
The greatest Russians of all time?

By Guy Gavriel Kay

Saturday's Globe and Mail - 9/1/2009

It was recently reported that more than 50 million Russians had decided the greatest Russian ever. In a broadcast on the state-run Rossiya channel, after three months of telephone and Internet voting, Prince Alexander Nevsky emerged in first place. There's symbolism at the top: Nevsky is revered for defeating Western aggression against Mother Russia in the 13th century. Point taken? (He is said to have forced an invading army of Teutonic Knights onto a frozen lake, where the ice gave way.) But that isn't the news that matters. After battling Prince Alex for first all the way, Joseph Stalin slipped to third by a mere 5,500 votes. There are fierce rumours of Kremlin interference, possibly to avoid the "embarrassment" of a Stalin victory, and certainly the vote difference is easily small enough to justify a recount in the venerable tradition of honest and fair Soviet/Russian elections. There are no current allegations of dangling chads. This is not Florida, after all.

Less widely reported, but equally noteworthy, is the fact that V. I. Lenin came sixth in the voting. He'd not have been happy about being 100,000 votes behind Stalin, let alone behind a poet like Alexander Pushkin, who was fourth.

(For the record, Czar Nicholas II's prime minister, Pyotr Stolypin - who instituted major agrarian reforms in an attempt to forestall the revolution - came second. He was assassinated in 1911; agrarian reforms didn't do the trick.) What is one to make of this? It would feel self-indulgent to launch a jeremiad about how very, very evil Lenin and Stalin and their system were. Novelist Martin Amis did this in a book a little while ago, *Koba the Dread*, which is essentially about his own belated discovery of that truth. And how his father, Kingsley Amis, and godfather, Robert onquest (who exposed the Great Terror for the West), had been right all along while Mr. Amis and his college chums had been proclaiming the glories of the Soviet Union and Mao's China in the 1960s. It was nice to see Amis fils getting around to getting it right, but the tone of shocked baby boomer awakening bordered on the amusing.

No, it seems to me there's another point, a narrower focus to be sought here, and it comes from - unsurprisingly - Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose *The Gulag Archipelago*, smuggled out to the West 35 years ago, documented the abomination of the Soviet internment camps with a terrifying mixture of biblical prophet and meticulously detailed scientist. (Mr. Solzhenitsyn, who did more to expose the reality of Lenin and Stalin and the Soviet empire to the world than anyone else who ever lived, and did so with unfathomable courage, did not surface anywhere near the top of the balloting, by the way.) Here's the issue that seems necessary to register after considering this vote: in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Mr. Solzhenitsyn makes the point that, as of 1966, some 86,000 Germans had been convicted in Germany for Nazi crimes. But what about in the Soviet Union - the Gulag, the Terror? "In our own country (according to the reports of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court) about 10 men had been convicted." And he asks, "What kind of disastrous path lies ahead of us if we do not have the chance to purge ourselves of that putrefaction rotting inside our body?"

He insists, in a written voice that still thunders, that Russia has a defining duty to name all of these people (Lenin, Stalin ...) and their party to have been executioners on a scale that beggars description - except that he does describe it.

He declares to his country that, in keeping silent about evil, "we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future." He asserts (in 1974!) that failure to do so will cause a generation to grow up ignorant of and indifferent to, or even supporters of, those foul deeds. And he ends a passage of colossal power by declaring: "It is going to be uncomfortable, horrible, to live in such a country!"

And that is the point. That is the sort of country that can vote as Russia did, choosing its greatest figures.

Denying, suppressing, falsifying the past, however savage it might have been (perhaps especially when it was savage) exposes a society to the raw power of history when it isn't dealt with. And that is a power strong as glaciers grinding everything in their path, shaping a landscape. It is critical to realize that this isn't some abstract, intellectual issue. It defines the world today, from Moscow to the Middle East, Kosovo to Kenya.

A country where Lenin and Stalin are proclaimed as heroes is a country that invites emulators and disciples to follow where they led.
