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**JOSEPH STALIN IS BACK...
BUT DID HE EVER GO AWAY?**

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Joseph Stalin is back... But did he ever go away?

Marcel H. Van Herpen*

On May 9, 2013, the Russian town of Volgograd will become Stalingrad. It is the second time this year this city changes its name after a decision of the city council to reintroduce the old name for 6 days per year. Again city buses will hit the streets decorated with images of the dictator. The name Stalingrad disappeared in 1961 during Khrushchev's destalinization campaign. Unfortunately, in Putinist Russia a slow-motion rehabilitation of the dictator is taking place. It began in 2009 when in Moscow's renovated Kurskaya metro station reappeared the lines of the old national hymn: "Stalin reared us on loyalty to the people. He inspired us to labor and to heroism". New history school books hail Stalin for his leading role in the Great Patriotic War and a few weeks ago Putin introduced the Hero of Labor award, modeled after its Soviet namesake, introduced by Stalin in 1938.

This Stalin-revival is a source of concern for Russian human rights activists, who do not deny the huge suffering and courage of the Russian population during the siege of Stalingrad. On the contrary. But they are revolted by the fact that the authorities – by reintroducing Stalin's name - shower praise on a paranoid mass murderer, responsible for the killing of fifteen to twenty million people. The Kremlin-led rehabilitation campaign is rather successful: in a recent poll 49 percent of Russians said that Stalin had played a positive role in Russian history.

The tendency to ascribe positive accomplishments to the most hideous regimes is not restricted to Putin's Russia. Also in the West one can sometimes hear the argument that

Stalin's ruthless, dictatorial rule was necessary to modernize a backward country or that Hitler built an excellent road network in Germany and created work for millions of unemployed. Similar arguments are used in defense of the former colonial empires, which were, if anything, foreign dictatorships for the native populations. It is argued that they not only brought investments, but also Western management methods, Western education, and Western governance to these underdeveloped countries. Even the hideous dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile is praised for its supposed benefits. Did not Pinochet, with the help of Milton Friedman's Chicago Boys, liberalize the country's economy and made it ready for the modern, globalized world?

The point is that this kind of reasoning has three biases.

- The first bias is that it pretends to grant the evaluation of the facts an appearance of objectivity and even-handedness, if not scientific impartiality. It is said that one should not 'demonize' a regime and that it is always more reasonable to say: "A regime cannot only be bad!" Unfortunately, however, a regime can be so bad that talking about its presumed benefits becomes morally indecent and an outrage for its victims and their families.
- The second bias is that this kind of reasoning easily results in a covert mode of legitimization of the regime's misdeeds according to the maxim: "the end justifies the means". One can, indeed, still often hear statements like this: "Okay, Stalin might have been a bloodthirsty tyrant, but apparently it was at that time the only way to modernize Russia."
- A third bias is that this kind of reasoning totally abstracts from the possibility of alternative courses of history which not only would have brought the same technical and economic progress, but, arguably, many more benefits for the population, with much less human suffering.

As concerns this third bias, it is worthwhile to remind the words of Aimé Césaire, the poet-politician from French Martinique, who wrote in his "Discourse on Colonialism": "I maintain

that colonial Europe is not loyal in legitimating *a posteriori* colonialism by the evident material progress which has been realized in certain domains during colonial rule; (...) that nobody knows at what stage of material development these same countries would have been without European intervention; that the technical equipment, the administrative reorganisation, in one word: the 'Europeanization' of Africa or Asia was absolutely not linked to a European *occupation* – as is proved by the Japanese example; that the Europeanization of the non-European continents could have been made differently than under the boots of Europe (...).”

How true these words are. Neither Africa, nor India needed a European colonization and occupation in order to develop themselves, just as Germany could have had better roads and less unemployment without Hitler. Not to speak of Russia, which certainly would have been better off if its modernization would have been initiated by the democratic government of Kerensky instead of by Lenin or Joseph Stalin. If there are any lessons to be learned from history, then it is the fact that in all these cases alternative courses would have been possible. This knowledge is an important antidote against the tendency to consider in retrospect history as a necessary process in which even evil regimes play a positive role, justified by a philosophy of 'the end justifies the means'. It is a truth worth remembering, and not only for Russians nostalgic for the Stalinist past.

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