

True today, lies tomorrow

History, all too often, is written by the victors. In recent weeks we have watched as Austrian President Kurt Waldheim once again faced a barrage of negative publicity over his wartime activities.

Waldheim, as a 20-year-old lieutenant, knew of war crimes being committed against Yugoslav and Greek civilians but did nothing. Just what he ought to have done has not been made clear by the historians who judged him — none of whom seem themselves to have been shot for disobeying orders during the war.

Contrast the fuss over Waldheim to the almost total silence over the death of former Soviet leader Georgi Malenkov, whose demise in mid-January was only tersely announced by Moscow in February.

The roly-poly Malenkov rose to power as Josef Stalin's private secretary and then went on to become head of the Communist party's personnel department. In this innocuous-sounding job, Malenkov selected the dossiers of the party members who were to be shot during Stalin's purges of the 1930s — in which 20 to 40 million people died.

Many of the two million party members executed during this period were personally selected by Malenkov. He became chief clerk of death, a Soviet version of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann. Both men, it seems, were untroubled by the murder of millions; their deepest care was to make sure that the paperwork for their monstrous crimes was properly filed.

After the war, Malenkov became Stalin's heir apparent. And when Stalin died in 1953, Malenkov briefly seized supreme power after a bitter struggle with the secret police chief, Lavrenti Beria. Malenkov denounced Beria as a western spy. Beria was executed.

But Malenkov was in turn overthrown by a cabal led by Nikita Khrushchev and packed off to exile running a dam in remote Soviet Central Asia. He lived in total obscurity until his recent death at the ripe old age of 86. Which proves once again that the bad do not die young.

For years, Beria has been portrayed as the most evil man inside Stalin's evil kingdom. Some Soviet historians have tried to lay the blame for many of Stalin's later crimes on Beria. In the West, Beria

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is always described as a bloodthirsty, opera-loving fiend who divided his time between murdering people and ravishing pubescent girls.

But is this view correct?

Beria delivered a funeral oration for Stalin that called for strict civil rights for Soviet citizens and an end to Russification of the USSR's other nationalities. Some Soviet defectors even claim Beria was the leader of a faction that wanted to bring sweeping liberalization of Soviet society and the economy — much as Mikhail Gorbachev is doing today. They maintain that Khrushchev talked liberalization but, in reality, brought back Stalinism — which persisted up until Gorbachev's domestic revolution.

These questions are of more than academic interest. As historical data slowly percolates out of closed Soviet society, we are being made sharply aware that much of what we have been told about the USSR is either false or cloaked with layers of misinformation. Yesterday Bukharin was a devil; today he is rehabilitated. Yesterday Brezhnev was a hero of the Soviet Union; today his name is being erased from public monuments.

Leon Trotsky will probably be the next to quit the Soviet hades of counter-revolutionaries and soar to the pantheon of revolutionary founding fathers.

Where is the fixed point in this spinning galaxy of relative truth? In the West, we know all about Kurt Waldheim's sins of omission. Yet we still know very little about the sins of commission of Stalin, or Yezhov or even Lenin.

As we eagerly and approvingly observe Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, we must ask ourselves: Is this more relativity where truth is not a straight line but a circle? Will some unknown apparatchik suddenly seize power and inform us that Gorbachev was a tyrant and enemy of the people?

Truth, of course, is never absolute anywhere. In the Soviet Union truth is like a ship tossed on stormy seas, blown hither and yon by mighty gusts of raw political force. What the USSR so badly needs is a harbor and stout moorings for its bark of history. These can only come from a truly free press and a free academia. So far, Gorbachev's men have taken a gingerly step in this direction by poking ever so carefully into the spooky cellars of modern Russian history.

This, alas, is not enough. A great leap forward is needed, not tiny steps.

But totalitarian states do not often make such leaps. Truth belongs to the party, not to the general public. It is a world, as George Orwell so aptly said, "where the Leader controls not only the future, but the past."