

# Putin's Homophobia Is an Echo of Stalinism

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One hundred years have now passed since the death of the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. The government which seized power in 1917, and which Lenin led for a few intensive years, used political terror against its opponents. The repression increased under his successor, Joseph Stalin, who saw enemies of the Soviet state colluding in every corner of society.

Even under his own dictatorship, Stalin kept uncovering new conspiracies. It was easy to label anyone who dared oppose—or was merely accused of opposing—state policy as an “enemy of the people”. These enemies were believed to take different forms: Trotskyists, Mensheviks, White Guardists, undercover representatives of British capital. As noted by Paul Gregory, who researched the archives of Soviet institutions, nothing was left to chance. Documents which became available in the 1990s reveal that Stalin personally identified various conspiracies and instructed his security police to achieve the desired results.

This development was by no means an anomaly. A distinguishing feature of Soviet jurisprudence was that it sentenced not only real enemies of the state, but also potential enemies (who were themselves unaware that they were enemies). The purely instrumental aim of this policy was to secure total power for the Communist Party. It was not until after Stalin's death in 1953 that political terror began to abate, and it never completely disappeared until the glasnost period under Gorbachev.

The winds that now blow through the halls of the Kremlin are reminiscent of Stalin's terror. On January 10, Russian authorities banned the so-called “international LGBT movement” as an illegal organisation. The crux of the matter: such a movement does not actually exist. It is, nevertheless, described by the Russian government as a subversive threat to state security. Russian authorities now classify every action and manifestation that it dislikes as “extremist” and thus potentially criminal.

Once again, the Kremlin speaks of a Western conspiracy. The Russian Ministry of Justice has explained that this supposed “international LGBT movement” is part of an American effort to “threaten Russia's demographic status”, and that it undermines Russia's “thousand-year-old traditions” as well as “traditional family values”. An investigation by independent Russian journalists has shown how several of these arguments originate from the far right, including the website Zavtra, known for promoting conspiracy theories.

These attacks should be viewed in their wider context. For over a decade now, sexual minorities have been portrayed in Russia propaganda as “fifth-columnists” who reject “traditional values”. President Vladimir Putin’s statements about how Russian soldiers are fighting “Satan” in Ukraine, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s rhetoric about Western children being taught that Jesus was “bisexual”, are all part of this state-sanctioned culture war.

It is important not to underestimate the effects of this kind of hate speech, which has grown in intensity since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Homophobia has become part of the algorithm of power. The attacks aim to create a convenient scapegoat, and to deflect political responsibility for the Kremlin’s mistakes. Last December saw raids on clubs and bars that had previously been safe havens for Russian LGBT groups. Witnesses speak of increased harassment, dismissals from jobs and housing evictions. Parents in same-sex relationships risk losing custody of their children. For more details on this, see the [Report](#) by my colleague Stefan Ingvarsson.

In what can be seen as a litmus test for all higher education, the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences is now under pressure. At a recent press conference arranged by the state news bureau [TASS](#), the Institute was called “the last bastion of villains, traitors, foreign agents and Russophobes”, and its researchers were described as an “ulcer”. It was declared—using an expression taken directly from the Kremlin’s war rhetoric—that these unpatriotic people must “undergo true denazification”.

The immediate aim of this campaign seems to be to purge certain named individuals who are all researchers of various standing. But there is also a long-reaching aim, namely to drive home the point that the loyalty of university faculty can be called into question at any time. Remaining silent or politically neutral is no longer an alternative. Explicit loyalty is now required of people in various positions.

The interplay between authoritarian tendencies in Russia and its aggressive foreign policy is a self-reinforcing spiral. It is hardly surprising that a new, more ideologically rigid road map was presented at the above-mentioned press conference. A participant with a background in ultra-conservative political circles proposed that from now on, all Russian research should be conducted in accordance with Putin’s decree “On spiritual and moral values”. Researchers at the Institute of Philosophy, he claimed, are “LGBT propagandists” obsessed with “undermining the foundations of marriage”.

This insistence on ideological conformism is an echo from Russia’s darkest past. In 1930, Stalin stated that there was only one political line to tow, and this meant “crushing active saboteurs, revealing those who were neutral, and recruiting those who were loyal”. Then as now, the Academy of Sciences was under attack. [Hundreds of scholars were imprisoned and executed](#). The Soviet Union never recovered from that loss. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of damage that would result from a scientific world operating in accordance with Putin’s ideological decrees.

Regardless of what happens next, the signal is clear: researchers in academia are expected to deliver the ideological support required by the Kremlin for its war against Ukraine. Just as Stalin spoke of “class enemies” and Marxism-Leninism as the only acceptable ideology, Putin is obsessed with “fifth-columnists” and “traditional values”. This is the primacy of power: individuals are once again persecuted—not for anything they have done, but for who they are, or merely claimed to be.



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