

Stalin's Image Returns to Moscow's Subway, Honoring a Brutal History

The Kremlin has increasingly embraced the Soviet dictator and his legacy, using them to exalt Russian history in a time of war, but he remains a deeply divisive figure in Russia.



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Reporting from the Moscow metro

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After a nearly six-decade absence, the face of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator who was not known for sparing lives to achieve his goals, is once again greeting commuters in one of Moscow's ornate subway stations.

A new statue was unveiled by the authorities this month, showing Stalin gazing sagely into the distance, flanked by adoring workers and children holding out flowers to him. A replica of one that was removed in 1966 during a de-Stalinization campaign, the new relief quickly became an attraction, with people leaving flowers, stopping to pose for pictures, including with their children, or just watching pensively.

The sculpture is part of the gradual rehabilitation of a brutal leader who still has the power to divide Russians, 72 years after his death. The Kremlin has revived parts of his legacy in its effort to recast Russia's history as a series of glorious triumphs that it is determined to continue in Ukraine.

Among those admiring the work on a recent visit was Liliya A. Medvedeva, who said she was “very happy that our leader got restored.”

“We won the war thanks to him,” said Ms. Medvedeva, a pensioner born in 1950, adding that she was grateful that Stalin didn't send her father to the Gulag even though he was taken prisoner during World War II — something that was equated with treason at the time. “Yes, there were many mistakes, but everybody makes mistakes.”

In a country where criticizing government action can be dangerous, it is unclear how many people disagree with Ms. Medvedeva's positive view, but some are dismayed, even enraged, by what they see as revisionist whitewashing of history.

Vladimir, a 25-year-old history student who refused to give his last name for fear of retribution, said he came to watch the crowd drawn by Stalin, whom he called “a bloody tyrant.”

“It is hard for me to express my own opinion,” he said. “But no other monument would draw as much attention.”

Stalin was responsible for mass purges, including the Great Terror of 1936 to 1938, when more than 700,000 people were executed, including military leaders, intellectuals, members of ethnic minorities, landowning peasants and others. Under his leadership, entire ethnic groups, like Crimean Tatars, were expelled from their homelands. His policies contributed to mass famine across the Soviet Union, including in Ukraine.

But nostalgia for the Soviet era is strong, especially among older generations traumatized by the painful transition to capitalism, reinforcing memories of Stalin as a strongman who imposed order on a sprawling country and led it to victory against Nazi Germany. His admirers see purges, famines and mass deportations as “excesses” for which overzealous local officials were mostly responsible.



Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of Russia's Communist Party, placing flowers at the grave of Joseph Stalin on the 72nd anniversary of his death, in Moscow in March. Alexander Zemlianichenko/Associated Press

Since Vladimir V. Putin took power more than 25 years ago, at least 108 monuments to Stalin have been erected across Russia, and the pace has accelerated since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, said Ivan Zheyaynov, a historian and journalist who has kept track of the statues. One was installed this year in the Ukrainian city of Melitopol, currently occupied by Moscow's forces.

But none of them have the visibility of the new sculpture in the subway, passed daily by legions of Muscovites changing between the main circle line and the purple line.

Yelena D. Roshchina, an English instructor walking by it, said she recalled Stalin's death in 1953 and how people "valued him." But, Ms. Roshchina, 79, added: "We should not go to the extremes. We always have it either black or white."

For years the Kremlin tried to maintain something of a balance, taking note of Stalin's repressions while opposing the liberal intelligentsia whose main ideological tenets included anti-Stalinism.

President Putin has repeatedly condemned Stalin over the years, and recognized that terrible crimes were committed under his rule. He has visited the sites of mass graves and convened human rights activists and historians to discuss Stalinism.

"It is very important that we all and future generations — this is of great significance — know about, and remember this tragic period in our history when entire social groups and entire peoples were cruelly persecuted," Mr. Putin said in Moscow in 2017, at the opening of the "Wall of Sorrow" monument to victims of Stalinist repression. "This terrifying past cannot be deleted from national memory or, all the more so, be justified by any references to the so-called best interests of the people."

In 2001, Moscow City Hall founded the Gulag History Museum, which vividly showcased how a system of mass labor camps led to as many as two million deaths.

But for several years, something entirely different has been happening in parallel.

The Memorial, the most prominent Russian civil rights organization founded by dissidents during late Soviet times, was declared a foreign agent in 2014. At the end of 2021, Moscow City Court ordered it to disband.

In 2017, Mr. Putin told the filmmaker Oliver Stone that "excessive demonization of Stalin has been one of the ways to attack the Soviet Union and Russia."

After a series of lengthy trials, Yuri A. Dmitriev, an amateur historian who discovered graves of Stalin's victims in a remote pine forest in northern Russia, was sentenced in 2021 to 15 years in prison. Mr. Dmitriev had been found guilty of sexually assaulting his adopted daughter, charges his family and friends dismissed as fabricated.

The Gulag History Museum was shut down in 2024 citing fire regulations and has not reopened. Roman Romanov, its longtime director, was removed from his post and the museum's exhibits are being redone under a new leadership.

This April, the government renamed Volgograd's airport for Stalingrad, as the city was called from 1925 to 1961, honoring both the colossal battle fought there in World War II and the ruler it had been named for.

“The creeping re-Stalinization of the country is dangerous not only for society, as it justifies the largest government atrocities in the country’s history, but also for the state,” said Lev Shlosberg, a Russian opposition politician and member of the liberal Yabloko party that started a petition to dismantle the monument in the Moscow metro. “Sooner or later, repression consumes the government itself.”

In the metro, activists left a framed poster in front of the new Stalin monument, a very risky protest by the standards of today’s Russia. The poster contained Mr. Putin’s quotes criticizing Stalin’s methods.

Security guards quickly removed it, and the police later detained one person who had taken part in the protest.

Ivan Nечepurenko covers Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the countries of the Caucasus, and Central Asia.