

# ‘Stalin Died but Not Completely’: On the Theatrical Legacy of Totalitarian Catastrophe

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I began working on this article in the winter of 2022, when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine shattered the fragile stability of Europe. The attacks have caused devastation in Ukraine and they have brought back traumatic memories of the Second World War. This article reflects this moment of catastrophe. At the same time, I acknowledge that Putin’s war has wreaked havoc on Russia too, damaging its economy, culture and image. Many Russian artists and intellectuals, who condemned the regime, stepped down from their positions and left the country, while those who dared to protest found themselves facing administrative fines, criminal charges and imprisonment.

Artur Solomonov’s tragifarce *How We Buried Josef Stalin* (2019, published in 2021) speaks directly to this confusing and catastrophic time but also to the legacy of Stalinism in Russia.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Joseph Stalin and the cult of his regime are contentious political and cultural issues in today’s Russia. After several state-induced attempts at collective atonement for Stalin’s crimes, including the 1960s Thaw and the 1980s Perestroika periods, as well as a decade of liberal reforms in the 1990s, the figure of the Father of Nations remains controversial. On the one hand, Stalin’s legacy rests with his admirers, who feel nostalgic for the Soviet past and for its strong vertical of power. On the other hand, many people wish to rectify the belief that Stalin ‘provided a final and terrifying solution to the question: who is more important in Russia – the man or the state?’<sup>2</sup> The truth is that Stalin did introduce a so-called ‘criminal arithmetic’ into the Russian consciousness: ‘on the one hand, millions of innocent people were

murdered, turned into slaves and subjected to violence and humiliation. On the other hand, he had created an industrial giant of a country, won the great war and turned this country into a superpower.<sup>3</sup>

Russian contemporary theatre recognizes the controversial status of Stalin's legacy in the national consciousness of the country. To acknowledge and to challenge this legacy, it placed Stalin onstage. A performance/installation, *Pokhorony Stalina* (*Stalin's Funeral*), written by Mikhail Kaluzhsky, directed by Kirill Serebrennikov and presented on 22 December 2016 at the Gogol-Centre (Moscow), now closed by the authorities, is one such example. An experiment in documentary style, *Stalin's Funeral* was imagined as a one-time theatrical event,<sup>4</sup> created to 'bury Stalin for good',<sup>5</sup> to remember victims of his regime and to question the legacy of his myth. An example of performance activism, it was imagined as a re-enactment of history to mourn the crimes of the past, to forewarn the future and to stimulate its audiences' political consciousness.

Other examples include *Rozhdenie Stalina* (*Stalin's Birth*), directed in 2019 by Vladimir Fokin (Alexandrinsky Teatr, St Petersburg) on the 140th anniversary of Stalin's birth, and the tragicomedy *Chudesnyj Gruzin* (*A Wonderous Georgian*), written by Andrey Nazarov, directed by Renata Sotiriadi and staged in 2021 for Maxim Gorky MAT in Moscow. Both productions depicted Stalin's early years as a young revolutionary in tsarist Russia. *Stalin's Birth* aimed to better understand the factual, emotional and psychological events that created the so-called 'Stalin phenomenon',<sup>6</sup> while *A Wonderous Georgian* was a colourful and romanticized portrayal of Stalin's family and his comrades of the time. It drew controversial reactions in both liberal and conservative circles. The decision of Eduard Boyakov (an artistic director of Maxim Gorky MAT) to cast Olga Buzova (a blogger and an influencer with 23 million subscribers) in one of the major roles as the singer Bella Shantal, who tries to help young Stalin escape prosecution, added to the hip and scandalous atmosphere of this work.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, *The Death of Stalin* (2017), directed by Armando Iannucci in the genre of a political satire, was banned in Moscow under the pretext that the film was a part of a 'western plot to destabilise Russia by causing rifts in society'.<sup>8</sup> A semi-private screening was held for a few influential film industry figures, representatives of the State Duma, the Russian Historical Society and the Public Board of the Ministry of Culture, at which audience members collectively expressed their concerns and dissatisfaction with the proposed cinematic portrayal of Russian history and its key figures. As a result, lawyers from the Ministry of Culture requested that the Minister of Culture (Vladimir Medinsky at the time) pull the distribution certificate for this film. "*The Death of Stalin* is aimed at inciting hatred and enmity, violating the dignity of the Russian (Soviet) people, promoting ethnic and social inferiority, which points to the movie's extremist nature," the attorneys said.<sup>9</sup> They found offensive a portrayal of Marshal Georgy Zhukov 'as a militant comedian, while he was actually a prominent commander, a gifted strategist and a marshal of the Soviet Union, who made a great contribution to our army's victory in the Great Patriotic War, so his name is inextricably linked to the great Victory'.<sup>10</sup> The attorneys concluded their

demand by stating, 'We are confident that the movie was made to distort our country's past so that the thought of the 1950s Soviet Union makes people feel only terror and disgust'.<sup>11</sup>

'A play about flexibility and immortality', Solomonov's tragic farce *How We Buried Josef Stalin* continues this tradition. Presented for the first time in the winter of 2021 by Chelyabinsk's Chamber Theatre, it confronts the audience with the dilemma of Stalinism, which Putin's putrid regime inherited and continues to mobilize. Using irony, hyperbole and grotesque, Solomonov proposes a dramaturgical response to the question of why hostility to the world, isolationism and nationalistic aspirations are deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of Russian society. He addresses a society that for generations has been living in the shadow of a tyrant, that has not atoned for this tyrant's crimes, and that has internalized fear of the regime to the point of oblivion, incomprehension and an utter inability to resist it. And thus, he suggests, this society is more open to making the same historical mistakes again and again. To Solomonov, the issue rests in the malleability of a Russian psyche that embraces an image of the tyrant and allows it to remain immortal. This image feeds Russian collective nostalgia, which prepared the ground for the rise of what Lev Gudkov called 'vtorichny ili vozvrashchaisya' ('secondary or recurring totalitarianism').<sup>12</sup> A system of governance based on legislation and practices that are put forward 'independently of control and responsibility to the population', *recurring totalitarianism* allows the state to impose norms on people's behaviour and actions by force.<sup>13</sup> 'Terror and repression are the outcomes of the totalitarian organization of society'. They are based on 'fusion of party and state'; 'the cult of the leader'; 'the almightiness of the secret police, acting outside any legal frameworks'; 'the state's monopoly on mass media and its transformation into a powerful instrument of propaganda and ideological indoctrination'; and control over civil society with the country's economy subjected to the political goals of the state.<sup>14</sup>

Solomonov's play illustrates how these practices of recurring totalitarianism can be implemented and how quickly they can infiltrate people's everyday actions and behaviour. Neither a biopic about Stalin nor a historical tale about his time, *How We Buried Josef Stalin* investigates the onset of a dictatorship. At the centre of the plot is a group of theatre-makers who decide to produce a play about Stalin. As the action unfolds, the director of the company, who is also its leading actor, plays Stalin and turns into the tyrant, while others internalize and enact a fear of the tyrant. Using irony and satire, the play aims to demonstrate how a dictator like Stalin could arise and remain in power with no punishment or retribution for so long. *How We Buried Josef Stalin* traces 'the gradual penetration of the "virus of Stalinism" into modern man', to the point where the actors/characters playing Stalin, Beria and Khrushchev begin to 'transform into these monsters with excitement and admiration'.<sup>15</sup> The play documents this resilient legacy of Stalin's totalitarianism and so, I argue, it paints the 'collective Russian' as responsible – even if tangentially – for what society allowed the historical tyrant to get away with and for the recent catastrophe in Ukraine, which Vladimir Putin and his regime created.

### Artur Solomonov and a laboratory of a theatrical satire

Artur Solomonov came to playwriting after a career as a theatre critic, an editor of the culture section of the opposition magazine *New Times* and one of the artistic producers for the television channel Kul'tura. With his 2013 novel *A Theatre Story* adapted for the stage in 2015, the 2016 play *Grace*, and 2019's *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, Solomonov has established a reputation as a politically engaged writer and cultural activist who chooses theatre – both as a cultural institution and as a metaphor for the new Russian realities – as a subject for his critical gaze. Solomonov's novel *A Theatre Story* tells the story of an unsuccessful Russian actor who is suddenly cast to play Shakespeare's Juliet in an experimental production. The plot involves a famous theatre director, an influential oligarch, witty journalists and an overbearing priest, all fighting for the attention of their respective flocks. Full of shrewd humour and grave irony, the novel is in the tradition of Russian literary satire, such as Mikhail Bulgakov's *Theatrical Novel (Notes of a Dead Man)*. It paints theatre – with its backstage drama, envy, betrayal and backstabbing – as a symbol of 'the age of mature Putinism', which created and is supported by 'the people loyal to the government, the beneficiaries of Putin's regime', the new bourgeoisie – the well-off average citizens 'who have finally made a good living under Putin' and who take vanity, personal comfort and compromise, alliances with the powerful, and post-truth at face value.<sup>16</sup>

Solomonov's *How We Buried Josef Stalin* continues this quest. A satire on Putin's Russia of bureaucratic and personal greed, organized crime and institutionalized violence, it is also a farce about conformism. The play makes fun of a theatre company which decides to put on a play about Stalin. Surrounded by his political supporters, the Ghost of Lenin, doctors and members of his household, Stalin is at his last breath. What follows, however, is not the story of Stalin dying but the tale of his legacy. Confronted with the wishes of their own president, who appears onstage only as 'a cough above stage' and who can be seen as a stand-in for Putin,<sup>17</sup> the company – starting from their director Voldemar Arkadievich – begins to change the original script. They cut and add characters and scenes in order to bring to life dramaturgical suggestions and expectations of the president. For instance, as the action unfolds, Voldemar Arkadievich, who plays Stalin, slowly transforms into this symbol of tyranny. In his play, Solomonov shows how fear and willingness for submission can take over ordinary people – here, members of a theatre company – and how the theatricality of evil can turn into its terrifying and inescapable banality. And thus, in its conclusions, Solomonov's play echoes Hannah Arendt's work on the internal structures and psychology of totalitarianism.

The rejection of personal and institutional ethics is for Arendt one of the major crimes and legacies of totalitarianism, something that has also become a characteristic of Putin's nationalism.<sup>18</sup> In the period of recurring totalitarianism, the state continues to rely on ideology and elaborate systems of terror: violence in the private sphere, the repression of freedom of speech, a push for doublethink and doublespeak, as well as the mythologization of the leader.<sup>19</sup> Gudkov describes Putin's totalitarianism from within the system: he demonstrates that both Russian laws and their enforcement

practices 'violate the fundamental principles of the post-war world order, which takes past behavior and the crimes against humanity committed by totalitarian regimes into account and recognizes restrictions imposed on national sovereignty by international law'.<sup>20</sup> Putin's recurring totalitarianism is directly linked to Russia's colonial past, which is evident in the imperialist war Russia is pursuing in Ukraine. This totalitarianism indicates a 'return to conservative, protective dictatorship whose success is determined by the extent it is able to sterilize growing social, cultural and economic diversity and thus contain or lower human potential'.<sup>21</sup> This turn to totalitarianism began in Russia in 2012 after the 'Medvedev–Putin swap'.<sup>22</sup> It intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and became ever-present in 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine. Unfortunately, this political turn is 'not accidental and proceeds from the logic of the evolution of the authoritarian regime, which is facing the consequences of its rule and the problems it created'.<sup>23</sup> 'Weakened legitimacy ... leads to dictatorship ... rather than to democratization. This is exactly the Putin regime trajectory'.<sup>24</sup>

Provoking instability and subsequently directly supporting separatist militants (providing them with heavy military equipment, ammunition, and the direct involvement of the Russian troops in the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine) as well as consistent efforts to split the country, which are the staples of the Kremlin policy in Ukraine, are reaffirming these trends but this time in the guise of pointless national narcissism. This concentration of negative evolutionary trends – appealing to xenophobia, obscurantism of the Russian Orthodox church, anti-Western and anti-liberal ideology – leads to Russia's alienation from global processes and guarantees to engender feelings of resentment and self-isolation for the next generation of Russians.<sup>25</sup>

*How We Buried Josef Stalin* studies these mechanisms of recurring totalitarianism and demonstrates that subservient acceptance of a leader allows a totalitarian system to survive and grow.

### ***How We Buried Josef Stalin: an instrument of anti-totalitarianism***

*How We Buried Josef Stalin* builds on the traditions of social satire as put forward by Nikolay Gogol. Considered to be an encyclopedia of comedic devices, Gogol's plays do not carry elaborate plots. His masterpiece *The Government Inspector* (1836/1842) studies the grandiosity of eternal evil revealed onstage through the figures of Russian bureaucrats.<sup>26</sup> Gogol employs verbal irony and devices of distancing to create a discrepancy between the playfulness of his fictional constructions and the realities of the world. His comedy is instructive but also entertaining as it zooms in on the uneven, the grotesque, the contradictory and the sinful elements of human behaviour. Fear is the major driver of Gogol's plays. It penetrates characters' thoughts, dictates their actions and serves as a dramaturgical mechanism of suspense, as terror and confusion increase from one scene to another.

*How We Buried Josef Stalin* borrows many Gogolian devices. To expose and criticize the dangerous and lasting impact that collective fear can produce on peoples'

psyches and life practices, Solomonov uses the fabric of laughter and the grotesque: 'I wanted my readers or spectators to be amused and horrified at the same time and every minute of the show. I believe laughter may be the only weapon with which to fight the resurgent Stalinism.'<sup>27</sup> Thus, if the charismatic leader cannot be ridiculous, Solomonov's play demonstrates, they must elicit the feelings of absolute admiration and total fear, the foundational emotions of totalitarianism:

After all, it is no coincidence that the film *Death of Stalin* is banned in Russia. A tyrant cannot be ridiculous. And he must not die. One of the main reasons this film was banned in Russia was the irrational unwillingness of our authorities to be reminded of their own mortality. Or of the death of their illustrious predecessor, for that matter.<sup>28</sup>

*How We Buried Josef Stalin* opens with a run-through of the fictional play about Stalin. Scene I, symbolically called 'Night Watchmen', depicts two guards at Stalin's bedchamber in his 'dacha near Kuntsevo'.<sup>29</sup> The scene is a comedic spoof on the opening of *Hamlet* with the Ghost of the old King making its symbolic appearance. However, Solomonov's guards are not Shakespearean sentries: they are badly educated and frightened fools of the totalitarian state, governed by the subject in their care. Instead of the Ghost of Hamlet's father, the director Voldemar Arkadievich appears onstage dressed as Stalin to recite the poem written by the young Father of Nations himself back in 1895.<sup>30</sup> In the next scene, Voldemar and the writer Terentii present their work to the audience, citing the political urgency of their play as 'the beginning of a grand burial of Stalinism'.<sup>31</sup> Although they realize that their production will cause controversy, they are ready to stand by the historical truth it presents. As we all know – Terentii states – in today's Russia 'no one understands what we believe in, or where we're headed'.<sup>32</sup> But the state 'must be correct in all its decisions and actions', whether it is demolishing churches, terrorizing its citizens or creating a cult of Stalin – the 'sacred cow' of Soviet totalitarianism.<sup>33</sup>

Suddenly, the Man from the Ministry steps onstage. As he tells Voldemar, the President is having lunch and wishes to be entertained, i.e. to see the run-through. In fact, the Man from the Ministry explains, regardless of whether Voldemar and his company are ready to fulfill this wish, the transmission had already begun by the time the curtain went up, and the President was already watching. Terrified but also flattered by this attention, Voldemar instructs his company to move on to the next scene.

Stalin is dying, the play tells us, and it is time for his rivals and supporters – from Beria to Khrushchev – to stand their ground, but these comrades, Stalin states, are like the actors who have been sent onto the stage without scripts. And so, he goes on, 'I pick up the scent of their fear – they fear me, each other, themselves'.<sup>34</sup> The future of Stalin's legacy and of his myth, he realizes, is unstable, but there is not much he can do on his deathbed. His immortality, like Lenin's, is to lie in a mausoleum on public display and to serve the future Russian people as an empty but terrifying symbol of the horrible but heroic past.<sup>35</sup> The Ghost of Lenin registers Stalin's last breath, when suddenly the Man from the Ministry stops the action once again to announce that the President

has finished his lunch – 'Dessert has ended!'<sup>36</sup> – and so must end this special transmission.

Wondering what the President's reaction might have been, the actors continue their preparations for the opening night and for the celebrations of Voldemar's eightieth jubilee. A renowned theatre director, with awards and state medals to his name, Voldemar is to officiate at the opening of a museum, a photographic exhibit in the foyer of his theatre and other festivities in his honour. However, the mood and the plans change when the Man from the Ministry returns onstage. His report is quite troublesome. Things did not sit very well with the President: not only did he not finish his dessert – a basket of sweets with raspberries was left 'almost untouched'<sup>37</sup> – he also has expressed his deep frustration with the play. 'It's not good, said the President, that your hero dies. A death isn't needed ... A birth is needed ... And humour is not needed, farce. Now is not the time.'<sup>38</sup> When pressed for more detailed instructions on how the company are to fix their work, the President explains, 'It's not by chance ... that human beings have two eyes. ... Because with one eye it's necessary to see the tyrant and butcher, and with the other – the mighty builder of the state.'<sup>39</sup> To bring the President's dramaturgical wishes to life – i.e. to portray Stalin both as the butcher and the mighty builder – Voldemar and his team go back to the drawing board. They ask Terentii to write a new scene between the young Father of Nations and his mother to show 'that horrific moment when the young Stalin turns into a monster',<sup>40</sup> and they start changing the original cast.

With the Ghost of Lenin, Stalin's doctors and household members gradually leaving the play, Voldemar turns into his own character to step onstage in Stalin's 'complete regalia'.<sup>41</sup> Terentii runs away in shame, while the chorus of Voldemar/Stalin's devotees sings an 'ecclesiastical prayer in praise of Josef [Stalin]':<sup>42</sup>

Comrade Stalin! We Request!  
 We Demand!  
 Raise the quota of those to be shot! In Kirov – by 800 people!  
 In Novosibirsk – by two thousand!  
 In Leningrad, by a thousand five hundred! It's a state necessity!  
 A state necessity!  
 The state is in need of corpses! It needs more prisoners.  
 And dead people ...  
 A person is nothing – the state is all.<sup>43</sup>

There is indeed no space for laughter: what started almost like a practical joke turns with time into a horror play. As the chorus finishes their ecclesiastical prayer, reality and fiction blur. Voldemar's costume turns into his skin, the mask becomes his true identity, and so his transformation attests to the problematic truth – there might be a small piece of Stalin in anyone.

But a good comedy is never complete if there are no sudden turns or twists to its plot. As the company rejoice in their inspiratory chant, the Man from the Ministry comes onstage once again. In a scene reminiscent of the mute finale from Gogol's

*The Inspector General*, the Man from the Ministry reveals the President's new demand. Now, the President not only wishes to act as the leading dramaturge of this performance, but also wants to be its director: 'it would be so wonderful – [the President stated] in a suggestive way – if Voldemar Arkadievich called and asked me to direct that production. I have invaluable experience: Who else, if not me?'<sup>44</sup> In this moment, we realize that there is no escape (and there never was) for Voldemar and his team. The President is the real director of this production because, like Stalin in the past, today he is also the director of Russia's history, its present and its future.

Here, Solomonov uses a model of directorial theatre as a metaphor for state power, with Voldemar acting as its leader turning into a tyrant.<sup>45</sup> Voldemar is an accomplished theatre-maker: he has enjoyed the blessings of the state for all his life, which allowed him to create a pyramid of power in his company, similar in its structures to that of his country. In Voldemar's theatre, actors are the most fearful and submissive people. They are 'willing to give up their freedom, to hand it over to the director and to offer up their body and soul for experimentation'.<sup>46</sup> This problematic interdependence between the director and his company is 'similar to that between the people and their dictator'.<sup>47</sup> Yet Voldemar is only a pale image of the omnipresent President, for whom, as for Stalin, there is nothing left that he could not do. The President, whose name remains unstated and who never shows his face, seems familiar. He performs acts of potent masculinity and extreme accomplishment: he 'already piloted a supersonic jet, soared into the heavens, descended into the gloomy depth of the ocean on a bathyscaphe',<sup>48</sup> and even 'played the piano on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre'.<sup>49</sup> And so, in Solomonov's play, the President's offstage theatrics testify to another troublesome legacy of Stalinism: from state-sponsored spectacles, such as military parades or sport events, to television propaganda, the totalitarian state relies on the power of populist spectacle to instill admiration and fear of the tyrant.

As historian James Harris writes,

fear and suspicion were built into the structure of Russian history ... From the earliest beginnings of Slavic civilization, the population was vulnerable to attack from all sides. The relentless expansion of empire and the concentration of power in a narrow centre were both driven by insecurity. Palace coups, popular rebellions, foreign invasions, and latterly, revolutionary terrorism ultimately spawned a dictatorial police-state on a permanent watch for domestic and foreign threats to its existence. The Bolshevik state was at once wholly different and substantially the same.<sup>50</sup>

Stalin and his repressive politics continued to build on this legacy of fear, suspicion and insecurity. As a kind of theatre director writ large, a kind of master of ceremonies, Stalin 'personally bears a heavy weight of responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Soviet citizens'.<sup>51</sup> He created an elaborate and oppressive network of information gathering and manipulation, and he put forward a system of collective interdependence which in turn mobilized people's sense of terror but also their love for the state and their leader. 'It was in Stalin's power to initiate and intensify or restrain and stop campaigns of political violence', as he was fully aware 'that radically simplified legal procedures and reliance on confession obtained under

torture contributed to a situation in which very large numbers of innocent people were caught up in state repression'.<sup>52</sup>

Following Stalin's death, the state made attempts at restitution, with Nikita Khrushchev championing the fight against Stalin's cult of personality, Gorbachev's reforms that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a brief period of Russian democracy that provided the country with a chance for deeper atonement for Stalin's crimes. With Vladimir Putin coming to power in the early 2000s, however, that chance for collective repentance was lost. Putin's government set out on a firm conservative course that brought Stalin's legacy back. 'The changes in mass consciousness that occurred over the past year are irreversible', Gudkov wrote in 2015.<sup>53</sup>

Curiously, in its performative attempts to resurrect Stalin's legacy, Putin's regime capitalized upon and appropriated the symbolism of official state performances. For example, public celebrations of Stalin's birthday assumed the status of state holiday in Soviet Russia. The tradition began in 1929 after Stalin had eliminated his political opponents and it helped to build his myth. For Stalin's fiftieth birthday, the Kremlin created 'a cultural hero in a grey military uniform' whose significance was symbolic and self-contained.<sup>54</sup> This new Soviet hero 'was focused, attentive, goal-oriented, wise, and ready for self-sacrifice; he personally cared about the interests of every Soviet person'.<sup>55</sup> Stalin's cult of personality continued to grow during his lifetime, with Stalin – much like Voldemar in Solomonov's play – acting as the maker of his own image, the director of the festivities, the keeper of memory and the curator of his own archive.<sup>56</sup> By 2009, the 130th anniversary of Stalin's birth, the significance of his legacy had been restored, with state celebrations demonstrating that by 'reanimating Stalin's image, each regime stated its attitude toward this historical figure, and so also indicated the vector of its own political course'.<sup>57</sup> It is not by chance, therefore, that Solomonov uses theatre as an ideal venue and a 'metaphor to place the action', because 'theatre is well suited to show how Stalinism takes over people, how much pleasure people derive from idolatry and then from becoming its victims, all the while continuing to rejoice in the presence of their idol'.<sup>58</sup> An incident with Stalinist supporters that took place at the opening of *How We Buried Josef Stalin* in the city of Chelyabinsk fully illustrates this statement.

### **Paradoxes of totalitarianism: on the staging and reception of *How We Buried Josef Stalin***

*How We Buried Josef Stalin* has been translated into English, German, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, Romanian and Hebrew. The play was first published in the journal *Dialog* (Warsaw), and then in Russian, English and German by the Austrian publishing house danzig & unfried in 2021. It received several staged readings in English, including a Zoom staging by the Ross Valley Theater in the US.

In Russia, it was produced by Chelyabinsk's Chamber Theatre (February 2021; see Figs 1 and 2) and in Moscow by Teatr.Doc (February 2022; see Figs 3 and 4). Events at the play's opening in Chelyabinsk merit a special mention, as they speak directly to the increased censorship and propaganda of Putin's pre-war Russia.



FIG. 1 *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, Chelyabinsk, Chamber Theatre. Photograph by Marat Mullyev.



FIG. 2 *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, Chelyabinsk, Chamber Theatre. Photograph by Marat Mullyev.

Pro-Stalin activists staged a protest, standing on the steps of the theatre holding posters that read 'Hands off Stalin' (see Fig. 5). To Solomonov, this protest looked like a clever bit of performance art or perhaps a marketing gimmick organized by the Chamber Theatre. To his great surprise, however, these were real supporters of Stalin,



FIG. 3 *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, Moscow, Teatr.Doc. Photograph by Alexandra Astakhova.



FIG. 4 *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, Moscow, Teatr.Doc. Photograph by Alexandra Astakhova.



FIG. 5 A protester with a 'Hands off Stalin' poster stands outside the Chelyabinsk Chamber Theatre, at the opening night of the play. Photograph by Marat Mulliev.

including representatives of the CPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation), who came to protect their idol.<sup>59</sup> First, the protesters gathered outside the Chamber Theatre, holding posters and chanting slogans; then they started publishing reviews on the website of their party. Finally, they began writing complaints to the FSB (Federal Security Service), the General Prosecutor's Office and the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, accusing the author and the company 'of distortion of historical truth, of attacking the authority of the government', calling the play 'an enemy political act'.<sup>60</sup> One can argue that these protests against the Chamber Theatre's production of Solomonov's tragic farce ended up reinforcing its emotional, critical and political impact.

Of course, not every Chelyabinsk resident who came to see this play expressed support for Stalin. Those who ended up in the theatre, not outside it, recognized many parallels between the play and today's Russia: 'today as soon as a new Stalin appears, everyone around them turns either into a sycophant or an enemy-renegade', wrote one Moscow-based critic.<sup>61</sup> 'There are many examples of these small tyrants emerging in Russia every day and the fear these tyrants instill', but in Solomonov's play 'desacralization of the tyrant takes place through post-post-irony', with no moralistic lessons to teach. The play says 'do you want to bury Stalin by laughing? Please do; but do remember a new Stalin might appear too and he will bury you for good.'<sup>62</sup> 'Rare theatre works provide such aesthetic pleasure as this tragicomedy', added one blogger from Chelyabinsk:

I hope the author and the actors will be able to stage this play in as many Russian cities as possible ... It is not enough to bury Joseph Stalin himself. It is vital to bury Stalinism

in the society and in our own heads, otherwise a new Stalin will come to replace the dead one.<sup>63</sup>

'Farce, buffoonery, and laughter are mechanisms of psychological defense and strategies of desacralization that Russian people can use today. There is nothing more enjoyable than to laugh at the idiots in charge, because when we laugh, we feel free', another blogger from Chelyabinsk stated.<sup>64</sup>

By some strange coincidence, the opening night of *How We Buried Josef Stalin* in Moscow took place on the same day as in Chelyabinsk, but one year later (27 February 2022) and three days after Russia began its war in Ukraine. Teatr.Doc is one of the oldest independent theatre companies in Moscow with a mandate to stage socially relevant and politically urgent documentary plays. Unlike many other theatre companies that openly supported the invasion and displayed war symbols (such as Z) on their façades, Teatr.Doc continued with its practice of political resistance. What started in the early 2000s as a theatre company fighting social and political injustice has evolved into a place for solidarity and the anti-war effort.

Teatr.Doc has often been subjected to political and economic repression. The state has repeatedly evicted the company from its rental space and it has been harassed by far-right groups, who sabotaged its work by interrupting performances, screaming obscenities, and spreading paint and dirt on spectators. It is not surprising, therefore, that the artistic directorship of Teatr.Doc decided to go on with producing *How We Buried Josef Stalin* in February 2022; they also managed to keep this production in its repertoire through 2022, even under increased censorship.<sup>65</sup>

On the night of the play's opening in Moscow, the artists asked themselves whether they had the moral right to go ahead with the event when Russia had just invaded Ukraine. They decided that to cancel a play about totalitarianism and its origins would be an act of complacency: 'By 8 o'clock on the opening night the audience began to arrive; it was the most unhappy and confused auditorium [Solomonov] had ever seen ... The conversations in the foyer were all about the war, with many people feeling ashamed and tormented by the guilt and their own powerlessness'.<sup>66</sup> After the performance ended, many spectators wanted to stay. 'People discussed what they saw, thanked the actors, many said that the performance gave them hope and now they had the strength to go on living.'<sup>67</sup> At the same time, they were in shock, unable to believe how relevant yet outrageous some lines sounded: 'The state needs corpses! It needs dead people! A man is nothing, the state is everything!'<sup>68</sup>

Since that opening, *How We Buried Josef Stalin* has taken on an added political value: the play reminds its audiences of what it means to laugh at the authorities in a totalitarian state and it creates new spaces for solidarity and anti-war protest. 'Nowadays, there is nothing left in Russia except art and the power of the state', Solomonov explains.<sup>69</sup> Russian courts, public organizations and Parliament are both fake and real at the same time, but so is art. Russian people consider theatre

a catalyst of great upheavals. Often, they hope that theatre can help them better understand what is really going on in the country, what is good and evil ... It is

dangerous to make political art in Russia ... but there is a feeling that your work can make a real difference.<sup>70</sup>

In September 2022, seven months into the war and the presentation of Solomonov's play in Moscow, one audience member, Ksenia Sakharnov, echoed the writer's words: 'today – she wrote – everyone is wondering how to survive. Where to find strength, how not to give up'.<sup>71</sup> *How We Buried Josef Stalin* 'helps us not to fall into despair. It is a brilliant tragifarce that tries to do what we should have done 69 years ago: to bury the tyrant'; 'the play is very funny! But its laughter is ironic and cynical. And when it's funny – it's not that scary'.<sup>72</sup>

As I write the concluding paragraphs of this article, it has been almost a year since the war in Ukraine began. By now, not only has Putin's army destroyed Ukrainian lives, cities and economy, but also his government has escalated its war against Russia's people. What started as a kind of witch hunt in March 2022, when most of the independent media were shut down, liberal opposition was sent to jail or into exile, theatre directors were fired, companies were closed, and the anti-war cultural elite left, has turned into a new form of cultural politics intended to methodically destroy and erase human rights and freedoms. In this climate of escalated censorship and oppression, any production of a political play like Solomonov's *How We Buried Josef Stalin* can be seen as an act of personal heroism on the part of every theatre producer, director or actor participating in such an endeavour. For example, in September 2022 the tour of Teatr.Doc's *How We Buried Josef Stalin* to Yekaterinburg was cancelled. This decision was based on an official complaint by Aleksandr Ivachev, secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party. Ivachev closely followed the story of the Chelyabinsk Communists and their protests and he read the script to determine instances of 'disrespect for the personality of Joseph Stalin and his contribution to the development of our country'.<sup>73</sup> As a result of Ivachev's complaint, the September tour of Teatr.Doc was cancelled. But the situation changed in December 2022, when the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center in Yekaterinburg decided to host the show. Known as a promoter of democratic traditions and beliefs, the Yeltsin Center has been criticized by conservative parties and public figures since its opening in 2015.<sup>74</sup> For instance, Nikita Mikhalkov, chairman of the Russian Union of Filmmakers, widely known for his support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, criticized the Yeltsin Center for its 'ideologized interpretation of history', calling it a threat to Russia's national security and detrimental to young Russians' view of their national identity.<sup>75</sup> In this context, hosting Teatr.Doc's production of *How We Buried Josef Stalin* in December 2022 turned into a gesture of political protest and anti-war effort on the part of the Yeltsin Center, which was reflected in the reaction of the audience who went to see it. People 'reacted so vividly to what was happening onstage that suddenly we felt a sense of community, something that happens very rarely these days', Tatiana Schur wrote in her Facebook post. 'To see a decayed Stalin onstage, but also immortal in the minds of people close to him ... is exactly what we experience right now, today', she continued. 'I would like to see the time when Solomonov's play will finally stop being

so terribly modern!<sup>76</sup> What this rare testimony reveals is the emotional impact a political performance like this tragic farce can produce on those Russian audiences who seek a collectivity of protest and a chance for personal atonement.

There are fewer and fewer spaces left in Russia today where such collective reflection and atonement can take place. Russian theatre in exile – as a form of political protest and activism – becomes such place of atonement, exemplified by the multinational Komli Theatre's staging of Solomonov's play that took place in the autumn of 2022 in Tbilisi, Georgia (see Fig. 6).<sup>77</sup> Directed by Georgian artist Sergo Kenia and renamed *Stalin 24*, this staging featured Russian-speaking refugee actors from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Georgia.<sup>78</sup> It invited the actors to overcome their professional differences, such as 'different acting schools and approaches, professional expectations, and the fact that they never worked together before', and to focus on their similarities, such as their rejection of Putin's war politics, as well as their 'need to find employment and nostalgia for home'.<sup>79</sup>

Performed in Russian for both Georgian audiences and Russian-speaking migrants, *Stalin 24* thus turned into a political action. At the end of the show, each performer came onstage with their own handwritten poster about the war. One poster said 'Don't forget that you are human'; another read 'True love helps get rid of fear' (see Fig. 7). This gesture was a reminder of people's shared humanity at a time when the homes of Ukrainian peoples have been crushed under Russian bombs, while the homes of refugees and exiles crumbled around them.<sup>80</sup> Written in Russian, Georgian, Farsi and Ukrainian, these posters struck a nerve. They also reflected its multilingual and multinational audience, including 'political activists who fled Russian persecution, young Russians who fled mobilization and Russian-speaking Tbilisians, who have not always been politically active'.<sup>81</sup>



FIG. 6 *Stalin 24*, Tbilisi, Theatre Komli. Photograph by Maria Makarova.



Fig. 7 *Stalin 24*, Tbilisi, Theatre Komli. Photograph by Maria Makarova.

Written in 2019, Solomonov's text acquired a new level of urgency in Tbilisi in 2022. It spoke to the grim realities of today's Russia and to the devastating impact of tyranny on a nation's psyche and behaviour, an impact that many generations of Russian people will have to atone for and wrestle with. Refugees, political exiles, members of the anti-war movement, economic migrants, military deserters and even plain criminals constitute a new wave of migration caused by Putin's war. Have these people learned their historic lesson of choice and conformism? What role – literally and figuratively – will they play when the time comes to put the tyrant and his accomplices on trial? And what lesson will we learn as we watch Putin's war play out from the safety of our own seemingly liberal democracies?

#### NOTES

- 1 I am using spelling 'Josef Stalin' in the title of Solomonov's play, as it was translated into German and English: Artur Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin* (Vienna: danzig & unfried, 2021). In other instances, I revert to the more common spelling 'Joseph Stalin'.
- 2 Artur Solomonov, "'Stalin Died but Not Completely': Dialogue with Artur Solomonov", conducted by Yana Meerzon, *Critical Stages*, 25 (2022), at [www.critical-stages.org/25/stalin-died-but-not-completely-dialogue-with-artur-solomonov](http://www.critical-stages.org/25/stalin-died-but-not-completely-dialogue-with-artur-solomonov).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 At the time this article was written (19 January 2022) a videorecording of this work was available at <https://yandex.ru/video/preview/10764324069700917523>.
- 5 Sererbennikov Kirill quoted in Elena Barysheva, 'Pochemu tak slozhno horonit' Stalina', *Deutsche Welle* (DW), 29 January 2018, at <https://p.dw.com/p/zriM9>.

- 6 Zhanna Zaretskaya, 'Chelovekobog, kak I bylo skazano: Valeriy Fokin pokazal "Rozhdenie Stalina" v Alexandrinskome teatre', *Fontanka.RU*; 26 February 2019, at <https://calendar.fontanka.ru/articles/7813/print.html>.
- 7 Eduard Boyakov is one of many controversial figures in Russian theatre. When he accepted the position as Maxim Gorky MAT's artistic director, he 'publicly renounced liberal values [and] proclaimed himself a conservative, a traditionalist, and a propagandist of spiritual bonds'. Sasha Sokolov, 'Teatral'naya perversiya Eduarda Boyakova: ot pravoslavnykh skrep – k Buzovoy', *Novye Izvestiya*, 10 June 2021, at <https://newizv.ru/news/culture/10-06-2021/teatralnaya-perversiya-eduarda-boyakova-ot-pravoslavnyh-skrep-k-buzovoy>. However, both conservative circles and the Orthodox Church were suspicious of his actions. They accused Boyakov of 'demonic cunning and criminality' (ibid.). The theatre started losing subscribers, while its new management offered an eccentric selection of names and trends to be featured on its stage. These included yoga practitioners, Orthodox preachers, monarchists, Stalinists, Nazis and bloggers like Buzova. Most symptomatically, Alexander Dugin, the father of a new-Eurasianism doctrine and one of the ideologists of the so-called Russian World concept, became a frequent guest of Boyakov's theatre. In this context, a decision to produce a play about the youth of the tyrant and turn it into a marketable enterprise illustrates once again how alive Stalin's legacy remains, if not through fear, then through sheer cynicism and commercialization.
- 8 Marc Bennetts, 'Russia Considers Ban on Armando Iannucci's Film *The Death of Stalin*', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2017, at [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/20/russia-considers-ban-armando-iannucci-film-death-of-stalin](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/20/russia-considers-ban-armando-iannucci-film-death-of-stalin).
- 9 TASS, 'Russian Culture Ministry Yanks Distribution Certificate for *The Death of Stalin*', 23 January 2018, at <https://tass.com/society/986516>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Lev Gudkov, 'Vtorichnyj, ili vozvratnyj, totalitarizm', *Vestnik obschestvennogo mneniya*, 3–4, 127 (2018), pp. 207–26.
- 13 Evgenij Senishin, 'Gudkov, Lev. "Vosem' priznakov togo, chto rezhim v Rossii iz avtoritarnogo stal totalitarnym"', *Republic*, 5 September 2022, at <https://republic.ru/posts/105098>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Solomonov, 'Stalin Died but Not Completely'.
- 16 Svetlana Stevenson, 'Далеко не идиоты', *Novaya Gazeta. EU*, 23 January 2022, at <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/01/22/daleko-ne-idioty>.
- 17 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 47.
- 18 Gudkov, 'Vtorichnyj, ili vozvratnyj, totalitarizm', p. 231.
- 19 Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), p. 298.
- 20 Lev Gudkov, 'Putin's Relapse into Totalitarianism', in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov, eds., *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 86–109, here p. 101.
- 21 Ibid., p. 103.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 *The Government Inspector* had a tremendous influence on playwrights and theatre-makers worldwide. Its two canonical stagings are those of Konstantin Stanislavsky, who directed the play for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1921 with Michael Chekhov in the leading part, and of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who directed it in 1926 in a style reminiscent of German expressionism with Erast Garin as Khlestakov. In the play's finale, the so-called 'mute scene', the characters' realization that neither human nor divine punishment is escapable, Meyerhold replaced actors with dummies, emphasizing Gogol's sense of grotesque and

- hyperbole. Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer, *Essays on Gogol: Logos and the Russian Word* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994). Julia Listengarten, *Russian Tragifarc: Its Cultural and Political Roots* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000).
- 27 Solomonov, 'Stalin Died but Not Completely'.  
 28 Ibid.  
 29 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 47.  
 30 Ibid., p. 51; Stalin's 1895 poem 'Khodil on ot Doma k Domu' can be found at <https://nstarikov.ru/stikhotvorenie-kotoroe-napisal-stali-73297>.  
 31 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 52.  
 32 Ibid., p. 53.  
 33 Ibid.  
 34 Ibid., p. 58.  
 35 When Stalin died in March 1953, his body was put on public display next to Lenin's in the mausoleum on Red Square. Within a few years of Stalin's death, however, Soviet authorities began the campaign against the cult of personality and Stalin's crimes. In October 1961, Stalin's body was removed from the mausoleum and buried in the adjacent tomb.  
 36 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 61.  
 37 Ibid., p. 63.  
 38 Ibid.  
 39 Ibid., p. 64.  
 40 Ibid., p. 67.  
 41 Ibid., p. 77.  
 42 Ibid., p. 79.  
 43 Ibid.  
 44 Ibid., p. 81.  
 45 Solomonov is not alone in criticizing the model of directorial theatre as a metaphor of dictatorship. Elena Kovalskaya, a former deputy manager of the TSIM collective, makes this metaphor explicit. See Yana Meerzon, "Russia Is My Country, Who Better Than Me to Clean Up the Ruins of Our Humanity": Interview with Elena Kovalskaya' (Parts 1 and 2), *Theatre Times*, 13 May 2022, at <https://thetheatretimes.com/russia-is-my-country-who-better-than-me-to-clean-up-the-ruins-of-our-humanity-interview-with-elena-kovalskaya-part-ii>.  
 46 Solomonov, 'Stalin Died but Not Completely'.  
 47 Ibid.  
 48 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 80.  
 49 Ibid., p. 81.  
 50 James R. Harris, *The Great Fear: Stalin's Terror of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 188.  
 51 Ibid., p. 188.  
 52 Ibid., p. 188.  
 53 Gudkov, 'Putin's Relapse into Totalitarianism', p. 104.  
 54 Gennadij Bordugov, *Oktyabr', Stalin, Pobeda. Kul't jubilee v prostranstve panyati* (Moscow: AIPO-XXI, 2010), p. 90.  
 55 Ibid., p. 99.  
 56 Ibid., p. 112.  
 57 Ibid., p. 90.  
 58 Solomonov, 'Stalin Died but Not Completely'.  
 59 Ibid.  
 60 Ibid.  
 61 The author opted not to disclose references to this post due to potential danger to this critic (blogger).

- 62 Ibid.
- 63 The author opted not to disclose references to this post due to potential danger to this critic (blogger).
- 64 The author opted not to disclose references to this post due to potential danger to this critic (blogger).
- 65 On 1 December 2022, Teatr.Doc organized a small theatre festival, with staged readings of Solomonov's plays and novel. The author joined Teatr.Doc and its audiences via Zoom as he has been living outside Russia since 2021; see <https://teatrdoc.ru/news/article/6333>.
- 66 Solomonov, 'Stalin Died but Not Completely'.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Solomonov, *How We Buried Josef Stalin*, p. 78.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ksenia Sakharnov, review of *How We Buried Josef Vissarionovich*, published on 5 September 2022, quoted by Artur Solomonov on his Telegram channel, at <https://t.me/asolomonov>.
- 72 Sakharnov, review of *How We Buried Josef Vissarionovich*.
- 73 Irina Krylova, 'Communists vyaskazalis' o skandal'nom spektakle pro pokhorony Stalina, kotory pokazhut v Ekaterinburge', *URA.RU*, 14 September 2022, at <https://ura.news/news/1052586840>.
- 74 The centre hosts the Boris Yeltsin Museum, dedicated to the political history of contemporary Russia and its first president.
- 75 Vyacheslav Prokof'ev, 'Mikhalkov prosit skorresktirovat' programmu Yletcin Centra v Ekaterinburge', *TASS*, 9 December 2016, at <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/3857045>.
- 76 Tatiana Shchur, Facebook post, 14 December 2022.
- 77 *Stalin 24* was directed by Sergo Kenia, designed by Nina Kalatozi and choreographed by Victoria Fatun and Idrak Mirzalizade. Komli Theatre, Facebook page, 9 September 2022.
- 78 The cast included Theona Dolnikova, Georgy Rybakov, Nikita Dvoryanchenko, Andrei Bibikov, Mikhail Selischev, Rakhmatulla Amirov, Grigory Laikov and Alexei Lyubimov.
- 79 Elena Vol'gust, 'კომლი/КОМЛИ: Na starogruzinskom – semjya', *Peterburgskij Teatral'nyj Jurnal*, 19 October 2022, at <https://ptj.spb.ru/blog/komli-na-starogruzinskom>.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Alexander Burakov, 'Kak khoronili Stalina: politsatiru or RF stavjat v Tbilisi', *Kultura Grusija*, 22 November 2022; Burakov, 'Как хоронили Сталина: политсатиру о РФ ставят в Тбилиси', *DW*, 22 November 2022.

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