

Stolen Victories: Evaluating the War Cult in Soviet Russia

Meghan Riley

It is late spring in Moscow. Column after column of Russian troops march in precise lockstep, accompanied by tank and missiles. Fly-bys by warplanes remind observers that Russian military prowess extends beyond the mass of green-clad men goose-stepping through Red Square. Symbols of Soviet power—the power that crushed the Nazis in the most savage war Europe has ever seen, symbols of the victory celebrated today—adorn the streets of Moscow; some troops carry Soviet-era flags, and a handful of posters of Stalin remind the average Muscovite of the enormous victory the Soviet state facilitated. In the speech he delivers later, the solemn leader who watches the procession praises those who repelled the Nazi invasion with “resistance unparalleled in courage and strength.” “The war made us a strong nation,” he declares. “Time is very powerful, but not as powerful as human memory, our memory. We shall never forget soldiers who fought on fronts . . . That cannot be forgotten. Memory is eternal.”¹ The military bands play the Soviet National Anthem, and a color guard carries the Victory Banner down the parade route.

Despite the Soviet-style pageantry and self-congratulatory speeches on the courage and determination of the Russian people, the scene described did not occur in the jubilant postwar hours of 1945 or even during the bombastically jingoistic Victory Day celebrations of the 1970s and 1980s; instead, this parade, so replete with Soviet symbolism, occurred on May 9, 2010. The great leader was not Stalin but President Dmitri Medvedev, and the object of the day’s veneration was not the Communist Party but the Russian people.² The enormous military parades of Victory Day—revived under Medvedev’s successor, Vladimir Putin, who also oversaw the

¹ Dmitri Medvedev, “Speech at the Military Parade to Commemorate the 65th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945” (address, Red Square, Moscow, Russia, May 9, 2010).

² Stephen M. Norris, “Memory for Sale: Victory Day 2010 and Russian Remembrance,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011):201-205.

restoration of other trappings of the Soviet era like the Soviet National Anthem, as well as revised Russian history textbooks that viewed Stalin more sympathetically than previous post-Soviet editions—functioned as an instrument of the cult of the Great Patriotic War, the collection of state-sponsored rituals, relics, educational programs, and values designed to perpetuate a version of the war most politically advantageous to the government in power.³ The post-millennium resurgence in heartily nationalist remembrances of the war worried observers, but in reality continued the decades-long trend of commemorating the war in terms designed to solidify the state's power.⁴ Sixty-five years after the Red Army raised the Victory Banner over the Reichstag, and nineteen years after the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian government, now nominally democratic and capitalist, still remembers the war in the same modes developed in the Soviet era.

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of the Great Patriotic War on the Soviet Union. The war involved armies of unprecedented size, cost the country approximately 25 million lives and one-third of Russia's wealth, and destroyed the nation's infrastructure and industrial base.⁵ Its effects on the Russian psyche, however, lasted even longer than its material consequences; the war was the defining event of the Soviet era, shaping not only the course of world history but Soviet perceptions of their individual and collective identities. As "the single most powerful element in the constitutive national narrative of the USSR," the war defined heroism, suffering, sacrifice, courage, and the very essence of Russian identity for its survivors, who naturally

³ David Hoffman, "Putin Seeks Restoration of Soviet Symbols; Stalin-Era Anthem, Army's Red Banner Would Be Revived," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2000, A40.; Michael Schwartz, "A Celebration is Haunted by the Ghost of Stalin," *New York Times*, May 9, 2010, 9.

⁴ Yuri Zarakhovich, "Why Putin Loves World War II," *Time*, May 8, 2007.
<<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1618531,00.html>>.

⁵ Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 291.

wanted to preserve and transmit its memory to subsequent generations.⁶ However, the memory of the war did not remain a self-evident body of experiences, the object of detached study and commemoration, or even a space for personal commemoration and reflection; instead, the Soviet state's attempts to appropriate the war for its own self-aggrandizement turned it into a battleground for competing ideologies, a vehicle for political maneuvers and consolidation of Soviet power. The relationship between the Soviet people and the cult assumed a dual character: at once cognizant of the cult's distortions of reality and deeply respectful of war sacrifices, derisive of the Soviet state's commemorative overkill, but still accepting the cult's deeper, more structural messages about the relationship between the war and Soviet identity. The war cult represented an attempt to "steal" the memory of the war from the people by the state; focusing solely on the state's manipulation of the memory further distances it from the Russian people and solidifies the regime's ownership of it. By relocating the discourse of the war cult from the institutions that created it to those who lived it, one can liberate the memory of the war from the confines of Soviet politics and return it to the Russian people.

Like everything else in the USSR, the war assumed a political character, one that meant different things to different people but could, above all, be molded to fit the needs of the state. The ways in which the Soviet state remembered the war, such as elaborate monument complexes, excessive Victory Day celebrations, and education programs that disseminated whichever version of the war that was most politically expedient at the time, reinforced Moscow's political message in place of meaningfully remembering the conflict's victims and survivors. However hallowed the war might have been in popular consciousness, it was not too holy for repurposing by Party members and government propagandists. As the decades passed

⁶ Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, "Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviets National Identity in Moscow," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, vol.3 (2002): 524.

and the USSR seemed to sag in an atmosphere of economic lethargy and political flabbiness, the State relied more and more heavily on the war, or, rather, its carefully cultivated myth of the war, for legitimacy. The war itself, marked by atrocities committed by both sides, Stalin's infamous inaction and strategic blunders, immense human suffering, and unpalatable moral complexities, was considered too dangerous and could have weakened instead of promoted the Soviet state. From this desire to use the state as a means of political legitimacy emerged the war cult, the ostentatious pantheon of tropes, relics, narratives, and rituals that promoted the Soviet state while effacing the actual memory of the war. Much has been written about the Soviet side of the war cult—the parades, the speeches, the memorial ensembles, and other species of totalitarian kitsch—but comparatively little attention has been paid to how the Soviet population received and regarded the cult's trappings. The standard historiography reads that a lifetime spent submerged in the war cult eventually led to generations disenchanted by the war and openly contemptuous of its values. However, despite the cynicism engendered by excesses of the war cult, an examination of Soviet testimonies and eyewitness accounts reveal that much of the message was accepted and internalized.

In *The Living and the Dead*, the only book length study on the war cult, historian Nina Tumarkin describes the dual nature of the war cult, which claimed to embrace and remember every victim, battle, and moment of the war, but in fact destroyed the actual memory of the war.⁷ Tumarkin focuses mostly on the state's role as a producer of remembrance and broadly describes the cult's primary features, values, and characteristics, such as its appropriation of the war to bolster the regime's legitimacy and the promotion of sentimental excesses designed to erase the aspects of the war that put the Soviet regime in a bad light. While the book often deals in

⁷ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 51.

generalities instead of specifics, and too much introspection and personal reminiscences dilute the quality of its scholarship, Tumarkin nevertheless describes the atmosphere and excesses of Brezhnev's cult well, deeming it a "panoply of saints, sacred relics, and rigid master narrative of the war endured by millions of tired tourists."⁸ It imposed a grotesquely nationalistic myth and eventually, Tumarkin argues, turned into a sort of dull murmur that numbed the audience to the actual legacy of the war.⁹ The cult's products—garish monuments and sentimental war stories—offended in their tackiness and "exuded a profound *falseness*, which was perhaps the primary cause of its failure."¹⁰ And failed it did: "To the younger generations, the feelings of shame, obligation, respect, awe, and gratitude toward those who fought in the war against Germany... were slow in coming.... the cult of the Great Patriotic War appeared to have backfired, inspiring a callous derision" in those it aimed to indoctrinate and inspire.¹¹

Arriving at similar conclusions, Lisa Kirschenbaum takes a narrower but more penetrating and detailed approach to the study of the memory of the Great Patriotic War.¹² She argues that the personal and public memories of the Siege of Leningrad are difficult to differentiate, and the contradictions, conflicts, and discursive space provided by this fusion of memories "managed to legitimize, outlast, and ultimately discredit the Soviet state."¹³ While Kirschenbaum focuses solely on how the Siege of Leningrad was remembered, her findings can often be applied to the memory of the whole conflict. Tumarkin and Kirschenbaum both emphasize the complexity of the Soviet remembrance of the war, which occupied a complicated position at the intersection of family history, personal experience, and state-sponsored myth.

⁸ Tumarkin, 134.

⁹ Nurit Scheifman, "Moscow's Victory Park," *History and Memory* 13, no.2 (2001): 8.

¹⁰ Tumarkin, 155.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹² Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006).

¹³ Kirschenbaum, 17.

However, the cult ultimately backfired, alienating the generations it was supposed to entice and cheapening the experience of the war in the process. This paper uses some of the same investigative frameworks as Kirschenbaum but approaches the topic from a slightly different perspective. Kirschenbaum emphasizes the meeting point between the state's ideology and individual memories, an encounter that produces a myth that "drew on experiences remembered by individuals while providing those who lived through the war with compelling and uplifting frameworks for narrating—and therefore remembering—their own experiences."¹⁴ The emphasis in this analytical scheme rests on the *product* of the encounter between the two parties in relation to war remembrance, whereas the present study focuses on the interaction between the people and the state and how that interaction affected the *people* instead of the state. While two of the three modes of remembrance instituted by the state—monuments and holidays such as Victory Day—were more of an imposition, the third mode of state-created remembrance, educational and youth programs, has been studied the least but provides the most space to discuss the interaction between the people and the state. Education, both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities, represented a literal confrontation between the channels of state ideology and the average Soviet citizen. It is here one can best examine the average person's experience of the war cult, an investigative approach that refocuses the war from the myths of the state to the reality of the people.

The "inner contempt" so often cited by Tumarkin and other historians seems to be a natural human reaction to endless exposure to the lofty feats and sentimental narratives of the war cult, especially among teenagers and young adults; however, current scholarship fails to explore the depth and breadth of reactions to the cult. The state installed a program of rituals, school curriculum, and extracurricular programs designed to mold the Soviet public's views of

¹⁴ Kirschenbaum, 8.

the war to serve the state's purposes. In the Soviet Union, patriotism served "as the common denominator, capable of blending into both the communism and the Christianity of the Russians."¹⁵ The war cult hoped to inspire this type of patriotism to unite the diverse populations of the Soviet Union. Much has been written about the tone-deafness of the war cult and the supposed alienation it provoked in its audience; the standard historiography reads that the farther in time from the war, the more extravagant the cult and the greater degree of cynicism in the public. The self-consciously post-war, post-Soviet generations of the 1990s probably would deny that the overblown, saccharine war cult influenced their opinions of the war, but an examination of memoirs of Russian citizens and long-term visitors to the USSR reveals that the cult impacted its audience on different, sometimes ambivalent, levels.

The Soviet state seized the war as a means of self-promotion almost as soon as the first German soldier stepped across the border on June 21, 1941. A *Pravda* article published on June 23 coined the phrase "Great Patriotic War."¹⁶ A reference to the Patriotic War of 1812, in which Russia repelled another invasion from the West, the name was obviously contrived to bolster Soviet morale and inspire the same commitment and fortitude that allowed the Russians to defeat Napoleon's *Grande Armée* over a hundred years earlier. Active remembering of the war, characterized by constructing monuments, began quickly as well; the first war monument to the Soviet dead is unknown, but as early as the spring of 1942, the first design contest for a war monument was launched by the Moscow and Leningrad chapters of the USSR Union of Architects.¹⁷ This trend towards public memorializing gained momentum after the war, emerging as a viable means of capitalizing on public sentiment for the state's political self-aggrandizement. "Postwar monuments, like monuments are more generally, were political

¹⁵ David K. Shipler, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* (New York: Times Books, 1983), 278.

¹⁶ Tumarkin, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

statements par excellence,” a truth the Red Army recognized as it swept through Eastern Europe.¹⁸ Even before Victory Day, Soviet troops hastily erected monuments to their dead in territories they had liberated from the Nazis. These obelisks and other classical monument forms served the dual purpose of commemorating fallen comrades and communicating a menacing political statement to the liberated territories. “We rescued you from fascism,” the Soviet monuments seemed to say, “and you are in our debt.” Both an external representation of the Red Army’s losses and heroism and a foreshadowing of Eastern Europe’s future, these early monuments served a political function as well as a personally commemorative one, a pattern that continues to guide how Russia remembers the Great Patriotic War into the twenty-first century.

Just as the war monument industry, which would flourish during Brezhnev’s tenure as General Secretary, provided geographic loci for state-sanctioned war commemoration, the Victory Day holiday served as a temporal monument to the war, an opportunity for the state to focus and control public assessment of the conflict. First observed on 24 June 1945, roughly two weeks after the actual Victory Day, the Soviet Union celebrated the defeat of Germany with a massive parade. Under the approving eye of Generalissimo Stalin, the ceremony culminated in the throwing of the banners of vanquished German regiments in front of the Lenin Mausoleum.¹⁹ This act, replete with symbolic meaning, subtly represented the primary goal of the fete and all future Victory Day celebrations: to remember the war in terms of Soviet power. After the victory, Stalin’s burgeoning cult of personality blossomed, elevating him to an almost godlike status. However, Stalin privately understood that the victory of 1945 belonged not to him but to his military staff—not to mention the Soviet people. “He wished after the war to restore his personal power, after several years of depending upon the loyalty and competence of others,”

¹⁸ Ibid., 101.

¹⁹ Overy, 281.

Overy argues.²⁰ To consolidate his authority and prepare the nation for the developing Cold War, Stalin silenced voices that directly or indirectly countered the preferred narrative of himself as the “architect of victory.”²¹ He instituted more merciless policies of oppression and ended state-sponsored commemoration of the war; celebrating the victory, he feared, would divert attention from himself to others and perhaps even illuminate his own failings in the early days of the invasion. “Patriotic memory abandoned any populist concessions to become entirely Party-centric,” and Stalin, as the soul of the Party, refused to recognize the Russian people as anything more than “bit-player[s] in the narrative of Communist triumph.”²²

Stalin’s death in 1953 ushered in a new phase in the war cult. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, consciously began a process of de-Stalinization, which reached its dramatic rhetorical zenith in his 1956 “Special Report to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”²³ Khrushchev’s “secret speech” brutally attacked Stalin’s wartime leadership, indicting him for his failure to heed numerous warnings prior to the German invasion, his alleged breakdown following the start of Barbarossa, and his “postwar propensity to take all the credit for the victory and no responsibility for the defeat that preceded it.”²⁴ Instead, Khrushchev shifted credit for the victory to where he thought it belonged: “ ‘Not Stalin, but the Party as a whole, the Soviet government, our heroic Army, its talented leaders and brave soldiers, the whole Soviet nation’ .”²⁵ This marked the beginning of the Party-centered war cult, which developed during Khrushchev’s regime but grew astronomically during the tenure of Leonid Brezhnev. In an effort to stave off the growing political, social, and economic stagnation

²⁰ Ibid., 304.

²¹ Ibid., 306.

²² Stephen Lovell, *The Shadow of War* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

²³ Tumarkin, 107.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 108-9.

of Brezhnev's reign, "an expanded, organized cult of the Great Patriotic War [was] launched to rein in the populace and keep it moving (or at least marching in place) on the right path."²⁶ Brezhnev's speech at the 30th anniversary of Victory Day exemplified the blindingly patriotic spirit—not to mention the creative interpretations of the war's history—the celebration was designed to inspire and popularize. Because of Soviet heroism, "dozens of countries were liberated from the fascist yoke and regained their independence. . . . [and] the positions of the progressive democratic, peace-loving forces gained strength the world over, and the authority of the Communist Parties intensified everywhere."²⁷ While certain "liberated" countries of Eastern Europe would probably disagree with this assessment, Brezhnev's interpretation of the war's effects embodied the Soviet hagiography of the war. In the same speech, Brezhnev more explicitly stated the goals of the war cult: "The Soviet people's outstanding exploit in the years of the Great Patriotic War is inseparable from the multifaceted, purposeful activity of the Party of Communists," and "the Party's immense ideological-political work was our mighty weapon during the war."²⁸ The Great Patriotic War transformed from a "national trauma of monumental proportions into a sacrosanct cluster of heroic exploits that had once and for all proven the superiority of communism over capitalism," producing ostentatious parades, grandiose monuments, and other forms of commodified public veneration that, devoid of any actual, thoughtful meaning, crossed into kitsch.²⁹

However, in the ever-increasing freedom of expression and dissent of the 1980s, the memory of the war became an opportunity to challenge the Soviet regime, a space to contest the Party's hegemony in defining Russian history and identity. The disintegration of the war cult,

²⁶ Ibid., 133.

²⁷ "30 Years After World War II Victory," *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 27, no. 19 (June 4, 1975): 19.

²⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁹ Tumarkin, 133.

which critics deemed a “spectacular failure” executed in “terrible taste,” paralleled the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁰ Veterans of the Great Patriotic War, whom the war cult should have celebrated, found themselves the object of scorn and resentment.³¹ This cynicism continued into the 1990s as well. In 1995, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of victory, a headline in the *Kommersant-Daily* on May 6 proclaimed “Monuments to War, Repression Get Ironic Reviews.”³² Discussing the continued proliferation of war memorials, Olga Kabanova writes that “one can only hope that the Memorial Complex on Poklonnaya Hill will finally complete the draw-out, 50-year era in the history of country’s monumental art....”³³ Kabanova criticized the Complex at Poklonnaya Hill, one of the largest and most extravagant of the cult, as evoking a “wide variety of utterly nontriumphant associations.”³⁴ In a criticism that could be directed at the war cult as well Poklonnaya Hill, Kabanova lambasts the tacky amalgamation of inappropriate conceits, such as “Tsereteli’s bayonet with the sexy goddess [Nike] and plump cupids” and a “cold neoacademicism” of the architecture, which paralleled fascist style.³⁵ Ultimately, the reader is left laughing at the memorial instead of respecting what it claims to represent. A week later, following the 1995 Victory Day, Yevgeny Krasnikov of the *Nezavisimaya gazeta* observes with cynicism that the reappropriation of Soviet symbols in the parade still “could not unite all Russians.”³⁶ A cynicism had replaced the loving reverence paid by the Soviet press just ten years earlier. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin once again began the process of appropriating the war for its own purposes of self-aggrandizement. A “campaign to build upon

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Olga Kabanova, “Monuments to War, Repression Get Ironic Reviews,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 47, no.18 (May 31, 1995): 9.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yevgeny Krasnikov, “Parades of Veterans, Troops Mark 1945 Victory,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 42, no.19 (June 7, 1995): 5.

an ideological visit of the past first dreamed up by Communist Party *apparatchiks* in the 1960s, in which World War II marked the birth of a Soviet nation in the crucible of the great battle,” the Kremlin’s resurrection of the war cult recalled the Soviet use of the war, “a powerful means of creating a collective identity—and bolstering the legitimacy of the regime.”³⁷ Over sixty-five years after the first Victory Parade, the war cult remains a powerful tool for those wanting to gain, keep, or consolidate their power.

Over the course of its existence, the state established the war cult to legitimize its existence and unify the nation increasingly fractured by the centrifugal forces of economic stagnation and social discontent. The Kremlin’s appropriation of the war’s memory constituted a political act of questionable taste, but it did not negate the fact that the war remained a deeply traumatic reality that affected nearly every Soviet family. “The memory of the war is fresh, both because it is kept that way by a leadership seeking to bolster national pride and cohesiveness, and because it was a genuine trauma that left scarcely a family untouched,” writes David K. Shipler in his holistic survey of Russian life following his years at the *New York Times*’ Moscow Bureau in the late 1970s.³⁸ Like so much else in Soviet Russia, the memory of the war assumed a double character; the war cult produced two realities in the minds of those who experienced the cult. Although the state designed its cult to mold every aspect of its citizens’ lives in a uniform way, every individual experienced it in a different way. However, personal accounts of experiencing the war cult reveal the same dual nature that characterized every other aspect of Soviet life: an ironic, skeptical view of the war belied by a deeper respect for the war experience instilled by the cult.

³⁷ Owen Matthews. “The History Wars.” *Newsweek (Pacific Edition)* 154, no. 3 (July 20, 2009), 46.

³⁸ Shipler, 279.

The war cult's most effective way of instilling its ideology was through organizations related to educating youth, both inside and outside of the classroom. An examination of how the war was taught reveals the ideological foundation for the cult and establishes the virtues which the cult would emphasize: heroism, Party supremacy, and Soviet blamelessness and power. These qualities produced a myth of the war worthy of remembrance. From the version of the war taught to schoolchildren to the extracurricular activities that supported the development of the proper views of the war in the students, the state sought to instill a proper set of beliefs under the program of "military-patriotic upbringing."³⁹ Military-patriotic upbringing included more than required military training or overt immersion in Soviet propaganda; it also manifested itself in the version of the war taught to students. In 1976's *The Russian Version of the Second World War*, Graham Lyons paraphrases and summarizes two prominent Soviet history textbooks in an attempt to render a concise version of the Russian memory of the war for Western readers.⁴⁰

The Russian narrative blames the war on imperialist competition between the non-fascist powers of Britain, France, and the United States and the fascist coalition of Germany, Japan, and Italy. Secretly the Allies hoped Nazi Germany, in its ruthless quest for *Lebensraum*, would spare them some trouble and annihilate the Soviet Union. The USSR was the "only state to make an energetic effort to restrain the Fascist aggressors, to block the path to war and to uphold war"; in the state's narrative, it pursued a policy of earnest peacefulness, an act of good faith that would eventually expose the nation to a German invasion.⁴¹ Attempting to avoid a war on two fronts—militaristic Japan was mobilizing in the east—and isolated by the international imperialist community, Russia had no choice but to agree to a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939. In accordance with the Nazi-Soviet Pact, it absorbed eastern Poland to protect the "life and

³⁹ "Draft Age Youths Look at Army Service," *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 32, no.7: 10-11.

⁴⁰ Graham Lyons, *The Russian Version of the Second World War* (New York: Facts on File, 1976).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

property” of the territory from Nazi aggression.⁴² Moscow always knew Germany would eventually attack and therefore planned to use the time bought by the non-aggression pact to prepare its defenses. The Winter War was the result of Finnish imperialist provocations; once again, the blame lay elsewhere but the Soviet Union.

As its armies gained experience fighting the Finns, the Party implemented a successful industrialization campaign that unified the nation; however, the Germans began their assault before Soviet industry could be fully mobilized. This, combined with Hitler’s monopoly on most of the continent’s resources and his army’s experience from fighting for two years in the west, led to the initial Soviet defeats; the effects of the purges and Stalin’s own inept leadership in the early days of the invasion are ignored or dismissed. Similarly neglected are American contributions through Lend-Lease, and the Allied bombing campaigns and campaigns in Africa. The Soviet account of the war reveals deeper, more fundamental divergences with the Western accounts as well: “The USSR was fighting for the defeat of Fascism, the liberation of the enslaved nations, the rebirth of democratic freedom and the creation of favourable conditions of the approaching peace” while the “imperialists of the USA and England” fought to eliminate Germany and Japan as colonial rivals.⁴³ Meanwhile, the United States and England repeatedly violated the terms of the alliance, to which Soviet Russia strictly adhered. The main point of divergence was the opening of the second front, which the Allies refused to do despite their “large body of armed forces and enormous military and technical reserves.”⁴⁴ While “the delay in opening the Second Front postponed the defeat of Fascism and condemned to death yet more millions,” Russia continued to wage a “heroic struggle, practically on her own, against the

⁴² Ibid., 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

Hitlerite hordes, thus saving world civilization.”⁴⁵ The Allies only opened the Second Front when it was apparent that the Soviet Union could defeat Germany on its own. In the end, the Soviets “saved mankind from annihilation or enslavement by German Fascism,” sometimes in spite of the imperialist Western powers’ secret desires, and spread socialism to liberated nations in Europe and China.⁴⁶

In some respects the Soviet account of the war is accurate; the fighting on the eastern front was unsurpassed in its savagery, and only the fortitude and sacrifices of the Russian people facilitated the state’s victory. However, the Soviet textbook version of the war praises the Soviet people, led, of course, by the Party, to the point of effusiveness; generations of post-war schoolchildren learned of how “the Patriotic War inspired the Soviet people to boundless exploits, and gave birth to the mass heroism of the whole nation as never before seen in history.”⁴⁷ Students learned history, especially that of the war, through the “narrow-angle lens that is known at the Soviet ‘world-view.’”⁴⁸ The state designed their version of the war to promote its political values instead of any kind of historical truth. After Stalin, the locus of war remembrance and education shifted from Stalin’s cult of personality to the burgeoning cult of the war itself. The war cult did not exist just to celebrate the heroism of the Soviet people, but to aggrandize the feats of the Party, who, the cult claimed, had orchestrated victory against the Nazis. The Party incorporated a hagiographic memory of the war into the state-run education system, disseminating a version of the war that glorified the Party through one of society’s most basic institutions.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 26

⁴⁸ Landon Pearson, *Children of Glasnost: Growing Up Soviet* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 440.

The hagiographic treatment of the war was especially embodied in the literature used to develop military and patriotic consciousness in the student. The 1975 textbook for secondary literature includes a 100-page section of ‘Literature of the Great Patriotic War,’ and the subsequent section, ‘Literature during the fifties and sixties,’ contains 120 pages of literature written about the war after its end.⁴⁹ Soviet literature especially emphasized heroes as models of exemplary patriotic behavior. The war cult provided “one suited to the needs of every age, yet always endowed with the same basic qualities...[and] always ‘ready’ when danger calls or the motherland needs to be defended.”⁵⁰ “Soviet schoolchildren are taught to model their lives on great heroes” like the partisan girl Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya or the nursing student Shura Serebrovskaya, both of whom were killed during the war, and fictional heroes like the long-suffering Meresyev, the hero of Boris Polevoy’s *A Story about a Real Man*.⁵¹ Meresyev, a fighter pilot, famously loses both legs in a crash but eventually learns to walk on prostheses so that he could fly once more. *A Story About a Real Man* recurs in memoirs of postwar Soviet childhoods as a prime example of state-endorsed heroism—and the sentimental excesses of the war cult. The heroes of the Great Patriotic War loomed large in Soviet classrooms, modeling the traits the program of military-patriotic upbringing was designed to instill and functioning as one component of the omnipresent war cult.

Military-patriotic upbringing extended beyond textbooks, however. In his survey of the Soviet education system in the 1970s, Joseph Zadjia identified three levels of military-patriotic education in the USSR.⁵² The first corresponded with grades 1-3 and consisted primarily of

⁴⁹ Joseph I. Zadjia, *Education in the USSR* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), 213.

⁵⁰ Andrew Wilson and Nina Bachkatov, *Living with Glasnost: Youth and Society in a Changing Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 218.

⁵¹ Zadjia, 212-214.

⁵² Zadjia., 208

“indoctrination in patriotism and internationalism” through children’s literature.⁵³ In grades 4-8, the child receives more thorough indoctrination through the school curriculum, especially through social studies and literature. Such training was reinforced by participation in the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations. The final stage occurred in the last two years of school, grades 9-10, and consisted of active military training designed to develop the ideally patriotic Soviet citizen, both intellectually and physically. Zadja attributed this emphasis on military preparedness on the war, arguing that “not only the school had a duty to inculcate all young people with devotion and loyalty to the Soviet regime and the CPSU, but also develop a heightened responsibility to teach physical fitness and military training in preparation for war.”⁵⁴

Remembrances of experiences of these organizations often reflect the ambivalence at the core of the postwar reaction to the war cult. Michael Pinyon, who served at *The Times*’s bureau during roughly the same period as Shipler, remembers that “in every town there are memorials to the dead, eternal flames guarded with solemn reverence by schoolchildren, in their Pioneers’ uniforms and bearing real guns”—an unnerving sight that perfectly captures the grotesqueness of the Soviet war cult, the militarization it provoked, and the uneasy imposition of the past on the postwar generation.⁵⁵ As members of the Young Octobrists, Pioneers, and Komsomol, Soviet Youth actively participated in the remembrance of the war. Landon Pearson, the wife of the Canadian ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1980-83, remembers the pride with which an Odessa tour guide in 1981 remembered “how honoured she had felt to have been chosen from among her schoolmates to perform this sacred duty” of guarding the Odessa monument.⁵⁶ Soviet schoolchildren were initiated into the Octobrists at age seven, and while they did not directly

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁵ Michael Binyon, *Life in Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 125.

⁵⁶ Pearson, 434.

engage in political activity, they received political training through exhortations to emulate the young, studious Lenin.⁵⁷ Once ten years old, Octobrists moved into the Pioneer program and began “to wear the triangular red Pioneer tie,” a common motif in Soviet memoirs.⁵⁸ The Pioneer organization continued to develop young Soviets’ political education through a structure defined by “military dimensions that accustom[ed] children to performing military activities such as marching, carrying regalia, and standing on guard, and to thinking in military terms.”⁵⁹ This military-mindedness, with its emphasis on structure and loyalty, reflected both the end goal of incorporating the children into the wider hierarchy of the Party and the impact of the war in encouraging readiness for war.

The next step in the Communist youth organization was the Komsomol, a more militant stage designed to more fully prepare youth for life as exemplary Soviet citizens. The Komsomol’s very structure reflects the impact of the war. Pearson recalls observing the 1983 Victory Day celebration in Moscow and wondering what it was like to “spend a childhood surrounded by memories of war, listening to hymns to world peace played on a military drum.”⁶⁰ The sacralization of memory of the Great Patriotic War forced the realities of war and peace to coexist as overlapping realities; they were “two sides of the same coin.”⁶¹ As reinforced by the Soviet history of the war, the USSR’s main goal has been peace, a peace that the Soviets thought had to be defended through war: “never again, so the children have been taught, must a war be found on Soviet soil, and never gain must the motherland be taken by surprise.”⁶² An elementary school principal told a European visitor that Soviet children “ ‘must be ready to fight.’ ”⁶³

⁵⁷ Ibid., 438.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 447.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 443.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 433.

⁶³ Shipler, 281.

Shipler argues that the “war is still used today to explain the surrounding world, to make of the Russians a special people unique in their suffering and in their need for vigilance.”⁶⁴ The structure and activities of Komsomol reinforced these values and the values of the Soviet war cult at large by keeping memory of that war alive.

In conjunction with the school system, the Communist Youth Organization implemented memorialization of the war in a variety of ways. The locus of war remembrance was the school, which included the Red Scouts, a “schoolchildren’s club devoted to compiling information about the heroic past of the Soviet Union.”⁶⁵ Zajda records that the Red Scouts had 14 million members in 1977 working to collect information about the three main traditions of Soviet veneration, the Revolution, the Civil War, and the Great Patriotic War.⁶⁶ One of their main avenues of commemoration was collecting information about individual heroes of the war. The club near Brest has determined the fate and sometimes the burial locations of more than 700 soldiers who died near the city.⁶⁷ The Red Scouts branch of a Gorky secondary school collected documents and photographs pertaining to the 322nd rifle division and built a memorial to the division with their own money earned at summer jobs.⁶⁸ A Minsk principal provides another example of the Red Scouts’ enthusiasm for extracurricular commemoration of the war. The principal allegedly asked his students, “Do you wish to participate in search and research activity into the unknown pages of history and heroic deeds of the Soviet soldiers during the years of the Great Patriotic War?”⁶⁹ He claims the majority answered affirmatively. While the specifics of the exchange may be questionable, the students collected funds and materials to create a memorial to

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Zajda, 214.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Zajda, 215.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 216

Boris Okrestin, a fighter pilot who died near Minsk in 1944.⁷⁰ Zadja concludes that “searching for lost soldiers is, clearly, the most effective form of military and patriotic upbringing.”⁷¹ This facet of the war cult obviously engaged students to a certain extent, reinforcing the values of heroism and inspiring at least a youthful complicity with the means and aims of the war cult.

Andrea Lee, who lived in the USSR in 1978 while her husband was doing research for his doctoral dissertation, made the following observation when observing the Red Square for the first time: “Our [American] emblems seem designed for the measured response of rationality, while Russian monuments—like the Stalinist monstrosity where I am to live—evoke raw emotion.”⁷² “Raw emotion” was the primary currency of the war cult. Ejike Dilber, an Uzbek-Tartar woman born in 1941, recalls sobbing after reading the story of the hanged partisan girl, Zoya.⁷³ Yelena Aksyonova, Shipler’s intelligent, well-traveled Russian instructor, was “blindly loyal to her country and her system... every saccharine short story about Soviet suffering and heroism in World War II... brought tears to her eyes.”⁷⁴ Yelena was not uneducated or especially ignorant; she was simply the product of the war cult that created an inflated sentimentality and sense of melodrama. Tina Grimberg recalls crying when she heard the song “Cranes,” in which a war survivor laments the death of his fallen comrades.⁷⁵ Guarding the local monument became an expression of emotion in itself; for Grimberg and her peers, “standing on guard by the monument let us show respect and gratitude. It was the way to demonstrate to our families and the nation how much their sacrifice meant to us.”⁷⁶ Love, sacrifice, loss, sorrow—the war cult manipulated these basic experiences to create a melodramatic myth of the war, “the sort of thing

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 217.

⁷² Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal* (New York: Random House, 1981), 8.

⁷³ Dilber Ejeke, interview by Dovlet Hojamuradov and Gulzara Hayytmuradova, Centralasianhistory.org, March 8, 2009.

⁷⁴ Shipler, 6.

⁷⁵ Tina Grimberg, *Out of Line: Growing Up Soviet* (Pittsburgh: Tundra Books, 2007), 93.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 95.

that long ago passed out of fashion in the United States.⁷⁷ Binyon argues that “since 1945... genuine emotions of the war have been exploited to justify a range of Soviet policies, including... above all, the identification of Soviet patriotism with the communist system.”⁷⁸ Genuine or not, the emotions amplified by the war cult functioned centripetally, unifying, if even only superficially, the postwar generation with a swell of soul-stirring patriotism.

The cult succeeded in that it infiltrated and influenced every aspect of postwar Soviet life. Memoirs of growing up in the cult, especially at the height of its extravagance in the 1970s, mention the war constantly. Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov interprets the war as “ ‘a symbol that functions as... an important element in positive collective identification, a baseline, a yardstick that can be used to measure past occurrences and, in part, one’s understanding of present and future.’ ”⁷⁹ The war functioned as the measurement of a good Soviet citizen; as Brezhnev remonstrated the country’s youth at the 1975 Victory Day parade, “Our dear young men and women, remembered that the young generation of the 1940s bore the brunt of the fighting in the Patriotic War. Your life and work must be worth of your fathers’ example.”⁸⁰ Official remembrances defined the contours of Soviet life, from the tradition of brides’ placing their bouquets at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow to the initiation of soldiers into the Soviet Army at war memorials.⁸¹ These rites, designed to link “past suffering with present resolve,” created a bridge between the war and postwar eras, a continuum of continual war remembrance that provided the context for Soviet life.⁸² The repeated mentions of the war in

⁷⁷ Shipler, 279

⁷⁸ Binyon, 126.

⁷⁹ Lev Gudkov qtd. in Zhan T. Toshchenko, “Historical Consciousness and Historical Memory,” *Russian Studies in History* 49, no. 1 (2010): 41.

⁸⁰ “30 Years After World War II Victory,” 4.

⁸¹ Tumarkin, 144.

⁸² *Ibid.*

postwar memoirs, in whichever form, testifies to the war cult's success in making the past of the war a reality.

The cult constituted the war as a frame of reference for postwar citizens, the where-were-you event around which all of Soviet society was structured. It was more than an event in a history book: it was an ambiance, a context in which Soviet life was lived. "War and hunger are the two words we hear everywhere: in our classrooms, in our news, in the conversations of babushkas on the benches of our courtyard," writes Elena Gorokhova, who grew up in postwar Leningrad. "They are nonspecific and worn out, something that happened not to individuals but to the entire country."⁸³ Cathy Young recalls her Grandma's stories of wartime deprivation and hunger with slight impatience.⁸⁴ Olga Vladimirovna Kamalurova, when interviewed by American historian Donald Raleigh, describes her postwar life and young adulthood as one marked by anxiety: "Basically I've always feared war, because I was born in 1950 and there were so many films and books about World War II. I can't even begin to convey to you how much I feared war."⁸⁵ Whether from the war cult or the more popular folk memory of the war, postwar generations lived in world defined by the memory of the Great Patriotic War.

The memory of the war, even by those who never experienced it, hung heavy like smog in Soviet life—or, in Gorokhova's case, provided the foundation to her existence like the ground beneath her feet. "Now the remnants of the war are buried in the ground," she writes, referring to her grandfather's discovery of an unexploded artillery shell buried in her family's dacha's strawberry patch.⁸⁶ Other mementoes of war were also discovered hiding barely beneath the earth: "There was a casualness, even generations after the war, and after Stalin, about the bones

⁸³ Elena Gorokhova, *A Mountain of Crumbs* (London: Windmill Books, 2010), 69.

⁸⁴ Cathy Young, *Growing Up in Moscow*, 15.

⁸⁵ Olga Vladimirovna Kamalurova qtd in Donald J. Raleigh, ed. and trans., *Russia's Sputnik Generation* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2006), 216.

⁸⁶ Gorokhova, 104.

and bits of uniform that children found. In Kolyma, recounts one visitor to the former Gulag, there were so many bones lying about ‘that in the summer children used human skulls to gather blueberries’.”⁸⁷ Tina Grimberg’s recalls her father and his friends riding to the ravine at Babi Yar and seeing the teeth and bones of the Jews murdered there whom now lay “under the fresh earth.”⁸⁸ The memory of the war defined the context of the Soviet experience even at an almost physical level.

Of course, the central question of the war cult remains: how did it fundamentally influence the ways in which postwar Russians thought of the war? The impulse towards memorializing remains strong. Anna Nemirovskya, an emigré born in 1936 in the Ukraine, describes the Denver Russian community’s celebration of the 2010 Victory Day celebration, the sixty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war: “It was broadcasting this same morning, the parade, which was held on Red Square in Moscow, and the people calling each other, celebrating each other, but still—65 years have passed—and still we are crying.”⁸⁹ The patriotism the war cult aspired to develop seems to have emerged; “young Russians, however unpolitical and materialist, are unashamedly chauvinistic.”⁹⁰ An acquaintance of Shipler told him, “‘you cannot understand us because you have not suffered and survived what we have.’”⁹¹ Belying the cynicism of the postwar generations’ views on the war cult is a solemn appreciation for the sacrifices of those who fought in the war. Ejeke Dilber states that although “our generation saw everything from the war to the collapse of the USSR... we saw less than our parents saw before

⁸⁷ Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone* (New York: Viking, 2001), 300.

⁸⁸ Grimberg, 48.

⁸⁹ Anna Nemirovskya, interview by Shirley S. Steele and David Shneer, *Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry*, July 15, 2010, <http://www.boulderlibrary.org/oralhistory/>.

⁹⁰ Binyon, 134.

⁹¹ Shipler, 281.

and during the war.”⁹² Despite its lack of sincerity, the war cult instilled a deep appreciation for the war that extended beyond the limits of the Soviet mythologizing efforts.

⁹² Dilber.

Works Cited

- Binyon, Michael. *Life in Russia*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- “Draft Age Youths Look at Army Service.” *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (32.7): 10-11.
- Ejeke, Dilber. Interview by Dovlet Hojamuradov and Gulzara Hayytmuradova, Centralasianhistory.org. March 8, 2009.
http://www.centralasianhistory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71:the-factory-worker-dilber-ejeke-uzbektatar-1941&catid=34:interviews&Itemid=29.
- Forest, Benjamin and Juliet Johnson. “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviets National Identity in Moscow.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92.3 (2002): 524-547.
- Gorokhova, Elena. *A Mountain of Crumbs*. London: Windmill Books, 2010.
- Grimberg, Tina. *Out of Line: Growing Up Soviet*. Pittsburgh: Tundra Books, 2007.
- Kirschenbaum, Lisa A. *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Lee, Andrea. *Russian Journal*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Lovell, Stephen. *The Shadow of War*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Lyons, Graham. *The Russian Version of the Second World War*. New York: Facts on File, 1976.
- Matthews, Owen. “The History Wars.” *Newsweek (Pacific Edition)* 154 (July 20, 2009): 46.
- Merridale, Catherine. *Night of Stone*. New York: Viking, 2001.
- Nemirovskya, Anna. Interview by Shirley S. Steele and David Shneer. *Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry*. July 15, 2010 <<http://www.boulderlibrary.org/oralhistory/>>.
- Norris, Stephen M. “Memory for Sale: Victory Day 2010 and Russian Remembrance.” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011): 201-229.
- Overy, Richard. *Russia’s War*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Palmer, Scott W. “How Memory was Made: The Construction of the Memorial to the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad.” *The Russian Review* 68 (July 2009): 373-407.
- Pearson, Landon. *Children of Glasnost: Growing Up Soviet*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990.

- Raleigh, Donald J. *Russia's Sputnik Generation*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2006.
- Schleifman, Nurit. "Moscow's Victory Park." *History and Memory* 13 (2001): 5-34.
- Shipler, David K. *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams*. New York: Times Books, 1983.
- Toshchenko, Zhan T. "Historical Consciousness and Historical Memory." *Russian Studies in History* 49 (2010): 37-52.
- Tumarkin, Nina. *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Wilson, Andrew and Nina Bachkatov, *Living with Glasnost: Youth and Society in a Changing Russia*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.
- Zadja, Joseph I. *Education in the USSR*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1980.