

Vova the Dread

By NINA L. KHRUSHCHEVA for The Wall Street Journal
March 4, 2005; Page A14

Vladimir Putin's presidency proves that Stalinism will never end in Russia. Emerging from the past, Russian dictatorship continues into the future almost without pause, changing only in name: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Koba the Dread. Fourteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's people discovered that their lives fare better with dictators. Hence the readiness with which we came to like "Vova" Putin's firm hand. We support his jailing the "dishonest" oligarchs, his clamping down on the "irresponsible" press and promoting a dictatorship of order over transparent laws. We are eager to sing his praises -- a hit pop song goes, "I want one like Putin" -- and make chocolate statues of this, oh, so pleasantly sweet modern autocrat.

In fact, many Russians believe that clampdowns are necessary given the president's agenda: bring the Kremlin back to the center of politics and economy; reduce the influence of the "oligarchs"; ensure the president's "vertical power," necessary to strengthen sovereignty and security; secure for the state Russia's vast energy production; return to Russia its international prestige. And while some of his successes are questionable, 72% of the public trusts him nonetheless. As a people relatively new to democracy, Russians still believe in "czars," not peasants. We hate rulers who look and act like us: Khrushchev with his energetic fists and Ukrainian shirt, Gorbachev with a birthmark on his bald head, Yeltsin with his mujik drunkenness.

Stalin, on the other hand, cautiously built himself an official image that concealed from the demos that he was squat and pockmarked. Mr. Putin, too, carefully constructs his enigma: Despite many public appearances we are still guessing what lies beneath his "soul": new technocrat or old spy? The historian Richard Pipes has consistently warned of a challenge to democratize Russia. People need, even want, protection from themselves, and so crave a stately strong hand. The current rise of Stalinism (in the polls Koba -- Stalin -- takes second place after Vova the Quiet), is not entirely Mr. Putin's fault. When Yeltsin stood on the tank in 1991, Russia, with its history of oppression, didn't know that democracy required individual contributions, whether or not there was Yeltsin leading the way. We haven't yet come to grips with the democratic/free market idea that there is no one but yourself to blame if things don't work out.

After the freedoms of perestroika and the anarchy of post-socialism, it turns out that without control from above, we don't like our poor, dishonest selves. The new autocracy has discovered it doesn't need a mausoleum to protect itself from the people: The fear of freedom makes us good volunteers, wanting a ruler who provides a sense of orderly life. So what if Stalin ruled by a different kind of fear, fear for one's life, we now say. That fear wasn't as threatening as having to live with decisions we take on our own. To a typical Russian question -- Who is to blame? -- there is now an answer: the reformers, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin. To another typical question -- What is to be done? -- the answer is also ready: back to Stalin, to the great

statehood. Back then, we may have been killed and imprisoned, but how grand were our victories and parades! The late Vyacheslav Molotov once lamented, "With Stalin we all followed the directions of his strong hand; when the hand got weaker, each started to sing his own song." He blamed the "reformers" for "letting out a beast that brings horrible harm to our society. It's called democracy, humanitarianism, but it's simply a bourgeois influence."

Today there is little doubt that Mr. Putin's politics is a modern version of a strong-hand rule. Ever so obedient, Russian citizens take cues from the Kremlin: In the last few years, over a hundred books have been published praising Stalin. In one such, Elena Prudnikova, a journalist from St. Petersburg, insists, "The country, deprived of the high ideals, in just a few decades has rotted to the ground. After the denunciation of Stalin in [1956] we lived on, increasingly useless and dirtier." Marshal of the Soviet Union Dimitry Yazov, former defense minister and a coup leader against Gorbachev's "bourgeois influence" in August 1991, a political criminal only a decade ago, has become a hero. His memoirs are a bestseller. Moreover, today Yazov is shown as a victim: All those Khrushchevs, Gorbachevs and Yeltsins manipulated public opinion into wanting unnecessary freedoms back then.

Thanks to the steady and stately leadership of Vladimir Putin in a new century, people have returned to their senses.

Ms. Khrushcheva, great-granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, teaches international affairs at the New School University in New York.