

We shouldn't look to Russia for how to treat problematic history and its statues

Coming to terms with the symbols of the past is necessary but meaningless if not accompanied by any deeper engagement with history



'The Russian regime didn't want an honest accounting of past atrocities because any such investigation would diminish the authority of the contemporary state.' Photograph: STR/REUTERS

By Jeff Sparrow
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“This is what Stalin did.”

As many people have pointed out, Malcolm Turnbull's response to the campaign against Australia's colonial statues could not have been more maladroit.

You could not think of another leader as committed to public statuary as Stalin, a man who constructed monuments in every population centre under Soviet control specifically to promote a particular version of history.

That's why, in 1991, as the communist coup collapsed, the people of Moscow drew – like the activists protesting against Captain Cook – a direct connection between the commemoration of the past and the control of the present.

A mob gathered in Lubyanka Square in the Meshchansky District, outside the notorious headquarters of the secret police. The crowd attacked the huge sculpture of “Iron” Felix Dzerzhinsky (the founder of the KGB's precursor, the Cheka), pulling at it

with such determination that the mayor eventually organised the fire service to remove the work without crushing anyone. Fire fighters carted the Dzerzhinsky statue away and dumped it by the river, where it joined a growing pile of discarded Soviet monuments from all over Moscow.

That was the genesis of what became the “graveyard of fallen heroes” – originally an ad hoc display of socialist realist art that remained in the Muzeon park of arts simply because no-one knew what else to do with it.

In the years since 1991, the original monuments have been supplemented with other work – some of it political, some of it not – in an outdoor sculpture park complementing the art in the nearby Tretyakov Gallery.

I travelled to Moscow last year, researching a book on the American singer and actor Paul Robeson. Like so many other tourists, I went to the garden by the Moskva specifically to see the monuments through which the regime had once defined itself.

It was winter and the falling snow softened even the most imperious of the statues, so that I couldn't, at first, distinguish the Stalinist relics from the art added in later years. But then I found a giant, kitsch representation of the dictator himself, its pink stone smashed from the hammer blows that demonstrators had rained down on the man of steel's mustachioed face.

The huge Stalin now stood near an image of the dissident Andrei Sakharov and alongside a work entitled “Victims of Totalitarian Regimes”: a wire cage containing sculpted granite heads. On the pathway, a notice explained in Russian and English: “This work is historically and culturally significant, being the memorial construction of the Soviet era, on the theme of politics and ideology.”

Similar signposts accompanied all of the representations of Lenin, of Kalinin, of Sverdlov and the other greater and lesser regime luminaries, with the iconography of the Soviet state deliberately juxtaposed with work by dissidents and non-party artists. The cumulative effect stripped the Stalinist art of its authority, presenting the statues as instances of a particular genre within the broader field of Russia sculpture.



Moscow pupils take a break on a toppled statue of Stalin in Moscow, Russia on 11 September 1991. Photograph: Dieter Endlicher/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The traces of protest still visible on the stone accentuated that impression of monuments emanating from a political and aesthetic project that had failed, a discredited artistic moment whose historic time had passed.

On the base of the Dzerzhinsky statue, for instance, I could make out a spray painted slogan, a reminder of the sentiment that had banished Iron Felix to the park all those years ago.

In the ongoing debate about America's confederate monuments, US commentators have pointed to Moscow as an example of how art commemorating a problematic history might be treated.

“It isn't difficult,” writes Radley Balko, “to imagine a similar park where a statute of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis or Nathan Bedford Forrest might stand in front of a monument to victims of lynching.”

James Glazer agrees. Discussing the “graveyard of fallen heroes”, he writes: “The statues in their old lives were meant to honor and glorify the Soviet leaders and their regime. In their new life, they have been turned into art. As pieces of art, their meaning can be changed or supplemented by how the viewer interprets them.”

As the park signs make clear, the sculptures retain both a cultural value (as pre-eminent examples of socialist realism) and a historic value (as once significant public monuments).

On both counts, their preservation is worth celebrating.

Nevertheless, the lessons from Moscow are complicated, perhaps more so than one might first think.

Coming to terms with the symbols of the past might be necessary but the graveyard of fallen heroes shows that it's by no means sufficient.

On that same visit, I spoke with Alexandra Polivanova, a researcher with the group Memorial, which was dedicated to uncovering the crimes of the Stalin era.

There remained, she told me, mass graves throughout the city.

“Some of them are very easy to identify. We have documents. But it's not simple in Moscow to start archaeological research. We can say that we know where they are, but we cannot prove it.”

The problem was that the archives were still sealed. The Russian regime didn't want an honest accounting of past atrocities because any such investigation would diminish the authority of the contemporary state.

“They [ie the government] don't have an ideological position at all,” she said. “They only have a pragmatic attitude to survive and conserve their power. When they need the church, they cultivate the church; when they need Stalin, they talk about Stalin as a great manager and general. Then, when they feel that that could be too much for an international audience, they say something about democratic values.”

A comparison with Germany illustrates the problem.

In Berlin, the authorities have transformed the former headquarters of the Gestapo into a museum known as “The Topography of Terror”.

In Moscow, the Memorial museum uses that name for its project documenting the location of Stalinist prisons, torture chambers, execution grounds and the like.

The sites in Memorial's “Topography of Terror” map radiate out from the Lubyanka, the huge building where the Dzerzhinsky monument once stood. But unlike the Gestapo facility, the Lubyanka hasn't become a museum. On the contrary, it's still operated by Putin's federal security service, the successor of the KGB.

The removal of the Stalin statues wasn't, in other words, accompanied by any deeper engagement with history.

In his book, *Warped Mourning*, Alexander Etkind argues that Russia remains haunted by its brutal past, a ghostly and often unrecognised presence in the public sphere and the marketplace.

He gives the example of the 500-ruble banknote printed from 1995 until 2011 with a depiction of the majestic Solovetsky monastery. The particular image chosen shows the cathedral topped by wooden pyramids – a detail that means the note actually depicts the building as it was in the 1920s and the 1930s, when it served as barracks for a giant prison camp.

“Whether millions of Russians are aware of this or not,” Etkind writes, “it is the mournful image of the Soviet gulag that they carry in their wallets, touch, handle, glance at and exchange daily.”

In that sense, the graveyard of fallen heroes obscures the lack of a real accountability. As Etkind says: “We do not have anything like a full list of victims; we do not have anything like a full list of executioners; and we do not have adequate memorials, museums and monuments which could stabilize the understanding of these events for generations to come.”

Not surprisingly, there’s no longer any consensus about the Stalin-era statues and their meaning.

A recent survey by the state-backed VTsIOM polling group suggested that 62% of Russians agreed that “plaques, busts, [and] paintings that talk about the success of Stalin should be put in public places” and 65% opposed “erecting signs talking about his failures and crimes.”



Celebration of Stalin’s birthday at Red Square in Moscow, Russia on 21 December 2015. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

A similar study by the Pew Research Centre in July this year found that 58% of adult Russians now see Stalin’s historical role in either a “very” or “mostly” positive light.

Multiple attempts have even been made to return the Dzerzhinsky monument to its old position outside the Lubyanka, with one poll from 2013 suggesting that 45% of Russians wanted the sculpture restored – and only 25% strongly opposed.

“Have we not fingered the foulest wounds and left them unhealed by our hands?” asks Anna Akhmatova, the great poet of the terror years.

Akhmatova's image of old cruelties infecting the present suggests the need for historical healing that goes beyond the removal of a few statues.

But even that's not enough.

For, fairly obviously, the rehabilitation of Stalin also reflects the population's disillusionment with the free market reforms introduced with such devastating effect in the nineties. As the euphoria of 1991 gradually evaporated, the way became clear for Vladimir Putin, a man who presents himself as a strong leader restoring Russian pride.

When addressing Western audiences, Putin denounces the Great Terror, the gulags, the show trials and the other elements of the Soviet dictatorship. But his government also promotes a nationalist history in which Stalin features as the kind of firm ruler necessary to protect Russia against enemies at home and abroad.

In other words, if the past shapes the present, the present also shapes the past.

What does that mean for Australia?

The writer Maria Tumarkin describes Russia as "one monstrous traumascap", a nation built upon graves.

Indigenous people might say the same about this country. The debates about the commemoration of Captain Cook and other figures of the colonial order offer, perhaps, a chance to face up to the trauma of white settlement and its consequences. Ultimately, though, we can only resolve the wrongs of history by creating some kind of justice in the here and now.

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