the former chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, Nikolai Kosygin. Kosygin headed that body from 1964-80. And in February, Ukraine celebrated at the official level for the first time the 85th anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Shcherbytsky, who headed the Communist Party of Ukraine from 1972-89. Bodiul and Shcherbytsky

resolutely opposed Romanian and Ukrainian nationalism, respectively.

The commemoration of Shcherbytsky's anniversary was nonetheless surprising because his period in office is associated with Russification, the wide-scale arrest of Ukrainian dissidents and the Brezhnev "era of stagnation." In addition, Shcherbytsky went ahead with the May Day parade in 1986 just days after the Chornobyl nuclear accident. By contrast, the 95th anniversary of the birth of Petro Shelest, Shcherbytsky's predecessor as Communist Party of Ukraine first secretary, which also fell in February 2003, was ignored. Shelest is often compared favorably to Shcherbytsky because he supported the Ukrainian language and culture and is therefore believed to be closer in spirit to the Ukrainian national communists of the 1920s.

Such contrasts between Shelest and Shcherbytsky are, however, artificial. Writing in the May issue of the Kyiv monthly "Krytyka," leading historian Yuriy Shapoval says it is absurd to claim Shelest was a "liberal" and Shcherbytsky an "orthodox communist." What differentiates them the most, Shapoval believes, is that Shcherbytsky knew how to hold on to power for 17 years with support from Moscow. This is the reason why Ukraine's contemporary centrist elites admire Shcherbytsky so much.

Leonid Kravchuk and the "sovereign communists" within the Communist Party of Ukraine were also seen as "national communists" in 1990-94 both in Ukraine and abroad when Kravchuk was parliamentary speaker and then president. But Ukraine's "sovereign communists" evolved into centrists, and it is those centrists who are today commemorating Shcherbytsky's anniversary, but not Shelest's, even though it would have been more logical for them to take Shelest, who was removed in 1971 after being accused of "national deviationism," as their role model rather than Shcherbytsky. Yet on Shelest's anniversary no newspaper articles or books were published or flowers placed on his grave.

Belarus and Russia, meanwhile, are selectively resurrecting Soviet symbols. In Belarus, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is the quintessential Soviet Belarusian patriot who presides over a regime steeped in Soviet nostalgia. In 2002, Belarus adopted a new anthem that, in fact, is the Soviet Belorussian anthem ("My Belarustsy," composed in 1955) with references to Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin removed. In Russia, President Putin and his party of power are seeking to incorporate both tsarist and Soviet symbols in a new Eurasianist ideology.

Russia under former President Boris Yeltsin had difficulties introducing new national symbols. In April 1997, the Communist Party moved in the Duma an amendment to restore the Soviet flag and anthem. The proposal obtained 239 votes with only 90 against, but fell short of the 300 votes necessary for constitutional amendments. In a

January 1998 vote, only a quarter of the Duma deputies backed the new (non-Soviet) flag, coat of arms, and anthem favored by Yeltsin. The majority of deputies voted to preserve the Soviet anthem.

As late as 2000, only 11 percent of Russians knew the lyrics of the Russian national anthem, whereas 79 percent could sing the Soviet one. Putin overcame Yeltsin's inability to resolve which national symbols Russia should adopt by reviving the Soviet-era anthem with new lyrics. In a State Duma vote in December 2000, only nine months after Putin came to power, 378 deputies voted to reinstate the Soviet anthem. Only a small minority of 53 from the SPS and Yabloko factions opposed the move.

In Russia, the tricolor flag and tsarist coat of arms have been restored alongside the revamped Soviet anthem. The Russian military has similarly reinstated Soviet Red Army insignia. Russia's national symbols therefore reflect a fusion of tsarist and Soviet symbols that make up Russia's emerging Eurasianist identity. Recent moves to bolster this new Russian identity appear to be rooted more in pragmatism than nostalgia. Faced with a dwindling pool of manpower to draw on, Moscow has invited all CIS citizens regardless of ethnicity to serve in the Russian armed forces. And the Russian Foreign Ministry is currently preparing a campaign to have Russian declared an official working language throughout the CIS.

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