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## Stalinism and Russian and Ukrainian national identities

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## ABSTRACT

This article is the first comparative study of the policies taken by Russian and Ukrainian émigrés, governments and intellectuals towards the legacy of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. The article analyses how these differing approaches have contributed to diverging national identities in Russia and Ukraine which preceded, and were reinforced by, the 2014 crisis in their relations and war between both countries. Stalinization was not a central question for Russian émigrés and was supported by 50 out of 69 years of the USSR and since 2000 by the Russian state. Ukrainian émigrés were more influential and the state actively supported de-Stalinization over the majority of 25 years of independent statehood that integrated de-Stalinisation with national identity and since 2015, de-communization.

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For fifty of the USSR's sixty-nine years, it was led by Joseph Stalin (1922–1952) and three Soviet leaders who supported a cult of Stalin (1965–1985). The USSR experienced only three short periods of liberalizations in the 1920s, following Stalin's death in 1953 and in the second half of the 1980s. A Stalin cult has been supported by Vladimir Putin since he came to power in 2000 representing the majority of independent Russia's quarter of a century of statehood. Stalin and Stalinism has therefore represented a dominant influence over Soviet and Russian history over the last century. Putin believes "excessive demonization of Stalin is one of the means of attacking the Soviet Union and Russia" (Parfitt, 2017).

The cultivation of a Stalin cult and myth of the Great Patriotic War are intricately tied to the integration of Russian and Soviet identities that took place from the second half of the 1930s and existed throughout the majority of Soviet history during periods of conservative anti-reform entrenchment. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev did not seek to disentangle these identities, President Borys Yeltsin usurped Soviet institutions in Moscow and half-heartedly approached building an independent Russian civic nation outside of Soviet identity (Brudny and Finkel, 2011) and President Putin has fostered a deepening of the integration of Soviet and Russian identities (Brandenberger, 2001). The emergence of Soviet Russian identity in World War II and cultivated since during the "era of stagnation" and Putin's Russia is an obstacle to the forging of a new post-Soviet identity (Vujacic, 2007).

Ukraine and Russia have viewed Stalin and his legacy in diametrically opposite ways. In Russia, liberals and nationalists have clashed over Stalin. Russian nationalists in the USSR and independent Russia have promoted a Stalin cult by highlighting his transformation of a backward country into an industrialized, nuclear superpower that won World War II while at the same time ignoring or justifying his crimes. Russian liberals received state support in the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras but could never compete against nationalists and national Bolsheviks who were influential in the conservative wing of the Communist

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Party of the Soviet Union (*Kommunisticheskaya Partia Sovetskogo Soyuzu* – KPSS thereafter) and in the military and security services where Putin was a KGB officer.

Ukrainians in the homeland and diaspora have viewed Stalinism critically. This is particularly true of the 1932–1933 artificial famine (*Holodomor [murder famine]*) which is an “emotional and highly charged” question for Ukrainians (Wanner, 1998, 41). Ukrainian democrats and nationalists in the diaspora and homeland have been united in their condemnation of Stalinism and the *Holodomor*.

During the last half century, Ukrainian views of Stalinism have been radicalized by three critical historical junctures. The first was the 1971–1972 “*pohrom*,” the term used by the *samvydav* (or *samizdat* which was an underground publication printed by the dissidents) *Ukrayinskyy Visnyk (Ukrainian Herald)* to describe the “heaviest single KGB assault on any group since Stalin” (Reddaway, 1978, 35). The “*pohrom*” undermined the belief of Ukrainian dissidents that had pitted a “good Vladimir Lenin” versus a “bad Stalin” and created the basis for a broader anti-Soviet opposition (Nahaylo, 1983). The second critical juncture was Ukraine becoming an independent state in 1991 which facilitated state support for de-Stalinization, open access to archives, the freedom to research, write and publish and provided opportunities for the Ukrainian diaspora to influence post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography. The third critical juncture was Russia's military aggression in 2014 which, in the manner of all conflicts and wars, speeded up the formation of a Ukrainian national identity with 70 percent of Ukrainians saying their patriotism had increased because of the heroism and self-sacrifice of Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers (*Konsolidatsiya Ukrayinskoho Suspilstva: Vyklyky, Mozhlyvosti, Shlyakhy*, 2016, 4). Important for the study of Stalinism was how Russia's aggression has shattered the Soviet myth of “friendship of peoples” between Russians and Ukrainians that had allegedly necessitated their eternal unity in one state (Kuzio, 2017a).

Russian and Ukrainian identities are grounded in diametrically opposite ethnic-linguistic and civic factors respectively. Russia views Russian speakers as “compatriots” and Russians (*Russkii*) can be defined as either ethnic Russians or three eastern Slavs – Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Therefore, Putin and Russian nationalists from the exiled writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Putin, have always viewed Russian speaking eastern and southern Ukraine as wrongly included in Soviet and now in independent Ukraine and Russian speakers living there are viewed as “Russians.” Ukrainian identity is grounded in civic factors with ethnic-linguistic identity only predominant in the western part of the country. Russian leaders were therefore surprised to find that Russian speakers in so-called *NovoRossiya* (the old Tsarist name for eastern and southern Ukraine that Putin revived) did not support Moscow or the pro-Russian protests. Russia's annexation of the Crimea and military aggression against Ukraine has led to greater integration of Russian-speaking Ukrainians into the Ukrainian civic nation and growing patriotism among Russian speakers living in eastern and southern Ukraine. During a conflict and war there is no possibility to sit on the fence and in 2014, Russian speaking Ukrainians showed their patriotism when they supported Kyiv and took up the arms to fight the separatists. .

## 1. Stalinism and national identity in Russia and Ukraine

Russian and Ukrainian intellectuals and writers for nearly seven decades since the death of Stalin in 1953 have approached the Stalinist era from different interpretations. Official and dissident Russian nationalists and Russian writers focused upon Stalin as a great war time leader who transformed a peasant country into a modern society, won the Great Patriotic War and made the West fear a Soviet nuclear superpower. In focusing on Stalin, they glossed over and marginalized his crimes against humanity. The anti-Gorbachev wing of the Russian Writers Union and intellectuals were allied to extreme official Russian nationalists and Stalinists who prepared “A Word to the People” in July 1991 that became a call to arms for conservatives who backed the putsch the following month. Three of the signatories of the open letter were members of the State Committee on the State of Emergency that attempted to launch a coup d'état in August 1991.

Since the 1930's, Soviet Russia had a large body of national Bolsheviks to whom domestic and émigré Russian nationalists, including supporters of Eurasianism, oriented themselves. In the mid-1930's, Soviet nationality policies underwent a strategic shift from viewing Russian nationalism as the greatest threat to the USSR to that of non-Russians, particularly Ukrainian nationalism. Stalin re-integrated many aspects of Tsarist historiography. In the second half of the 1930s and World War II, Russians were elevated to the status of “elder brother” and “leading nation” of the USSR (Martin, 2001, 81). From 1936, Russians became the first among equals and in 1945, Stalin's famous toast congratulated them for winning the Great Patriotic War. Russians had become the state-bearing nation of the Soviet Union.

Whereas Russian imperialism and colonialism had been condemned during the 1920s, Tsarist/Soviet historiography viewed Russian expansion as “progressive”, bringing modernity to backward non-Russian peoples, and hence, the “lesser of two evils.” This blending of Bolshevism with (Russian) nationalism came to be called national Bolshevism and was strongly backed by émigré Russian nationalists who developed the theory of Eurasianism where Russia/USSR was at the center of a separate, unique and superior civilization. Eurasianism remained influential in the Russian diaspora but was brought to Russia in the 1990s by intellectuals such as Aleksander Dugin.

The integration of Russian nationalism and Bolshevism in the 1930s facilitated the integration of Soviet and Russian identities. Unlike Serbia in Yugoslavia, the Russian SFSR never possessed republican institutions except briefly after Yeltsin's election as Russian president in 1990–1991. Instead of national communists defending the republics' sovereignty, as in Soviet Ukraine, national Bolsheviks in the Russian SFSR defended the Soviet state and empire. Russian liberals (with the exception of a few like Vladimir Bukovsky and Andrei Amalrik) did not seek independence for the Russian SFSR and instead sought to

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