

WorldViews

For Russians, Stalin is the 'most outstanding' figure in world history, followed by Putin

By [David Filipov](#)

June 26, 2017

MOSCOW — More Russians consider Joseph Stalin the “most outstanding person” in world history than any other leader, according to a poll released Monday. Tied for second in the same survey is the man who has done more than anyone to restore the notorious Soviet dictator's reputation, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The poll by the [Levada Center](#) asked a representative sample of 1,600 Russians to name the “top 10 most outstanding people of all time and all nations.” It also compiled a list of all 20 names that received more than 6 percent of the vote.

Without prompting, 38 percent named Stalin, followed by Putin at 34 percent, in a tie with [Alexander Pushkin](#), the renowned 19th-century poet often referred to as “the Shakespeare of Russia.”

Putin's 34 percent is his highest ranking on this list since he came to power 17 years ago. Stalin has actually slipped a few notches: He polled 42 percent in 2012, the first time he topped the survey of the world's most influential people, which has been conducted by Levada and its predecessors since 1989.

But there's little doubt of the connectivity between the popularity of the former and current Kremlin occupants.

Stalin in Russia is [increasingly portrayed](#) not as the murderous [architect](#) of the Gulag, forced collectivization, mass starvation and political purges that claimed millions of his citizens' lives, but as the steely architect of the Soviet victory in World War II — called the Great Patriotic War here.

The defeat of Nazi Germany is central to the Putin regime's portrayal of itself as the logical outcome of Russian history. In the Kremlin's view, saving the world from fascism was the greatest achievement of the 20th century. Russia inherited this legacy, and thanks to Putin, it has returned to its proper place as a global power, his supporters say.

“The use of the cult of victory for propaganda goals naturally adds up to the acquittal of Stalin to a certain degree,” said Denis Volkov, a sociologist at the Levada Center.

In the [fourth](#) of his interviews with American director Oliver Stone, Putin characterizes Stalin as a “complex figure” and acknowledges “the horrors of Stalinism,” but also goes on to say that “excessive demonization of Stalin is one of the ways Russia's enemies attack it.”

Several Russian cities have unveiled monuments to Stalin in recent months. A Levada poll released in May found that the number of Russians who consider Stalin's repressions to be “political crimes” has diminished from 51 percent in 2012 to 39 percent. The number of Russians who did not know anything about the repressions doubled over the same time from 6 percent to 13 percent.

Though the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought to light the full scope of Stalin's crimes, the complete archives of the Soviet KGB secret police and its predecessors were never made public.

Tanya Lokshina, Russia program director for Human Rights Watch, told The Washington Post recently that “Russia never had a proper de-Stalinization and there is little awareness” of Stalin's crimes in Russia today.

In his interview, Putin compares Stalin with Napoleon, as “leaders who came to power by way of revolution and concentrated huge authority.”

The French military leader and emperor was ranked 14th in the Levada Poll, chosen as one of the most outstanding world figures by 9 percent of Russians, highest among non-Russians (or non-Soviets) on the list. The only other foreigners to receive more than six percent are Albert Einstein (16th) and Isaac Newton (19th).

The ethnocentric responses reflected by the poll are not unusual. People tend to name the people and events closest to their lives, which explains how last year's Orlando shooting, horrific tragedy that it was, ended up on a [list](#) of the most significant historic events in Americans' lifetimes published in December.

There's also no question that [Yury Gagarin](#) (6th), the first man in space, Leo Tolstoy (7th), and [Dmitry Mendeleev](#) (13th), who developed the periodic classification of the elements, all deserve to somewhere on all-time outstanding lists. Also, Vladimir Lenin (4th) and Peter the Great (5th), modernizer of the medieval Russian state, certainly are figures of major historical importance. No U.S. president or leader made the 6 percent cut.

You might be wondering what Putin has done to belong.

The Russian leader's approval rating — as measured by [Levada](#) — hasn't dropped below 80 percent since he annexed Crimea in 2014, and he enjoys daily praise from the commentators and news reports on state-run television, where most Russians get their news.

The Levada Center is no lap dog of the state, by the way. It was slapped with the Russia's [foreign agent](#) label last year, a de facto acknowledgment that the government doesn't approve of its unvarnished takes on Russian public opinion.

So believe Volkov when he tells you that there's more to Putin's ranking than the fact that he heads an authoritarian regime.

“He is credited with rescuing Russia from the economic ruin of the 1990s,” Volkov said. “For many people that is a monumental accomplishment.”

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David Filipov was The Washington Post’s bureau chief in Moscow, focusing on Russia and the republics of the former Soviet Union. He left The Post in January 2018. He previously reported for the Boston Globe from Boston, Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan. [Follow](#) 

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