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The fetters of victory

How the war provides Russia with its identity

Victory in the "Great Patriotic War" is the most potent symbol of identification in present-day Russia, and the sole prop for national self-belief. Victory legitimated Soviet totalitarianism; now, the more the memory of Stalinist repression fades, the more public opinion turns in the dictator's favour. The commemoration of the war serves above all the centralist and repressive social order that has been imposed in the post-totalitarian culture and society under Vladimir Putin. Here, Lev Gudkov describes the taboos in Russia surrounding the underside of victory.

Preliminaries

The last century, the "century of masses" or "the century of totalitarian regimes and movements", fundamentally changed the very terms of the question of how it is possible to understand the past. It also changed the role of the past. As late as the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of "understanding" was conceived mainly as a hermeneutical problem, an issue of one individual interpreting texts written by another individual. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, after the catastrophic events of two world wars, large-scale social transformations, and mass repressions, this problem began to be viewed from a whole range of new angles. First of all, the number and diversity of available sources of testimonies about the past had increased; second, the type of social and cultural reproduction had changed.

In the pre-modern, pre-totalitarian age, the task of understanding and explaining the acts and states of people of the past had on the whole been accomplished by one cultural stratum or estate that was in possession of the "whole" range of historical tradition. The means of interpretation employed never went beyond the experience and ideas of people who had received a corresponding type of education. After 1945, the issue of the types, adequacy, and limits of "understanding" was stripped of its formerly indissoluble connection with a uniquely personal view of understanding, remembering and empathy. From the post-war existentialists to the contemporary post-modernists, many authors have argued that the experience of those who had "survived Auschwitz", whether that stood for the Nazi extermination camps or Stalin's Gulag, was irretrievable. Survivors' traumatized silence, or their inability to convey all their feelings and thoughts to those who had not been there, or to the next generation, was taken by philosophers or intellectuals as proof of the transcendence, inexpressibility, and human impossibility of "testifying" to such experiences. It was asserted that everyday language and forms of thought are entirely and fundamentally inadequate means of describing or understanding this experience.

The excessive ethical emphasis that was placed on the irreproducibility and impenetrability of extreme states diverted analysts' attention from others aspects of this issue, such as the ineffectiveness of the model of an individualistic and immediately personal act of understanding as "mental empathy" or "penetration" of the mind of those who have been through an extreme ordeal. The very model of "tragic comprehension and understanding" is devalued by the fact that events of this kind affected and engulfed millions of people. The condition of death as an everyday event; of de-personalized mass disappearances; of the degradation of the dying, "refined" mind to the level of social or intellectual semi-vegetation: these trivialized the death or life, and depreciated the individuality and unique personality, of highly educated individuals. Their death was monstrously conventionalized and industrially calculated in just the same way as that of less refined people. The banality of mass evil called for fundamentally different means of studying collective or mass memory, a different ethical or metaphysical position, such as earlier historians had never felt the need for. This brings us to a very important question: to what extent can the experience of those who have lived through the tragic upheaval of the past century be comprehended, passed on, or turned into a lesson? What, if anything, remains in our memory of events that simultaneously affected the lives of a mass of people, or indeed turned them upside down, such as wars, revolutions, repressions, collectivization, large-scale transformation of the social order, and the like?

The recorded "history" of the twentieth century differs in crucial ways from both medieval chronicles and the "Universal Histories" produced in the nineteenth century. Firstly, the groups who concern themselves with preserving and reproducing the "past" have changed and become much larger and more differentiated. Secondly, the very techniques used for retaining and preserving the past have changed. They are no longer limited to archives, museums, galleries full of battle-pieces and historical paintings, multi-volume surveys of events, memoirs, or family documents of the upper or educated classes. Today, professional historians are rivalled by cinema archives, mass media, fiction, schools, armies, political demagoguery, national rituals, symbolical and ideological place names, and much else. This is why, when publicly debating historical "memory", the remaining memories of survivors or the first transmission of these memories to another generation, as well as the reproduction of stories about "how it was", we need to be clear about what "past" we are dealing with, who its bearer is, how it is organized and structured, and by what means it is being expressed. This is especially relevant in the case of such symbolic events as "the War" (in the Soviet Union or Russia, when people say "the War", they always mean one war, *the* war: the Great Patriotic War, as it was called in the USSR and as it is called in official discourse in contemporary Russia, or World War II, if people want to include the international discursive level).

Moreover, we need to make a fundamental distinction between individual, private memories of the war (and, accordingly, clearly understand the motives for which people privately pass on their experience, as well as the distinctive features of the situations in which they do so), and collective (group or institutionalized) representations of it. Neither of the two should be thought of as objective reflections of what really happened, something like a documentary about the actual events that is yet to be shot. The work of memory is not just a process of *selecting* events and details, but also a way of *constructing* a story line or assessment of those events that is based on an explicit or latent interpretive scheme. The relevance or value of memories depends on *who* provides that scheme — the recollecting person themselves or, as is much more

frequently the case, their immediate or abstract partners — and also on whom these memories are being addressed to. In other words, the scholar, and particularly the sociologist of culture, is faced with the task of unveiling the communicative structure of memory, or, to be more precise, to represent memory as *social interaction*, wherein the subject of remembering implicitly addresses himself to a significant Other (even if the other is no more than a generalized, diffuse image of "the young generation", the moral "judgment of history", "the public", or "society" — an image which, speaking from the social anthropologist's point of view, is merely a self–projection of the narrator pictured in a mode of ideal understanding, ie as a listener who knows "the whole story").

The process of "remembering" always consists of producing interpretations resulting from a more or less explicit controversy, or provided as supplements or illustrations to commonly accepted rhetorical accounts of the content or meaning of the events narrated. For the sociologist, it is very important from both a methodological and substantial point of view to note the features of this scheme and its meaning as a collective or institutional norm of "history" or "historical events" for various actors. Without exposing the semantic significance of this scheme, it is impossible to proceed to understanding memory as social interaction. If individual memories are set out as chains of biographical or family circumstances, they are attached to the level of private history with its key values and standards of assessment. Collective conceptions, on the contrary, are constituted by certain values common to the entire community and reproduced by means different from those used for passing on the stories of private persons. Usually they are stripped of all traces of their origin and process of production, and are perceived as "obvious" opinions that emerged "no one knows when": corporative or mass consciousness is not just uninterested in the genesis of these ideas but, on the contrary, does everything to protect itself from any attempt to subject them to rational analysis, to suppress all traces of their ideological production, and to taboo their sacred status as symbols of collective identity. Therefore collective conceptions cannot be viewed as a sum of individual memories and concrete details of past events. They are always entirely different "reconstructions" of historical processes and events, whose function is linked either to the rituals of collective (national or group) solidarity or to accounts of collective myths and ideological beliefs designed to give legitimacy to certain social institutions or political actions. This is why the sociologist of mass "memory" is forced to follow Maurice Halbwachs in constantly asking himself and others: which institution, which group or social milieu retains *this* "past" in its memory; *how* is it retained (reproduced); and using which figurative, symbolic, and technical means? Or, in other words, what are the "social frameworks of collective memory"?

In this article, I shall examine the character of the collective "memory of the war" or the role of representations of the war in the system of the contemporary Russian national identity.¹

Double–think and memory

What needs to be noted at the outset is that the mass, ie non–specialized, "general" or "lower–class" consciousness is deprived of "memory". Public opinion doesn't retain the experience of separate individuals; their experience is neither preserved nor transmitted. All that individuals go through, and above all their unreflected suffering, vanishes unless it is taken up by specialized institutions, unless it is channelled into other means of cultural reproduction

and, accordingly, unless private opinions are sanctioned by some authority that ranks as supra-individual. This is why today we should speak not so much of memory but rather of the reproduction of "memory": at present, people who lived through the war make up no more than 6–7 per cent of the population, they are mainly elderly and little educated women, most of whom have neither the means, opportunities, nor, most importantly, any motivation for transmitting such experience.

Mass attitudes towards the war virtually liken it to traditional, almost Biblical acts of God — famine, pestilence, floods, or earthquakes, with unclear causes and terrible consequences.² The un-worked-through and uninterpreted mass experience of the war is preserved in such amorphous and extremely indefinite categories that retain only a highly general assessment of the events of those now-distant years. People consider the "patriotic war" (judging from the relative frequency of definitions given in our surveys) above all "great", then "bloody", "tragic", "terrible", much less frequently "heroic", "long", and even less frequently "mean".

Collective memory (mass consciousness) has virtually repressed an entire level of experience: the cheerless everyday life during the war and the post-war years, the coercive labour, the chronic hunger and poverty, the overcrowded conditions of life.³ All of this has dissipated, as has the memory of the maimed invalids (or, as they were called in the post-war years, the "samovars" — human stumps on little wheels that were a fixture of the street bustle as late as the first half of the 1950s). All of this is now seen as burdensome and unnecessary, as were the invalids in the post-war period (they were left to the mercy of fate, people were ashamed of them, turned away from them, hid them with an unpleasant feeling of guilt and a sense of "the ugliness of life" — everything was done to keep them out of the official gala picture of peace-time life). All of this has left only an unconscious fear in public memory, a fear that often expresses itself as a fear of a new (world- or civil-) war, and forms the background to mass assessments of the quality of life, to the sluggish resistance against attempts to heroize anything that goes beyond the war theme, to people's passive endurance — in brief, to everything that used to be expressed in the familiar Soviet sigh: "If only there was no war!" These components of mass consciousness have become a "collective unconscious" and are not disappearing, although their significance is gradually diminishing.

In total contrast to this diffuse state of memory, an extremely structured social attitude towards the war is incarnated and consolidated in the main symbol that integrates the nation: victory in the war, victory in the Great Patriotic War. In the opinion of Russia's inhabitants, this is the most important event in their history; it is the basic image of national consciousness. No other event compares with it. In the list of the most important events that determined Russia's fate in the twentieth century, victory in the GPW is named by 78 per cent of those surveyed. In recent years, especially after Putin came to power, the significance of victory has only increased. In 1996, 44 per cent of those surveyed (a relative majority) mentioned it in response to the question, "What makes you personally most proud in our history?"; in 2003 the figure was 87 per cent. There is nothing else left to take pride in: the disintegration of the USSR and the failure of the post-Soviet reforms, the noticeable weakening of mass hopes, and the disappearance of the illusions of Perestroika have furnished the content of a traumatic experience of national failure.

An interconnected process is at work here: as pride in Soviet achievements (the Revolution, the construction of a new society, the creation of a New Man, the demonstrative results of Soviet industrialization, the military might of the superpower, and the related strength of science and technology) is eroding,⁴ the symbolic weight of Victory is increasing. Both the imperial cultural heritage (including "sacred" Russian literature) and the ideological symbols of socialism (which today are only preserved by older generations in the form of nostalgia for an idealized past) are increasingly losing out to Victory. All components of the positive collective unity of the idea of "us" are eroding. After their devaluation has brought to the fore a range of complexes of hurt self-esteem and inferiority, Victory now stands out as a stone pillar in the desert, the vestige of a weathered rock. All the most important interpretations of the present are concentrated around Victory; it provides them with their standards of evaluation and their rhetorical means of expression.

A few examples should suffice to illustrate this. A recent TV image: posters displayed at the perfunctory rally of solidarity with Putin (on the Vasilyevsky Slope on Red Square after Beslan): "We held out in 1945, we'll hold out now".⁵ More distant images: 1996. With great difficulty, federal troops have captured Dudayev's palace (the former building of the regional party committee in Grozny), a Russian flag is fluttering above it (alluding to the victory banner over the Reichstag in 1945). One may also refer to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's seemingly comical reasoning about the motives for the referees' mistakes at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (the 2002 doping scandal) — "that's revenge on Russia for her victory in the Patriotic War"⁶ and the like. But, as usual, Zhirinovskiy's buffoonery very accurately locates the sore points of mass consciousness, the residues of a closed, paranoid, militaristic society, where the authorities were maintaining their citizens' hatred of internal and external enemies, putting up bogeymen and cultivating fears that made those very authorities appear indispensable.⁷

During the early post-war years (the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the '50s), there was still a sharp cleavage between the uncodified, all-too-fresh and immediate personal and mass experience of the war and more generally the time of the war (which included so little that was picturesquely heroic — everyday life, hunger, evacuation, and the "work" of the war were in the foreground) — and the official gala version of the events of the war.⁸ But a mere fifteen years later, as the first generation that had not fought in the war started its social ascent, mass representations of the war began to be subjected to an intense matrixing process. It was marked by the beginning of an official, demonstrative veneration of the "veterans"; the appearance of a "lyrical" tone in descriptions of the war (above all in memoirs); and various state rituals. This process combined the stereotyping of collective experience (the production of "generalizing" clichés and rhetorical formulae as well as a normatively adopted, "elevated", official language of collective pronouncements about the war that was taken up by journalists and consolidated in the poetics of official history, mass communication, and mass culture) with corresponding concepts of state history and national culture, moral evaluations of private life, and views on the limits of its autonomy.⁹ Freeing it from the affective radicalism of front-line perception, the post-war interpreters thereby routinized the war experience, introducing it into the general horizon of a closed military-bureaucratic society. Those were the years when the official multi-volume *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941–1945* began to appear (the first volume came out in 1960) and memoirs of Soviet marshals were first published,¹⁰ quickly becoming a scarce commodity (and remaining so until the 1980s). It is this stereotyping process

that provided an enormous amount of people with a language for their "lofty collective feelings", a language of lyrical statehood that was fixed in the 1970s, and which remains the only possible language for talking about the war for the majority of Russians.

Most contemporary Russians's attitude towards the war is a result of the entire way in which Soviet culture functioned: it is a product of propaganda, of the mass-media, of school education, of state-wide rituals, of an art subordinate to the state — above all cinema and literature, but also the stereotyped production of the members of the Union of Artists that was replicated in illustrated magazines, the war songs broadcast on radio, and in other media. This means that the ideas, experience, and knowledge of an entire generation were ideologically processed, packaged, and rhetorically shaped by professional interpreters (party workers, writers, directors, editors, historians, commentators). Only then did the configurations of meaning that had been officially sanctioned by the authorities receive the status of reality, general validity, and absoluteness, a status that subordinated the personal experience of individuals.

The fact of human death on such a large scale — something that cannot be taken in by individuals's perception — as well as the war-time destruction of social ties and of the very everyday way of life, do not "automatically" become a factor that changes the structure of mass consciousness. Just like any other, this "private", individual experience, the experience of people at war and during war, even enormous numbers of people is not reproduced and does not constitute a cultural or social fact unless specially processed. Only when war-time experience is appropriately shaped and consolidated, when it has become technically reproducible, when it is inscribed into, or at least correlated with the collective framework of events past and present, does it become a society's (or individual group's) and war veterans's historical "memory". Without such mechanisms (and a purposeful media policy) that specially maintain, organize, and stage "memory" and its rituals, without making a performance out of the war theme, even such a significant past rapidly disintegrates and vanishes. This is precisely why today the war (the events of the Second World War), as represented in the old Soviet films that are broadcast on the main TV channels or in special programmes about the war on a daily basis, occupies 6–8 per cent of all air time. This figure rises abruptly at times of commemorative events connected to memorable war dates — the battles near Moscow, the battle of Stalingrad, the liberation of Leningrad, the battle of Kursk, the May holidays, and so on.

The war as a symbol

Therefore, every time people mention "Victory", what they mean is a symbol that appears to the vast majority of those surveyed, and thus to society as a whole, as a central element of collective identity, a point of reference, a gauge that sets a certain perspective for evaluating the past and, partly, for understanding the present and the future. The victory of 1945 is not simply the central junction of meaning of Soviet history, which started with the October Revolution and ended with the collapse of the USSR; it is in fact the only positive anchor point for post-Soviet society's national consciousness. Victory does not only crown the war, but as it were purifies and justifies it, at the same time withdrawing its negative side from any attempt at rational analysis, tabooing the topic. It makes it impossible to explain the causes and course of the war, or to analyse the actions of the Soviet leaders and the nature of a regime that subordinated all spheres of social existence to its preparations for

the war.

The victors's triumph masks the ambiguity of the symbol. Victory in the war retrospectively legitimizes the Soviet totalitarian regime as a whole and uncontrolled rule as such; justifies the "costs" of Soviet history and the accelerated military-industrial modernization — the repressions, famines, poverty, and enormous numbers of deaths after collectivization —; and creates a version of the past that has no alternative and provides the only possible and significant framework for interpreting history. This is why there is no other coherent and systematically developed version of history and, correspondingly, no other version reproduced by all institutions of socialization. Today there is no elite that could propose a different, equally systematic point of view on the events of the war, or indeed any other assessment of, or moral stance towards the past.

It is no accident that as the symbolic force of victory in the war is increasing, so is the authority of comrade Stalin (both as commander-in-chief and as leader of the people). Stalin is not just returning — his role is also changing (compared to Perestroika). The higher the status of the events of the "war" in their teleological organization as a chain of events leading up to pre-determined Victory, the more the memory of Stalin's repressions is receding (their perceived significance for Russian history has fallen from 29 per cent to 1 per cent over the past twelve years, according to our surveys, while positive views of Stalin have increased from 19 per cent to 53 per cent between 1998 and 2003; the question, "If Stalin were alive and standing for the post of president of Russia, would you vote for him?" is answered by 26–27 per cent of Russians with "Yes, I would").¹¹

Victory Day has not become a day of mournful commemoration of the dead, the human suffering, and the material destruction. It is literally a day of victory, of the Soviet army's triumph over Hitler's Germany. Russians address the intentional meaning of victory exclusively to themselves; it only has a meaning within the structures of Russian self-determination. Today there are hardly any people left who feel hatred for the former enemy countries: Germany and, less surprisingly, Italy, Japan, or Romania. Until recently, such feelings had remained intact among the older generations and on the periphery of society. Today anti-American feeling is much more pronounced than anti-German moods, which are characteristic only of 8–10 per cent of the population (mostly old people). Half of all Russians would not even object to putting up a monument to the fallen soldiers on both sides of World War II (although this readiness has also declined during Putin's reign, from 57 per cent to 50 per cent, while resistance to this idea has increased from 26 per cent in 1991 to 35 per cent in 2003).

Russians are not willing to share their triumph with anyone else in the world. Sixty-seven per cent of those surveyed (in 2003) believe that the USSR could have won the war even without the help of the allies. Moreover, as Russian nationalism is intensifying and the war is receding further into the past, it has gradually begun to be integrated into the traditional idea of the Russian "mission" and "rivalry with the West". Parallels between the events of contemporary and medieval history ("By smashing fascism, the USSR protected the peoples of Europe from annihilation", just as "By smashing the Tatar-Mongol hordes, Rus' shielded Europe") have become commonplace both in late Soviet nationalist rhetoric and generally in the post-Soviet period. This view is reinforced by the idea that the Russians defeated an enemy whom none of the most developed, richest, most successful, and "civilized" peoples

of Europe were able to withstand.

At the same time, a number of unpleasant facts have been repressed from mass consciousness: the aggressive nature of the Soviet regime, Communist militarism, and expansionism, which were the reason for the USSR's expulsion from the League of Nations after its attack on Finland; the fact that World War II began with a joint attack on Poland by two partners and (then) allies — Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union; the human, social, economic, and metaphysical cost of war; and the responsibility of the country's leadership for the beginning and course of the war, and the consequences of the war for other countries.

The war and the taboo on rational analysis

Victory in the war came to structure collective memory as a result of the longstanding work of the official Soviet social institutions — the school, the army, the media, the system of propaganda, and ideological education. Today we are essentially faced with a more or less markedly Stalinist version of the war and the whole history of the Soviet period, and, therefore, of the entire twentieth century. This interpretation of the war was established by Stalin's General Staff and the Central Committee's agitprop.

Various groups of ideologists engaged in a tough competition for control over interpreting the war, a competition that has not ceased to this day (the various political parties — from the "party of power"¹² to its opponents, the Communists, patriots, populists, and others — are still vying for a monopoly on the heritage of the war, trying to draw their own legitimacy from the victory). All variants and nuances in accounts and assessments of the war appeared exclusively within the bureaucracy itself (or the educated stratum of society) in reaction to the official position. All versions thereof, whether already existing or possible in the future, are only supplements, criticism, refutations, or parodies of this position, and cannot be anything else. Thus, the very elaboration of a new or more specific interpretation, the emergence of a new perspective on the war and victory, may be viewed as a signal of a defect in the mechanisms of the social and cultural reproduction of the Soviet system. Conversely, this call for the restoration of the basic version of the war, of the dominant of national history, may be seen as a recovery and conservation of the bases of the Soviet regime and Soviet society.

The dominant understanding of the war or interpretation of the events of the war is represented in the cinema epos *Osvobozhdenie* [Liberation] created in the Brezhnev period by Yury Ozerov and Yury Bondarev.¹³ All other versions only elaborated on this theme in different genres — from comedy and adventure thrillers to lofty tragedies with their characteristic existentialist or ethical tone of narrative.¹⁴ They proposed additional elements or arrangements of the theme of heroic self-sacrifice, tests of loyalty, genuineness of human values and relationships (Alexei German's *Proverka na dorogakh* [Checkpoint]), but didn't propose any interpretation of the war that would have been alternative to the dominant one.

In the USSR, for a long time, everything that was related to the war (the one War, a war with a proper name — the Patriotic War), was subjected to a tremendous sacralization that blocked all attempts to analyse the past rationally. Any version that was at variance with the military and state leadership's was long perceived (and, largely, still is) as a sacrilege, as an insult to the memory of the fallen, as blasphemy against the highest national values.

As a result, instead of moral, intellectual, political, or any other attempt at rationally working through the negative, traumatic experience, we are left with its "cicatrization". Every attempt to reassess the war as a whole, or individual aspects thereof, was suppressed by the Soviet authorities with the greatest possible swiftness and brutality. Private, individual experience (and, accordingly, the significance of its values) was driven into the sphere of a culturally unmarked and unreflected "collective unconscious". The emergence of a psychological defence against the need for rational analysis was less important in this context than the preservation of a certain rating of values, a fixed correlation between the private and the total–collective, which was always linked to the state (in Bulat Okudzhava's words, "[...] we need one victory, one for all, we're ready to pay the price"). The moral sense of people who were defending themselves not just from aggression, but from an enemy who, as people thought and as the authorities asserted, was waging a war to exterminate the peoples of the USSR, didn't simply reinforce the victors' triumph. People's view of themselves as victims of aggression gave them a steadfast confidence in their own integrity and human superiority, as confirmed by Victory in the war.

This confidence was routinized in an extra–moral, socially primitive, archaic, almost tribal distinction between "our people" and "not our people" as a basis for social solidarity. This was also expressed in a readiness to justify (but not to support!) any aggressive or repressive state policy against other countries or territories withstanding the USSR or Russia (the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, respectively, in 1956 and 1968, and of Afghanistan in 1979). Most recently this has been illustrated by the bellicose rhetoric against Georgia, the Baltic countries, and so on. (eg in Alexander Nevzorov's film *Nashi* [Our Boys]). The effect of all this is evident in people's attitude towards Chechnya, in the films *Brat* [The Brother], *Brat–2* [The Brother 2], *Voyna* [War], and similar output by Balabanov and countless numbers of other epigones. The right to violence is seen as the force of the righteous. Arbitrariness becomes the legitimizing principle of the social, as can be seen from the *Yukos* and Gusinsky affairs, the *Nord–Ost* hostage crisis, or Beslan. I am of course only sketching this line of development — the demoralization of war — but it is definitely perceptible in both everyday life and public discourse.

The war as culture

For Russia, war has become a surrogate for "culture" — the semantic arena for today's most important themes and topics. The war provides models for the evaluative expression of the main conflicts and dramatic models of interaction. War is turning into a field of models for rituals of group and national solidarity, trial, and test for authenticity, as in the films of German or Tarkovsky.

Under these conditions, the highest societal or nationwide values can only be articulated in a strung–up and excited tone of voice and in extraordinary situations (of exploits, self–sacrifice, salvation, break–through into a new reality and repudiation of everything that is common and routine, of "normal life"). Extraordinariness is the mode and condition of reproduction of these values and, accordingly, of this society. Everyday life, on the contrary, is not simply culturally unsanctioned and ideologically unprovided for,¹⁵ but was long slighted as something base, corrupt or even hostile ("Philistinism" and similar labels served as universal bugaboos in all Soviet ideological campaigns). Obviously, it's a small step from elevating "emergency–ism" to

the rank of a socio-political cult to justifying endless mass terror.

The state-ordained interpretation of the victory of 1945 served not only to justify the Soviet regime in the past and for the future. For a long time, it allowed the authorities to exploit their anti-fascism as a kind of antithesis to western capitalism and liberalism ("Soviet democracy"). In addition, the symbols of victory screened the regime and "compensated its costs" through chronic mobilization, justifying the existence of a huge army (which became a model for other socio-political institutions), the emergence and maintenance of the "socialist camp", the militarized state economy, and the frantic nuclear arms race despite slogans of "peaceful competition" with the West.

The fact that the understanding of, and attitude towards the war were full of taboos, made the non-victorious, non-state side of war, with all its burden and human fear, recede into a kind of "subconscious" of society (the "blind spot" of its official memory). The symbols of victory are part of the construction of a state-oriented consciousness that ensures the priority of all "state interests" and a mass "readiness" passively to endure an age of troubles by mobilizing the resources of its experience of extreme existence. They appeal to the possibility of a repetition of local or global "war" situations that would be as uncontrollable by the private, domestic world. Thus these two general levels of the war are linked to two levels of the state of the nation: state-patriotic enthusiasm and mobilization (and, accordingly, "a readiness to execute the requirements of the party and government as everyone's internal need", as Soviet propaganda demanded) on the one hand, and on the other hand a desire for "calm", the values of a stable existence, and, in its absence, chronic collective asthenia, fatigue, and fear of losing the relative well-being of private life. It will be obvious that the first state corresponds to a universal conviction that "Russians display their national character and mental qualities at the fullest in times of crisis, trial, and war", under extreme conditions of catastrophe and adversity (situations of "exploits", "mass heroism" at the front and at work) rather than in "calm and happy times". This conviction is shared by an absolute majority of Russians (77 per cent of those surveyed). In other words, it has become a norm of symbolic self-identity.

Mass assessments of the actions of the authorities are little altered by the fact that a significant number of those surveyed (almost half — 45 per cent) are sensible enough to agree that the war was won "by number rather than skill", that victory was wrought at the cost of tremendous losses among both soldiers and civilians, and that the extremely low value placed on human life was one of its pre-conditions. The idea that mass losses were inevitable and that the millions of victims somehow "go without saying" are a constituent element of the general semantic complex of national exploits and general heroism. Characteristically, such "norms" of people's view of the losses are extrapolated onto the allied troops and even the German army.¹⁶ Russians's mass consciousness is unable to imagine a war where the military leaders would aim to save the lives of their subordinates at any cost.¹⁷

The moral, intellectual, and political inability of Russian society to make sense of the traumatic circumstances of the beginning of the war, the Soviet way of conducting it, and the leadership's cruelty towards both civilians and the army, is the reason why, thirteen years after the collapse of communism, people in Putin's Russia are reverting to the official point of view on the causes of the war and the cost of victory, reviving the old myths about the inevitability of the war, and the "suddenness" of Hitler's aggression (the proportion of people who agree with this has risen by more than half — from 21 per cent to 38 per

cent). In 2001, almost half of those surveyed (47 per cent) thought that by the end of the 1930s it would have been impossible to avoid war, while 35 per cent disagreed.¹⁸ This vagueness and contradictoriness of mass consciousness is very important here. It is not an expression of social cleavages between "parties" with clear-cut positions and distinct convictions, but a symptom of a "guilty conscience" and some unrevealed internal dissatisfaction with the generally adopted attitude towards the war. Let me quote two more examples that illustrate the character of this national "subconscious": 68 per cent of those surveyed think that "we don't know the whole truth about the Great Patriotic War", and 58 per cent believe that the story of the "suddenness" of the German attack on the USSR on 22 June 1941 was invented to "hide Stalin's political miscalculations", which were the true reason why the country was not prepared for the war.

This seeming incoherence of public opinion expresses a passivity and resignation to officialdom coupled with a deep-seated distrust of official ideology. This means that society is lacking a morally, intellectually, or even socially authoritative group or institution whose position might be adopted by a majority of the population. The more complicated a war-related issue, for example, the topic of the responsibility of the country's leadership, the more confused and unclear public opinion is. Thus, just over half of all Russians know about the debates on the secret protocols that were part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact and provided for the partition of Poland and a division of spheres of influence in Europe (though the ratio of those who believe them to have been forged and those who are persuaded that they actually existed is 1:4). Only just over half of those who "know" about those protocols think that "this agreement untied Hitler's hands for his plans for World War II" (54 per cent), while others tend to put the blame on Great Britain and France, who had agreed to the "Munich deal". Better still, even more people are prepared to approve of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact than actually know what it was about (40 per cent to 23 per cent). This is an effect of the old Soviet view of the Soviet–German agreement as a step which Stalin was forced to take in order to gain time to prepare the country for war.

The legitimizing functions of the war

In the eyes of Russian society, the war and its victims sacralized not only the army as one of the central, fundamental social institutions, the carcass of the entire Soviet and post-Soviet regime, but also the very principle of a "vertical" construction of society, a mobilizational, command–hierarchical model of social order that does not bestow any autonomy or value upon a private existence or group interests that are independent of the "whole". Russian society has left behind a period of critical re-evaluation of its past, including the war. The debates about the "cost" of the war as well as the pre-war and postwar policies are over. Today the memory of the war and victory is "switched on" mainly by mechanisms of the conservation of the social whole that prevent society from becoming more complex and functionally differentiated. Memories of the war are required above all to legitimate a centralized and repressive social order; they are built into a general post-totalitarian traditionalization of culture in a society that has not been able to cope with budding social change. This is why the Russian authorities constantly have to return to those traumatic circumstances of its past that reproduce key moments of national mobilization. The repression of the war keeps spawning state-sponsored aggression — the Chechen war and the restoration of a repressive regime.

In conclusion, we may say that a "memory" of the war as a whole era, a focal point for a multitude of private or collective events, is preserved in today's Russia only through the activities of state institutions or social groups linked to the authorities and laying claim to a social or political role or acting as ideologists or executors of state orders. Russian society did not take the sumptuous state-sponsored celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of Victory as an occasion for a rational analysis of its past and present. The declared programme of solemn events turned into a sequence of routine demonstrations of allegiance to the symbols of past state power that are rapidly losing their force and significance. To put it more precisely, this was a coercive imitation of collective solidarity with the authorities, based on nothing but police-state patriotism and political cynicism.

This article is based on a paper presented at two conferences on the collective memory of World War II, held in 2004 in Moscow (The Memory of the War: NZ's Malye Bannye Chleniya, 14–16 October) and Berlin (Which History Shapes the Present? The Culture of Memory Sixty Years after the End of the War: Ninth German–Russian Autumnal Discussions, 22–24 October).

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- ¹ This article is based on the results of monthly nationwide representative surveys among the population of Russia, carried out since 1991 by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), and since 2003 by the Levada Center. Unless otherwise stated, the samples are made up of 1600 adults.
- ² In May 2001, when asked "Do we know the truth about the Patriotic War?", 68 per cent of those surveyed replied "I don't think so" (25 per cent said "Yes, I think so", and 7 per cent had no definite opinion).
- ³ Not wanting to remember the war was a reaction rather typical of former front-line soldiers up until the mid-1960s. See Alexander Yakovlev's recent reminiscences (his latest books as well as the interview with him by Vladimir Tolz on the *Dokumenty proshlogo* [Documents of the Past] programme on *Radio Svoboda*, 13 February 2004). The point is not so much that they were subject to a typical "post-traumatic syndrome", but rather that they had no adequate discursive and rhetorical means for expressing their war-time experience. It was only after the emergence of a war prose (eg Konstantin Simonov's novels), including the "lieutenants' prose" (Viktor Astafyev, Grigory Baklanov, Yury Bondarev, Konstantin Vorobyev), and war or battle movies (starting with *Letyat Zhuravli* [The Cranes Are Flying] and the filming of Simonov's *Zhivye i mertvye* [The Living and the Dead] and *Soldatami ne rozhdayutsya* [Soldiers Are Not Born]) in the late 1950s and early '60s; the lifting of the ban on war-time songs and their rehabilitation; the appearance of generals' memoirs; and the like, that a corresponding language of "front-line feelings" gradually began to emerge.
- ⁴ This was epitomized by Soviet achievements in space and especially Yury Gagarin's first space flight.
- ⁵ Author's notes. Reports on the rally were broadcast on the First Channel and *Rossiya* in almost every news bulletin on 7 and 8 September 2004.
- ⁶ From Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's television commentary broadcast on 22 February 2002, after a heated debate on the 2002 Winter Olympics (author's notes). On the atmosphere surrounding those games see eg *NEWSRU.com*, 22 February 2002 (newsru.com/arch/22feb2002/index.html), and Ilya Milshtein's comment "Ura, my lomim, gnutsya yanki" [Hurray, we are charging forward, the Yankees are stooping]: www.zeka.ru/olympics/articles.ura (18.2.2002).
- ⁷ Another important point concerning the "Patriotic War of 1941–1945": this is the only war of all those led by the Russian Empire, the USSR, or Russia throughout the twentieth century that contemporary Russian society accepts as "just". According to a January 2005 survey, the ratio of those considering the various wars "just" and those thinking it "unjust" is as follows: for the Russian–Japanese war of 1904–05 — 0.9 (34 per cent:36 per cent); for the First World War — 0.9; for the Civil War of 1918–22 — 0.7; for the Soviet–Finnish war of 1939–40 — 0.5; for the Afghan War (1979–1989) — 0.2; for the First Chechen War (1994–1996) — 0.2; for the Second Chechen War (1999–) — 0.3 (19 per cent consider it "just" and 68 per cent "unjust"). Only for the Great Patriotic War does "just" utterly prevail — 4.9 (79 per cent:16 per cent).
- ⁸ At first, critics of the official, "polished" version of the war only took issue with its artistic representations. The harshest criticism was of course levelled against films such as Mikhail

Chiaureli's *Padenie Berlina* [The Battle of Berlin] (1950) or, with an ironic tinge, against Vladimir Petrov's *Stalingradskaya bitva* [The Battle of Stalingrad] (1949), Boris Barnet's *Podvig razvedchika* [The Scout's Exploit] (1947), etc. It is in opposition to that interpretation that a "psychological" or "realist" trend later emerged in Soviet cinema, as represented by Mikhail Kalatozov's *Letyat Zhuravli* (1957), Grigory Chukhrai's *Ballada o soldate* [The Ballad of a Soldier] (1959), or Alexander Stolper's screen version of Simonov's *Zhivye i mertvye* [The Living and the Dead] (1964). It was only during Gorbachev's Perestroika, however, that it became possible to criticize the official history of the war itself, a history that had been touched up according to the requirements of every new political leader, defence marshal, or even, in the words of the military historian, General Gareev, "every director of the GlavPUR" [the Main Political Department of the Red Army that was in charge of ideology – *Translator's note*]. See: M.A. Gareev, "Ob izuchenii Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny" [On the Study of the Great Patriotic War], *Novaya i noveyshaya istoriya* [Modern and Contemporary History], 1/1992.

- ⁹ This is illustrated by the impressive success of Marlen Khutsiyev's films *Zastava Il'icha/Mne dvadcat' let* [I am Twenty] and *Iyul'sky dozhd'* [July Rain], and their paradigmatic role for the intelligentsia in the 1960s.
- ¹⁰ Georgy Zhukov's mangled and over-edited *Memoirs* (1969) was especially important. As with other military leaders' memoirs after his, pages and pages about the role of party officials and such were inserted into his book. Interestingly, even on contemporary Russian "patriotic" web sites, where Zhukov is called "a symbol of the Russian people's Victory", his memoirs are qualified as "ambiguous" and "often employed in anti-Soviet propaganda". See eg www.patriotica.ru/authors/zhukov_.html.
- ¹¹ When asked (in January 2005) "Are you in favour or against setting up a monument to Stalin on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Victory?", 29 per cent of those surveyed replied "in favour", 37 per cent replied "against", and 28 per cent said it made no difference to them.
- ¹² Suffice it to mention some of the most recent examples: on 21 December 2004, one of the leaders of the ruling United Russia party, the former Minister of the Interior and current speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov, an advocate of the current policy of strengthening the strong-arm "power vertical", after laying flowers on Stalin's tomb on Red Square, called for a reappraisal of Stalin's historical role. He noted that some "exaggerated" deeds should not be made to overshadow the "remarkable" personality of a "leader of our country who did a lot for Victory in the Great Patriotic War", a man "who was respected even by our allies". What Gryzlov hesitated to say openly — that, just like in previous periods of hardship, Russia needs an authoritarian dictator — was said for him by his critics and opponents, who were accusing him (just like the other members of Putin's government) of robbing old-age pensioners and war veterans. The secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party of the Future, Alexander Kuvaev, called Stalin an "outstanding pro-statist", "a politician such as Russia needs today", and declared that "Russia is in a deplorable state today" and therefore "needs a new Stalin" (<http://12-04.olo.ru/news/politics52445.html>).
- ¹³ A five-part series that came out in 1970–72: *Ognennaya duga* [Ark of Fire], *Proryv* [The Breakthrough], *Napravlenie glavnogo udara* [Aiming the Main Blow], *Bitva za Berlin* [Battle for Berlin], and *Posledny shurm* [The Final Storm]. Characteristically, the war epic is set out as a story of victory and totalitarian triumph. The first years of the war, which were the most dramatic, and all the more so the pre-history of the war, or the social, moral, and human collisions it encompassed, are absent from this battle panorama drawn from the perspective of the high command.
- ¹⁴ Here are a few examples out of many: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivanovo detstvo* [Ivan's Childhood] (1962), Konstantin Vorobyev's story *Ubity pod Moskvoy* [Killed Near Moscow] (1963) or Vasil Bykov's stories: for example, *Mertvym ne bol'no* [The Dead Feel no Pain] (1966), *Kruglyansky most* [The Kruhlanski Bridge] (1969), or *Somikov* (1970).
- ¹⁵ This context altered the significance and value of other levels of existence — all those which were expressed in a language that was not collective and was not being specially cultivated. As the "war" (taken as a variety of themes) became "culture", everyday life and private existence turned into a counterweight that was scarcely touched upon in literature and art. In Soviet times, everyday life perhaps only began to find a language of its own starting with Yury Trifonov's stories *Obmen* [The Exchange] (1969), *Predvaritel'nye itogi* [Preliminary Stocktaking] (1970), and *Drugaya zhizn'* [Another Life] (1975).
- ¹⁶ If we compare the figures given by respondents in various surveys with the official statistics about war casualties, we see that people always exaggerate the number of casualties in the Second World War: for the Soviet Union, where the actual figures are monstrous enough, people over-estimate them on average by 21 per cent, for Germany by a factor of two, but most of all people overrate US casualties (by a factor of 30).

- ¹⁷ Alexander Yakovlev brought this up again in his aforementioned recent interview.
- ¹⁸ When asked why millions of Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner during the Great Patriotic War, equal numbers of those surveyed agreed that this was due, respectively, to "the suddenness of the German attack on the USSR", and to "errors committed by the Red Army command" (58 per cent in both cases — the total is superior to 100 per cent since multiple answers were possible). Characteristically, both the old Stalinist hypothesis ("because of their cowardice and perfidy") and purely anti-Soviet accounts are of little consequence (they were advanced by 8 and 5 per cent, respectively). Similarly, mass consciousness is unable to settle on any stance on the question of why, in the first months of the war, the Red Army suffered such crushing defeats. 41 per cent of those surveyed adhere to the traditional idea that "The Red Army was stunned by the suddenness of the attack", but an almost equal number (40 per cent) think that "The leadership of the Red Army was weakened by the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s". Thirty-seven per cent agree that the USSR didn't have time to prepare for the war, while 32 per cent believe that the Red Army was much worse trained and armed than the German troops, notwithstanding all the vainglorious declarations of the late 1930s to the effect that "we will beat the enemy on his own territory" (Results of a January 2005 survey).

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