

## STALIN TODAY: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

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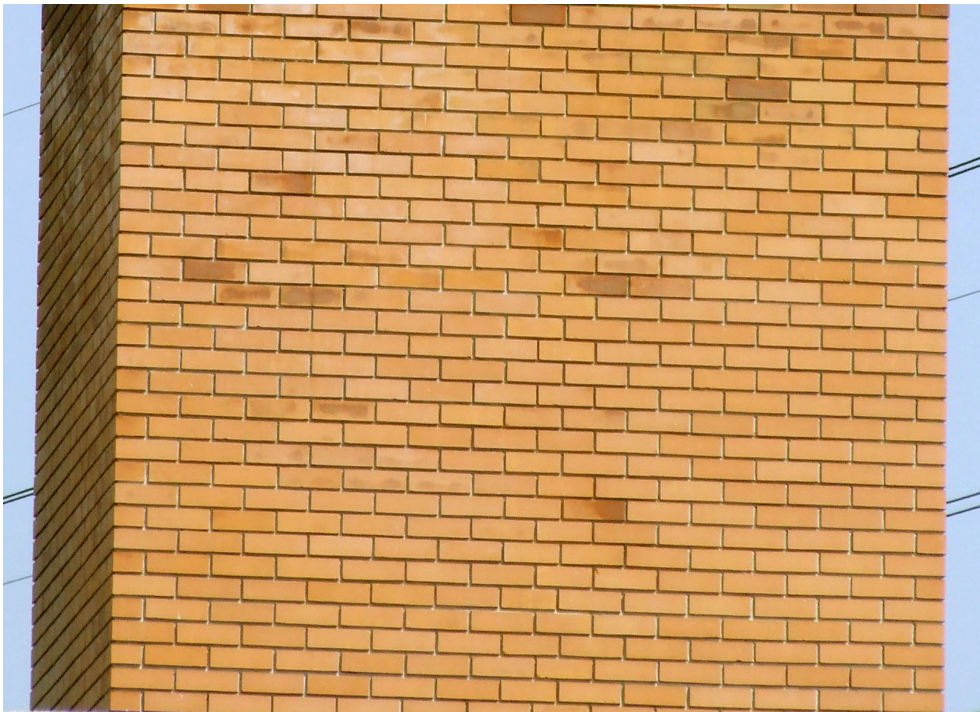
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*By Ivo Mijnsen* – **Stalin continues to grip the imagination even sixty years after his death. While Russian society wavers between nostalgia and condemnation, Switzerland's relations with the country continue to be surprisingly good.**

„One cannot but contemplate how many people he has mercilessly removed from his way. But this thought is immediately followed by the notion that, had he not been harsh and implacable, he would not have been Stalin, and that probably, very probably he would not be where he can now be seen: in complete apotheosis.“ The Swiss emissary to Moscow, Camille Gorgé, wrote these words on the occasion of Joseph Stalin's death on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1953, sixty years ago. The document is part of a recently released collection from the historical project [Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland](#). Switzerland restored diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1946 in recognition of the latter's political weight and in the hope of entering negotiations on restoration of assets in Eastern Europe and Russia, says historian Thomas Bürgisser. Hence, in spite of the Swiss public's stout anti-Communism, relations with the USSR continued to be pragmatic after Stalin's death.

The document shows what a towering figure Stalin was – and continues to be. The majority of books by historians of Russia are still today written about Stalinism, and Western media are quick to draw parallels between autocratic tendencies in contemporary Russia and Stalinist rule. A google search of „Putin is Stalin“ yields almost 30'000 results. Such a comparison is unfounded, as today's Russia is a much more complex and freer society than it was under Stalin. Still, he continues to play a political role.





*Stalin, who turned the Soviet Union into a superpower, continues to preoccupy today's contemporaries. Demolished Stalin-Statue in Hungary. Picture: Wikisource.*

A poll by the independent Levada-Center in Moscow on the occasion of Stalin's death showed that just under half of Russians view Stalin positively and consider him a „wise leader“. At the same time, two thirds see him as a tyrant who killed millions of people, and more than half believe his repressions cannot be justified. Most drastically, only one out of five Russians would want to live in a Stalinist society.

### **A shadow that looms large**

This highly ambiguous image is shaped first and foremost by the experience of the last twenty years, rather than the supposed continuity of a totalitarian political system in Russia: For many, a „benevolent dictator“ who develops and modernizes the country has a certain appeal after the chaotic 1990s and the current leadership's inability to solve basic problems like widespread corruption and neglected infrastructure. Under Putin, who has often spoken of a need for modernization and a more positive view of Russia's history, Stalin's image has at times certainly been shaped to conform to this ideal.

The second source of Stalin's popularity is linked to victory in World War II. Even critical Russian intellectuals credit Stalin for this victory, and its commemoration continues to occupy a crucial position in contemporary Russia. Nonetheless, Stalin's policies during the war against Russia's neighbors (take the Baltic states or Poland) continue to encumber international relations in Eastern Europe, and his crimes against his own people are one source of the widespread distrust of the state.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to claim that Stalin has been rehabilitated in contemporary Russia. Instead, Putin and Medvedev deal with Stalin in an awkward and often contradictory manner. One example is the recent decision to return the name of Stalingrad to the city of Volgograd – albeit only on six days of the year – namely for the commemoration of the battle of Stalingrad. Most Russians oppose a full renaming, and particularly younger people are increasingly indifferent to Stalin.

Equally unlikely is a return of Stalinist imperial policies, in spite of Putin's occasional grand gesture. Russia's elite is too closely connected to the international economy, not least because most of its assets lie on bank accounts in Switzerland and other tax havens. Relations between Russia and Switzerland continue to be good sixty years after Stalin's death. This year, Russia even invited Switzerland to the G20 meetings. Not surprisingly, it listed Swiss knowledge of the international financial system as the main reason.

*Ivo Mijnsen (31) lives in Zurich and is currently spending three months in Moscow. He is a PhD candidate at the*

*Chair for Eastern European History, University of Basel and deals with war memory in the Soviet Union.*

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