

Who is at the Gate?

The Symbolic Battle of Stalingrad in Contemporary Russia

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Putin and Symbols

During the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian president Boris Yeltsin's administration paid little or no attention to the old symbols of Russian national pride. Liberal ideology, as Yeltsin's advisers understood it, had nothing to do with the old symbolism. The revolutionary wave that Yeltsin rode tended to destroy all symbols of the Soviet past, crush monuments, and change cities' and streets' names.

Vladimir Putin moved into the Kremlin with a significantly different attitude. His adviser Gleb Pavlovskii is famous for his ability to utilize political symbols for the president's benefit. And as the period of revolutionary activity has transitioned to a period of stabilization, Putin's most impressive achievements lie in the sphere of symbolic politics. He expelled oligarchs, reintroduced the Soviet anthem, and suppressed those TV channels that opposed him. Putin has succeeded in creating a new symbolic landscape for Russia.

Many Russian politicians noticed the president's special attention to symbols. With the goal of attracting Putin's approval, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov offered to return a monument of Cheka founder Felix Dzerzhinskii to Lubyanka Square. The removal of this statue, which was broadcast around the world, was a profound symbol of the dismantling of the Soviet regime. Returning the statue to its former pedestal would also have profound symbolism. The arguments made in favor of Dzerzhinskii's return to Lubyanka Square, including his role in helping street children, his job in the Russian High Economic Council, and the monument's role as the architectural center of the square, will not likely overcome the legacy of cruel fanaticism that placed him at the head of the Bolshevik secret police.

There are, however, several cases in which the ideological implications of certain symbols have been less clear cut and more complicated and controversial in the contemporary Russian context. One of the most controversial cases concerning Soviet symbols is Volgograd governor Nikolai Maksiuta's suggestion to return the name of Stalin to his city.

Stalingrad as Volgograd

This suggestion is not an innocuous one. Volgograd is an important city in Russian politics. Not only is it valued for its economic role and the activities of local elites on the federal level, it is also very important symbolically. The city was founded in 1589 as Tsaritsyn (Zaritsyn), a fortress and trading post on the Volga. The name Tsaritsyn came from the Tartar language, but in Russian, sounded like its root evolved from the title of tsar's wife, "tsaritsa" (czarina). Not surprisingly, then, the Bolsheviks renamed the city Stalingrad in 1925, in remembrance of Joseph Stalin's role in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War battles that took place nearby.

In 1942–43, the Battle of Stalingrad was fiercely waged in the streets and in the immediate vicinity of the city. Indeed, it was in part the symbolic importance of Stalingrad that compelled Hitler to press for its defeat, and led Stalin to famously command the Red Army "not one step back" to prevent the Soviet city from falling to Germany. Some consider this battle the greatest military battle in history. The hard-fought Soviet victory was the turning point in the fight against Nazi Germany. For the Soviet Union, the battle of Stalingrad was a major victory after months of defense and retreat.

During the de-Stalinization campaign, launched by Nikita Khrushchev, Stalingrad's name was changed again. Khrushchev did not return the city to its tsarist name. The city was rechristened Volgograd, meaning simply, "city on the Volga." The numerous portraits and statues of Stalin were removed from their pedestals. The huge bronze statue of the former leader that was above the first lock of the Volga-Don ship canal made way for a concrete Lenin that was only half as large.

The idea of returning Stalin to the city's name emerged not long after Khrushchev's resignation, but nothing became of the suggestion. In the early 1990s, though, the idea was proposed yet again, this time by national patriots. They found common cause with leftist and veterans organizations, which supported the return of the name Stalingrad as a commemoration of the battle, not the leader.

The Yeltsin administration paid little attention to national symbols. As a result, Stalingrad became a rallying cry for the patriotic and Communist opposition. From their point of view, the westernization of Russia had to be stopped in the same way the Nazi invaders were halted at Stalingrad. Opposition leaders from across the country annually converged in Volgograd on February 2 (the last day of the Stalingrad battle). In February 1993—the 50th anniversary of the Stalingrad victory—residents of Volgograd witnessed a huge rally led by politicians from across the opposition spectrum, ranging from orthodox Communists to nationalist extremists. The government was not ready to react and did not participate in the celebration. At the time, Yeltsin officials seemed afraid of visiting a city occupied by the "National-Patriotic" forces. It was there that the opposition called for a "second Stalingrad" to be fought against President Yeltsin and his reformist team, associating the administration with the Nazi invaders of fifty years before. Six months later, those who met in Volgograd led the anti-Yeltsin coup that resulted in the October 1993 violence in Moscow.

Perhaps beginning to realize the power of symbols, the presidential administration then sought the support of a larger part of the patriotic field. Yeltsin made his first attempt to wrest the symbol of Stalingrad away from the opposition on May 9, 1996, (Victory Day) with a visit to Volgograd, his only visit to the city during his presidency, on the eve of his second presidential campaign. Yeltsin had ample company, however, as candidates from across the political spectrum—from Mikhail Gorbachev to Gennadii Ziuganov and Aleksandr Lebed—also chose Victory Day to converge on the city. The city formerly known as Stalingrad was a popular campaign stop for all Russian politicians. Even the Belorussian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who considered himself a major player in the Russian political field, frequently visited Volgograd and also celebrated Victory Day there in 1999.

Battle for Stalingrad or Battle for Stalin?

Yeltsin's government missed its opportunity to take patriotic symbols away from the opposition. Putin did not. He started his presidential campaign by catering to the electoral field of the patriotic opposition. As acting president, Putin visited Volgograd on February 22, 2000, on a Russian military holiday, to give a patriotic speech.

Now, however, leftists seem determined to outdo Putin on this matter. In 1998, when then–Deputy of the State Duma Aleksandr Vengerovskii (LDPR) proposed the idea of returning the name of Stalin to Volgograd, no serious debates arose. Local polls demonstrated that the majority of Volgograd residents did not want to change the city's name. However, Nikolai Maksjuta, a member of the Communist Party, revived the idea in 2001 and is now considering renaming the city without a plebiscite “as a commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Stalingrad battle,” which will be celebrated in February, 2003. This proposal is in the same vein as Luzhkov's proposal to restore the monument to Dzerzhinskii, and poses many of the same problems.

Putin and his team, unlike Yeltsin, are very attentive to the importance of symbolism in politics. They carefully selected national symbols to help cure the wounded national pride of Russians. Such symbols, however, have a double meaning. For many Russians, returning the name of Stalingrad to Volgograd would mean a celebration of the name of Joseph Stalin rather than that of the place of a decisive battle. There are two different (although partially intersected) groups who support the idea—patriotic forces including veterans, to whom Putin often panders, and pro-Stalin Communists. Any attempt to rename the city furthers both groups' aims. Liberal and democratic forces, not surprisingly, oppose the proposed renaming.

Politicians who suggest such controversial actions are trying to force Putin to move symbolically into their camp. The president is facing a choice that would ultimately associate him with a particular ideological group. Putin has assiduously avoided such associations. During debates over national symbols he has supported the reintroduction of both the czarist coat of arms and flag and the Soviet anthem.

The majority of the Volgograd population does not support changing the name of their city back to Stalingrad. Popular opinion, however, may not be enough to prevent the change. Maksjuta's suggestion that the name change could take place without a plebiscite is challenging Putin to take a stand in the debates over Stalingrad.

The West and Russian Symbols

One of the reasons for Putin's popularity in Russia is his attention to both the old Russian and Soviet symbols. As with any national symbol, it may be difficult for a non-national to understand ambivalence toward a particular sign, or to appreciate all of the contexts and subtleties that surround it. For the general public, however, attention to or neglect of national symbols has great meaning; it greatly influences whether one views a politician as friendly or unfriendly toward them.

Some Western officials seem to clearly understand the symbolic importance of the city on the Volga. In February 1998, the newly appointed NATO information officer in Russia, Alexis Chahtinskii, started his term (devoted to an attempt to persuade Russians that NATO's eastward expansion was not a threat to Russia) with a stop in Volgograd. During the Soviet period, Volgograd was a necessary destination for almost any Western leader visiting the USSR, from Fidel Castro to Francois Mitterrand. Now, however, the city is mostly visited by a different kind of foreign leader; over the last three years, Volgograd has only been visited by Belarus's Aleksandr Lukashenko and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Symbols can be imbued with more than one meaning. The current battle over Stalingrad is one in which the meaning of Stalingrad as a powerful symbol will prevail. For Russians, Stalingrad is a symbol of victory at great sacrifice; it was the last instance of retreat from the Nazis. As a turning point in World War II, Stalingrad is also a symbol of the great victory of the alliance of the USSR and the Western democracies. National patriots press for Stalingrad to be seen as an anti-Westernizing symbol. The caliber of visits from foreign officials in the last three years only gives credence to this meaning. Pro-Western Russians and Western leaders can try to use the powerful symbol of Stalingrad as a reminder of the benefits of cooperation with the West. Symbolism is important in public politics, and those interested in improving Russian-Western cooperation should use symbols to strengthen the appeal of their position.