CONTESTED HISTORIES

STALIN STATUE

Novosibirsk, Russia

38.0318, 78.4805



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Executive Summary

In 2019, a bust of Soviet leader and dictator Joseph Stalin was unveiled in Novosibirsk, Russia's third-largest city. The erection of this statue followed decades of lobbying by a local grassroots initiative. It was met with some pushback by local individuals and institutions who highlighted Stalin's role as perpetrator of mass violence, repression, and terror. Despite demands by the pro-Statue lobby to celebrate Stalin and his wartime leadership with a monument on a public site, the bust was installed on a private site. This case study outlines the controversy in Novosibirsk and argues that it speaks much more broadly to a battleground at the heart of contemporary Russian memory politics: the memory of Stalin and Stalinism in the context of authoritarian revival in Russia.

Introduction

On May 9, 2019, a bust of Soviet leader and dictator Joseph Stalin, accompanied by two commemorative plaques, was unveiled in Novosibirsk, Russia's third-largest city. The erection of this statue followed years of lobbying by local Stalinist activists who sought to celebrate his achievements in the country's history. The project was met with some pushback by local individuals and institutions who highlighted Stalin's role as perpetrator of mass violence, repression, and terror. The pro-Statue lobby wished to celebrate Stalin, his wartime leadership and Novosibirsk's development during Stalin's five-year plans, with a monument on a public site. Following the recommendation of the city's Art Council, the decision was taken for the bust to be installed on a private site, to protect the memorial from potential vandalism, as it could offend some of the city's residents whose families suffered under Stalin.[1] This case study follows the public contestation that developed in the years preceding the erection of the monument and argues that it reflects the broader state of Russia's increasingly authoritarian politics and national myth-making.

Background

Stalin's Legacy

The complex legacy of Stalinism has undergone many transformations in the course of Russian history. The cult of Stalin's personality, presenting him as the *Vozhd* ('leader') of the nation, was widely and successfully enforced during his tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR (1922-1953). He was portrayed as the leader who led the Soviet Union to victory in World War II, often considered the country's greatest achievement.

After Stalin died in 1953, his positive image was soon challenged by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev. In his 1956 speech delivered at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences,' Khrushchev exposed the grave faults and terrors of Stalin's rule, changing the official presentation of Stalin from a hero to a ruthless dictator.[2] This was accompanied by the renaming of the streets and cities, for instance, the city of Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd in 1961. In addition, there were mass removals of Stalin monuments across the Eastern Bloc, as well as the relocation of Stalin's body from the mausoleum on Red Square. For the remainder of Soviet rule, the presentation of Stalin remained predominantly negative, and a new wave of popular criticism swept the country during perestroika in the late 1980s and beyond, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This wave of protest was significantly supported by the newly established NGO, Memorial (Society), founded in Russia in 1990 to commemorate the victims of Stalinist terror.[3]

However, the positive perceptions of Stalin began to increase during the latter half of Boris Yeltsin's presidency: in the last years of the USSR, only 12% of respondents believed that Stalin

[1] Ольга Яковлева, "Кто и зачем ставит памятники Сталину в России," *Настоящее время*, November 13, 2018.
[2] Kathleen Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR.* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 25.
[3] Ibid., 78-104.

was the most outstanding person in Russian history; in 1994, 20%, whilst at the end of Yeltsin's presidency in 1999, it jumped to 35%.[4] During Putin's rule, and especially after the conflict between Russia and Ukraine started in 2014, when Russian politics took an increasingly authoritarian-conservative turn, the official and public perception of Stalin continued to grow more positive. According to a survey conducted by the independent Levada-centre in 2019, 70% of respondents positively assessed Stalin's contribution to the country, and 51% responded that they treat his figure with admiration, respect, or sympathy.[5] In the last 20 years, more than 130 statues and plaques honouring Stalin have been put up in various cities.[6]

A Stalin Bust in Novosibirsk

In 2006, activists from the Stalinist party VKPB (All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks), headed by local Stalinist activist Alexei Denisyuk, began lobbying for the erection of the Stalin monument in Novosibirsk.[7] The group established a movement named '*Za Stalina*' ('For Stalin'), the aim of which was to raise money for the construction of a Stalin monument and obtain permission from the authorities to erect it in a public space.[8] According to Denisyuk, they aimed to re-establish 'historical justice' for Stalin and make his 'undeniable achievements in leading the country towards victory in the Great Patriotic War' recognised.[9] His group represented a broader community that celebrated Stalin as the war hero of the Second World War, referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). The memory of the Great Patriotic War serves as a nationalist myth to generate solidarity and national pride, and functions as the cornerstone of Russian official political discourse and patriotic identity.[10]

After years of lobbying and multiple rejections from the Artistic Council at the City Hall of Novosibirsk, VKPB finally had their chance when Novosibirsk elected a communist mayor, Anatoly Lokot, in 2014.[11] By 2017, the group had raised over 300.000 Rubles from donations for the bust. In September of that year, a special working group was established by the municipality to select the location for the monument; Denisyuk was included among its members.[12] The bust was made by a local sculptor out of synthetic material, though painted to look like bronze. It was kept at the home of Oleg Metzler, an activist associated with the Russian Communist Youth League (RKSM) and the Vanguard of Red Youth (AKM), for several years, until its installation.[13]

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[4] Markku Kangaspuro, "Dilemma over Stalin: Confronting the Great Patriotic War and the Reputation of Russia." *In Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe* (2021): 180.
[5] РБК. "Уровень одобрения Сталина россиянами побил исторический рекорд," April 16, 2019; Левада-Центр, "Уровень одобрения Сталина россиянами побил исторический рекорд," April 16, 2019; Eva Hartog," Is Stalin Making a Comeback in Russia?" *The Atlantic,* May 19, 2019.
[6] Timofey Neshitov, "The Comeback of a Soviet Dictator," *Spiegel International,* August 08, 2019.
[7] Всесоюзная коммунистическая партия большевиков (ВКПБ), "Пикет по сбору средств на памятник И. В. Сталину в Новосибирске," February 6, 2018.
[8] Иван Стагис, "Новосибирцы просят установить в Сквере героев революции памятник Сталину," *kprfnsk.ru*, July 7, 2016.
[9] Антон Барсуков, "Это глумление над памятью жертв террора," *Сибирь.Реалии*, November 3, 2018.
[10] Daria Khlevnyuk, "'Framing' and 'Screening' the Gulag: Politics of Memory of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin's Repressions in Russian Regions." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 55, no. 3 (September 2022): 25.
[11] Anton Barsukov and Robert Coalson, "Bust in Novosibirsk: Stalin's Legacy Riles Russia's Third-Largest City," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 6, 2018.
[12] Илья Кудиннов, "Сталин уже увековечен, оглянитесь!," *Сибирь.Реалии*, November 28, 2017,
[13] РИА Новости, "В Новосибирске Открыли Памятник Иосифу Сталину," *РИА Новости,* May 9, 2019; Meduza, "'No war but class war!' How a group of communists in Novosibirsk has leveraged Soviet nostalgia to speak out publicly against the invasion of Ukraine," February 28, 2025.

History of the Contestation

Due to Stalin's controversial history, many local residents voiced disapproval of the building of the statue when the local government initiated public discussion in 2018. Many critics of Stalin considered him the source of Soviet repressions, where his political terror was responsible for millions of victims who were sent to labour camps, displaced, or imprisoned. His political governance style also clashed with liberal and human rights ideas.[14] This system of governance relied on extreme centralisation of power, the elimination of political opposition, and the routine use of repression as a means of social and political control. The memory of the repressions is, simultaneously, aligned with more liberal and individualistic ideas focused on the individuals who suffered, while Stalin's celebration as a war hero represents the striving for 'solidarity and national pride.'[15] Under the context of controversy over Stalin's legacy, the city government held public consultations in October 2018 on the subject of the monument.[16] Further discussions preceding the decision to erect the monument generated heated public debate.

In October 2018, the Novosibirsk mayor's office published the results of a 'public discussion' period for the proposal. According to the memo, the office received 243 comments on the proposal, 155 of which were in favour and 85 opposed.[17] The ones in favour praised Stalin as a great leader who provided Russia with 'indisputable service.' In contrast, the ones in opposition condemned him as a tyrant, as some survey respondents' relatives were repressed by Stalin's apparatus. A local activist criticised such results as unreliable and not useful.[18] Another critic of the project, Andrei Pozdnyakov, whose great-grandfather was sent to a labour camp under Stalin's regime, launched an online petition against the monument. It had gathered about 11,500 signatures by mid-2019 and has since stalled, reaching 11,661 signatures in December 2025.[19]

At the same time, the city administration initiated an online discussion, asking the citizens to select one out of three possible locations for the monument: one in the city centre, and two on the outskirts. However, there was no option of voting against the erection of the monument.[20]

On October 30, 2018, the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Political Repressions, a protest against the erection of the monument was staged in the city centre, where dozens of protesters turned up with slogans like: 'no to the monument of Stalin – the executor of my family!'[21] Protesters considered such a monument an insult to the memories of the victims who suffered immensely under the political repressions conducted by Stalin.

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[14] Daria Khlevnyuk, "'Framing' and 'Screening' the Gulag: Politics of Memory of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin's Repressions in Russian Regions." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 55, no. 3 (September 2022): 25.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Anton Barsukov and Robert Coalson, "Bust in Novosibirsk: Stalin's Legacy Riles Russia's Third-Largest City," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 6, 2018.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Андрей Поздняков, 'НЕТ ПАМЯТНИКУ СТАЛИНУ В НОВОСИБИРСКЕ!' November 3, 2018.
[20] РИА Новости, "В Новосибирске Открыли Памятник Иосифу Сталину," *РИА Новости,* May 9, 2019.
[21] Антон Барсуков and Лиля Пальвелева, "Новосибирск: жители вышли на митинг против установки памятника Сталину." *Сибирь.Реалии*, October 30, 2018.

Decision-Making Processes

The decision was eventually made to install the bust not in the House of Officers, as proposed by the city mayor. Instead, due to 'Stalin's controversial role in the history of the country,[22] the monument was placed on the property of the Communist Party headquarters in Novosibirsk, far from the city centre. The Novosibirsk Art Council made this decision fearing the monument could generate a 'negative reaction among a significant portion of the city's residents and would provoke vandalism.'[23] The monument is protected by a tall fence and CCTV against potential vandalism. A three-meter brick wall was erected for the background, the bust placed on a similarly tall granite pedestal, with the text carved out: 'Generalissimo of the Soviet Union Stalin.' Two commemorative plaques were added to the wall behind, one is a song praising Stalin, and the other is Stalin's own quote.[24]

The unveiling of the statue happened on May 9, 2019, the 74th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, amidst traditional and exuberant Victory Day celebrations. The event was attended by some 200 people, mainly elderly residents of Novosibirsk, who came with Stalin portraits, Soviet symbols and flags. The President's press secretary Dmitry Peskov was asked to comment on the monument installation, but he responded that this is 'a local matter', even though 'it cannot be denied that Stalin is a part of our country's history.'[25] A local civil rights activist staged a one-man protest against the Stalin bust outside the Communist Party building, calling the monument 'an embarrassment' for the city.[26] The symbolism of the monument and its ceremonial unveiling may reflect a broader trend evident in narratives that rehabilitate Soviet Stalinist memory and seek to reinstate the myth of Soviet–Russian exceptionalism. This is particularly evident in the growing number of monuments dedicated to Stalin appearing across Russia today. In Surgut, for example, a bust of Stalin was erected illegally, 'just meters from a memorial to the victims of political repression,' one of more than 100 monuments dedicated to Stalin in contemporary Russia, the majority of which were constructed after 2005.[27]

Three years later, on November 3, 2022, the Communist Party published a news article claiming that 'vandals' stuck leaflets to the monument with the slogan: 'Instead of leaves, Communists will hang on the trees.'[28]

Summary and Conclusions

This case study illustrates the struggles that groups and individuals may face when trying to address contested legacies in a country like Russia. In a state where democratic mechanisms are

[22] Anton Barsukov and Robert Coalson, 'Bust In Novosibirsk: Stalin's Legacy Riles Russia's Third-Largest City,' *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, November 6, 2018.
[23] РИА Новости, "В Новосибирске Открыли Памятник Иосифу Сталину," *РИА Новости,* May 9, 2019.
[24] Вадим АЛЕКСЕЕВ, 'Вождь под наблюдением: в Новосибирске после долгих споров открыли бюст Сталина,' *KP.RU*, 9 May, 2019.
[25] Anton Barsukov and Robert Coalson, 'Bust In Novosibirsk: Stalin's Legacy Riles Russia's Third-Largest City,' *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, November 6, 2018.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ольга Яковлева, "Кто и зачем ставит памятники Сталину в России," *Настоящее время*, November 13, 2018.
[28] Любовь Наряднова, 'Идеологический теракт: Вандалы наклеили экстремистские листовки на памятник Сталину,' КПРФ, November 3, 22.

essentially non-existent, and the levels of corruption are very high, the public voice has a very small role to play in resolving such matters. The success of one initiative or another depends on its political alliances and the degree of benevolence shown by those in power, rather than on public opinion. Thus, as indicated in the study, the camp of Denisyuk lobbied for the erection of the Stalin monument for years, but could only achieve its aims after several years of communist mayorship in the city, which, although reluctantly, supported this small public initiative. The apparent lack of involvement by the United Russia party (the ruling political party in Putin's Russia) suggests that the communist support for the project was in line with the Russian government's general view of Stalin's legacy and representation. The protesters, on the other hand, lacked support within the administration, and so their cause largely failed; even though the bust was installed on private property on the outskirts of the city rather than in the very centre, it may still be considered a positive achievement.

The installation of the Stalin monument in Novosibirsk has to be seen as part of the nationwide reappraisal of Stalin's legacy and the creation of new monuments. The history of the Stalin era terror has become increasingly distant to the young generations. At the same time, Putin's rise to power has been accompanied by a new form of patriotism that relies on heroic and bright aspects of the Soviet past. Russian propaganda seems to be whitewashing the history of Stalin and omitting the Great Purge and famine from history school education. Rather than being an isolated local initiative, the Stalin bust in Novosibirsk demonstrates how the rehabilitation of Stalin's image is institutionalised through monument-building that links his legacy to the World War II victory, national unity, and five-year plan prosperity, most visibly through the timing of the unveiling on Victory Day and the commemorative language employed. In this context, Stalin is a part of a wider narrative of Soviet–Russian exceptionalism, while a blind eye is turned on his legacy of repression.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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