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The Great Patriotic War as myth and memory

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In the Soviet Union, the 'Great Patriotic War' was both a uniquely traumatic ordeal that took the lives of approximately 30 million people, and the focus of a decades-long myth and cult that celebrated the most glorious achievement of the Soviet era. At the war's end, Stalin, whose mistakes and brutality had greatly increased Soviet war losses, sought to obscure popular memories of the war experience, but the Brezhnev regime turned an idealized memory of the Great Patriotic War into the focus of an elaborate cult. As the Soviet Union declined and finally expired, the memory of the war became highly contested, as ugly truths about the war were made public. Today the war myth lives on as evidence of Stalin's inhuman rule, and as a source of Russian national pride and patriotism.

The Soviet Union lost some 30 million people in the Second World War. For three years, from the German invasion in June 1941 – when the Soviet Union suffered the greatest military disaster in the history of modern warfare – until D-Day in June 1944, that country was, with the exception of some active fighting in Italy in 1943, the sole theatre of war in all Europe. Unlike Hitler's war of occupation in Western Europe, his war on the Eastern front was a war of extermination, inspired in part by the goal of destroying or enslaving the populace of the most enormous country in the world. One quarter of Belorussia's population of ten million was slaughtered, with hundreds of villages razed to the ground. One third of Leningrad's three million residents perished in the 27-month blockade. The former Soviet Union still bears the scars of the trauma it endured 60 years ago, a trauma that had followed a dozen years of forced collectivization, Party purge, and terror.

Although the vanquished capitulated to the victors on the afternoon of 8 May 1945, Muscovites learned the news only early the next morning. At 2:10 am on 9 May, Radio Moscow aired the long-awaited announcement that Germany had

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surrendered unconditionally, and that the war was over. Together with the announcement of the victory, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet declared 9 May a nationwide festival day, a Victory day holiday.[1]

In Moscow, immediately after the broadcast, people poured into the streets to celebrate. Others, manifesting years of political conditioning that stressed the importance of meetings in the workplace, and eager to seek each other out, made their way out to factories and institutes before the sun was up to hear and make impromptu speeches. Throughout that warm, sunny day, a spontaneously generated energy gripped the capital. Crowding onto the streets, strangers hugged and kissed each other in joy.

On 9 and 10 May the central press was filled with articles about the victory, most of them emotional, even rhapsodic. There was minimal mention about the need to remember the war dead, and more emphasis on their unforgettable heroism than on the tragedy of the loss. No casualty figures were published during these days. Every article praised Stalin and thanked him for leading the Party and people to the victory, which was already being presented as a vindication of the Communist Party, Red Army, and the socialist system.

The impassioned people cheering and singing and dancing in the streets on 9 May, may have had little idea what the victory really meant to the Leader whom they lauded and applauded with such evident enthusiasm. For the astute observer, indications were readily in evidence. On 9 May, *Red Star* ran an article whose concluding section contained the following paragraph: 'Victory! For You we fought for almost four years, *and now we will never give you up for anything, for anyone*. You are the offspring of our unprecedented struggle. You are the gate to our bright future. You are the eternal pride of our mighty, invincible Red Army.' [emphasis added]

Holding on to the victory meant that the Red Army would never fully yield the lands it had liberated with its own blood. (And, in fact, the Soviet Army did not begin to give up most of those territories until 1989, at which time some veterans would complain that Mikhail Gorbachev had thrown away the victory for which so many had sacrificed so much.)

On 24 May 1945, at a Kremlin banquet in honour of the commanding officers of the Red Army, Stalin raised his glass and offered a toast, saying, 'Our government has made no small number of mistakes. In 1941–42 we were at times in disastrous situations, when our army was retreating, leaving our beloved villages and towns in Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, the Leningrad region, the Baltic territories, the Karelo-Finnish republic, leaving them because there was no other choice. Another people might have said to their government, "get out of here, we're going to install a new government that will make peace with Germany and guarantee our tranquility".'[2]

This statement may well reveal something about Stalin's concerns at the war's

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end. He knew that tens of millions of his subjects expected to be rewarded for their trials with better, happier, freer lives. Stalin also knew that if the USSR were to become that which the Western powers seemed to think it already was – a mighty global power – he would have to continue much the same kind of rule the populace had endured in the 1930s. Thus, the transition from wartime to post-war society was unimaginably difficult, in no way resembling the 'return to normalcy' that people invariably long for when a war is over. Out of a total population of approximately 190 million, about 30 million people had died in four years. Over 1700 towns and more than 70 000 villages had been destroyed, as well as thousands of factories and tens of thousands of miles of railroad track and roads. In the cities, more than half the housing had been demolished and much of the rest of it was in terrible repair, as were the heating, sewage, and other systems vital to the functioning of urban areas. In industry, most of the achievements of the Second and Third Five-year Plans of the 1930s had been reversed, with industry in a state of ruin almost, but not quite, as complete as the disastrous breakdown that followed the tumultuous First World War and the 1917 Revolution.[3]

Within a year of the 1945 victory, self-sacrificial wartime heroes were rapidly demoted. This was no time to rest on one's laurels, much less to expect rewards. The only post-war hero was Hero Number One – Stalin – and He was not inclined to make room for any competition. Military heroism *per se* faded from the novel, which moved its focus from feats of valour to the practical business of economic and social reconstruction.

In 1947, Stalin stepped up his efforts to leave the war aside; he demoted Victory Day from a state holiday to a regular working day. From 1947 until 1965, when Victory Day was reinstated as a holiday, its annual commemoration was largely informal, with meetings of veterans, visits to cemeteries and public strolling. The one festive ritual the authorities retained was fireworks in the hero-cities and republic capitals.

By 1949 and 1950, the tenets of mature Cold War propaganda had thoroughly saturated the official stance on the war. The wartime enemy was no longer called fascism, but imperialism. In these years the press contended that not only had the Soviet Union alone saved the world, defeating imperialism and the forces of reaction, but that throughout the war, its so-called 'allies', the United States and Britain, had maintained an active collusion with the enemy. These 'friends' had not only delayed opening a second front, but had also conducted secret negotiations with the Germans. From a genuine holiday in 1945 and 1946, Victory Day had turned into yet another channel for the mobilization of popular efforts in the service of the state – plus fireworks.[4]

During the Khrushchev years – after the famous 'Secret Speech' at the 1956 20th Party Congress in which Nikita Khrushchev had begun the process of

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de-Stalinization – Victory Day, 9 May, still a working day, continued to be marked annually with meetings in schools and workplaces, informal gatherings of veterans and well-wishers in city parks and, after dark, fireworks. A cult of the Great Patriotic War – an organized system of symbols and rituals driven by political imperatives determined by its managers – was in its formative stage. Some aspects of the symbolic matrix – like the basic plot of the war and the Victory Banner as the cult's central symbol – had been fixed. Others, such as Stalin's role in the war, were in flux. Nikita Khrushchev set the number of the war's victims at 20 million, an official figure that was retained until a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

On 8 May 1967, at 9:45 in the morning, an armoured carrier bearing precious cargo appeared in the vicinity of Red Square and pulled up near the recently constructed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Leonid Ilich Brezhnev, well into his third year as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, headed the delegation of notables on hand to greet the vehicle, which had made the 650 km journey from Leningrad, stopping on the way in many towns and villages to receive silent homage from local honour guards and residents. Now, at the edge of Moscow's Alexander Garden, it had come to its final destination.

In December 1966, to mark the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Moscow, the remains of an unknown soldier had been conveyed from a mass grave 41 km outside of Moscow – scene of the Soviet Union's first successful counter-offensive against the Nazis in December 1941 – and buried with full military honours near the Kremlin wall. The relics were lowered into an underground vault to the strains of Chopin's funeral march, the western world's best-known classical dirge.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – a spare, square monument of polished red stone decorated with a modest bronze sculpture of a military banner topped with a soldier's helmet – was unveiled on 8 May 1967, together with a row of six marble blocks honouring the 'hero-cities' – Leningrad, Kiev, Volgograd, Sevastopol, Odessa and the Brest Fortress. In the words of *Ivzestiia*, those blocks were to house 'sacred earth from the hero-cities, drenched with the blood of the Motherland's courageous sons and daughters in the years of the Great Patriotic War'. The inscription near the tomb was simple and strong: 'To Those Who Fell for the Motherland, 1941–1945'. Some time later, huge, gilded letters were attached to the gleaming marble just in front of the stark bronze star, spelling out a message directly aimed at the unidentified human remains, and using the familiar form of address: 'YOUR NAME IS UNKNOWN, YOUR DEED IS IMMORTAL'.

The armoured transport had brought to Moscow two consecrated objects: an urn filled with earth from Leningrad's Piskarevskoe Cemetery, where repose the remains of more than half a million victims of the wartime blockade; and the

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eternal flame from the memorial to the victims of the 1917 Revolution located on Leningrad's Field of Mars. The sacred fire that, for almost a half-century had blazed out in solemn homage to a heavenly host of revolutionary martyrs was now to be transmitted to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in a symbolic incorporation of the Great Patriotic War into the Soviet Union's Foundation Saga, a cosmic, mythic history of the glorious Soviet socialist state, whose prime creator had been the idealized Lenin.

The ceremony began with a speech by the First Secretary of the Moscow Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, N. G. Yegorichev. His prose was more than just purple. In effusive, sentimental language full of descriptions of grieving widows and devoted comrades-in-arms, the speaker laid out a carefully constructed system of meaning that constituted the spiritual core of the by then highly developed cult of the Great Patriotic War. It is symbolic, he said, that 'the Fire of Glory' to be lit today at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has come from 'the city that bears the name of the great Lenin, from the sacred field of Mars where the fallen warriors of the Revolution, the heroes of October, repose'. 'This fire,' he continued, 'somehow transfers across an entire half-century the undimmed flame of October, illuminating the stages of the great path taken by the Soviet people under the leadership of the Leninist party'. Now the October fire would continue its inspirational work through the spirits of the immortal heroes of the second great trial and triumph – the Great Patriotic War. 'It is as if the soldiers of the Revolution and the soldiers of the Great Patriotic War have closed ranks into one immortal rank, illuminated by the Eternal flame of glory, lit by the living in honour of the fallen who will always live.'

Overblown, flowery language did not even attempt to disguise the political agenda of the speech. 'Heroes do not die', pronounced Yegorichev; they live on to serve successive generations as exemplars of 'wholehearted courage and patriotism, fidelity to military duty, steadfast devotion to the Communist Party, to the Socialist Fatherland. They were victorious, they achieved immortality.' The underlying message: war heroes served their country in life, in death, and in life after death. Consequently, surviving generations who live not in fascist enslavement but in freedom have incurred certain obligations. Those whose loved ones died in the war will regard the unknown soldier tomb with a prescribed affect, namely, 'with profound grief and radiant pride', and all successive generations are morally bound to imitate the martyrs' valour and their devotion to country and Party.

As thousands of Muscovites stood witness under bright sunshine, Hero of the Soviet Union A. Maresiev approached the armoured carrier, lit a torch from the sacred fire borne by the vehicle and, accompanied by a deputation of military dignitaries from Leningrad, handed the flaming torch to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev leaned over and brought its fiery tip to the centre of the bronze

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five-pointed star splayed onto the shiny black marble platform before the Unknown Soldier's tomb. Instantly the flame began its eternal leap into the atmosphere of downtown Moscow.

Despite their established status as rulers of a feared nuclear superpower, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet government had been searching for sources of legitimacy that could mobilize the loyalties and energies of an increasingly disaffected, alienated, and alcohol-prone youth. Men of the 1940s had, of course, been almost entirely wiped out, and with them the last of the peasantry of old Russia, which had succumbed to forced collectivization and man-made famine, the Great Terror, and finally, the Second World War.

A new breed of Soviet citizen was taking shape. Post-war Soviet youth, particularly after de-Stalinization, tended to be slow to trust anyone representing political authority, reluctant to labour for meagre rewards, as equally remote from the folk religion of their grandparents as from the revolutionary zealotry of their parents. During the long stagnation period beginning in the 1960s, tens of millions of young people expended their energies on splitting their lives in two: holding down a respectable job while at the same time bringing in money *na levo*, on the side; cultivating an officially-acceptable persona wildly divergent from the private individual behind the mask; pretending loyalties and beliefs for the sake of career advancement; learning how to deceive and how to tolerate being deceived by others.

When Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin assumed power in 1964, the political and social system had not yet succeeded in making the transition to some kind of post-Stalinist ethic. Stalinism had ended with Stalin, but without him – and without the kind of ongoing cult of the dead leader's memory that had held the system together after Lenin's death in 1924 – even social cohesion was difficult to maintain.

The new leaders, bureaucrats *par excellence*, set about trying to orchestrate a vast programme of public *displays* of loyalty, expecting, no doubt, that these would somehow lead to real popular sentiments of devotion to the regime, its values and its goals. Aware that the revolution of 1917 was a distant memory whose 50th anniversary celebration in 1967 was a swan song, and the cult of Lenin, a hollow shell that had visibly crumbled after the jubilee centennial of his birth in 1970, the authorities focused on the Great Patriotic War. In its idealized form, the war had everything: violence, drama, martyrdom, success, and a chic global status.

The 'upbringing of the young' took on an unprecedented significance to those who strove to keep the old order intact. 'Military-patriotic upbringing' and an expanded, organized cult of the Great Patriotic War were launched to rein in the populace and keep it moving (or at least marching in place) on the right path. It was a kind of counter-campaign against the international youth culture, and some

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of the major forces impelling change in much of the Western hemisphere. And the main hook to draw in the young was to be *shame*.

With its rituals tying children and adolescents to ageing veterans, the Brezhnev regime tried to shame young people into feeling respect for their elders or, as a minimum goal, into behaving obediently in their presence. The 20 million alleged martyrs had, after all, given up their lives so that successive generations might flourish in a world free of fascism. And, for better or for worse, the tiresome veterans who came to school to repeat the stories of their exemplary exploits and receive bouquets of flowers from dutiful children, had given of themselves as well. The idealized war experience was a reservoir of national suffering to be tapped and tapped again to mobilize loyalty, maintain order and achieve a semblance of energy to counter the growing nationwide apathy and loss of popular resilience of spirit.

In the quarter-century that began with Leonid Brezhnev's accession to Party rule in 1964, and ended at the close of the 1980s with the devastating collapse of the system he had inherited from Stalin, the Communist Party created nothing less than a full-blown cult of the Great Patriotic War. This included a panoply of saints, sacred relics, and a rigid master-narrative of the war endured by millions of tired tourists held hostage by their Intourist guides at the most famous of the Soviet Union's tens of thousands of war memorials. What visitor to the old Soviet Union does not remember the goose-stepping adolescents – especially the girls in short skirts and braided hair decorated with huge organza bows – wielding automatic rifles while serving as honour guards of those memorials' eternal flames?

The master-narrative's basic plot: collectivization and rapid industrialization under the first and second Five-year Plans prepared the country for war, and despite an overpowering surprise attack by the Fascist Beast and its inhuman wartime practices, despite the loss of 20 million valiant martyrs to the Cause, our country, under the leadership of the Communist Party headed by Comrade Stalin, arose as one united front and expelled the enemy from our own territory and that of East Europe, thus saving Europe – and the world – from Fascist enslavement.

By 1990, as the Soviet period of Russian history was drawing to a close after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the cult of the Great Patriotic War – which had climaxed with the 40th anniversary of the victory in 1985 – had been replaced by a rich amalgam of passion, regret, nostalgia, rage and remembrance. A few days before Victory Day 1990, a newspaper article entitled, 'Stolen Victory' brought into high relief some of the most sensitive questions tugging at the war myth. It began with a conversation that had recently taken place between two elderly veterans:

> 'We've given away Germany, we've given away Europe – for what then did we lay down so many lives during the war?'

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> 'What's there to discuss?' responded the other veteran, 'they've stolen our Victory, and that's the whole story.'

Did Soviet people really believe that their country had fought fascism in order to take over half of Europe? Gennadii Bordiugov, a scholarly commentator interviewed in the article, was not surprised at this reaction to the recent liberation of Europe: 'Our sea of spilled blood was too vast, our wounds too deep to expect our people, especially those who fought, to respond to the events in East Europe without pain.' But he went on to assert that in fact the Victory *had* been stolen from the people – by Stalin and his system – on the very day of the Victory, 9 May 1945. For Stalin, the imperative to rein in the anti-Stalinist and anti-Party sentiments in the country at large had been at least as important a goal as defeating fascism. In the end, 'Who was victorious and who was conquered, who won the war against whom, if the vanquished are now sending food to the victors?'[5]

A united Germany supplying an impoverished Soviet Union with food! Who could have predicted it five, or even three years earlier? Who was victorious indeed? More than once in 1990 I had heard young people (including Jews) assert that it would have been better had Hitler won the war, contending that a fascist regime would have been no worse, and probably better, than the Soviet system that had brought them nothing but frustration and grief. Such inanities were not common, but many members of the intelligentsia had, in fact, come to equate Communism and Fascism, Stalin and Hitler.

Soviet publications and films about the war had become relentless in their drive to reveal the ugliest aspects of the war, and in particular, Stalin's brutality toward his own populace. Early in 1990 '*Shtrafniki*,' a documentary film by Lev Danilov, created a major stir. It graphically detailed the wartime fates of some of the notorious punishment battalions (*shtrafnye bataliony* for officers, *shtrafnye roty* for soldiers) of former political prisoners and other undesirables, who were sent on the most dangerous, often suicidal missions, followed by commissars pointing guns at their backs to make sure they followed orders. The film also underscored the work of the dread 'defensive detachments' (*zagraditelnye otriady*) of former border or NKVD guards, established after the summer 1942 'Not a Step Back' order, to prevent acts of 'cowardice' – such as surrendering to the enemy when surrounded. Viacheslav Kondratiev wrote a sympathetic review of *Shtrafniki*, which he titled 'Pariahs of the War'. 'How many were killed on reconnaissance by the Germans, and how many by the bullets of our own defensive detachments, we will probably never know … . Poor, unfortunate Russia, the poor, unfortunate Russian people that had to live through all this …'[6]

In the Victory Day 1990 edition of the then still-respected weekly newspaper published by the USSR Writers' Union, *Literary Newspaper* (*Literaturnaia gazeta*), Kondratiev was one of three writers to publish a lengthy retrospective article on the Great Patriotic War. His piece was a scathing indictment of the way

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the war had been fought. 'What depressed us in the front lines was that our commanding officers did not pity us. They threw us into ill-considered attacks that they knew were doomed. Now you wonder how many men we lost for no purpose, but from incompetence, from ambition, because they took towns just to help celebrate Soviet holidays. And always, always – *at any price!* How many lives could have been saved if we had fought just a little more intelligently, a little more prudently, with a bit more compassion for people?' The author then extended his charge back further back into the Soviet past: 'No, they did not pity their own people, just as they did not pity them in 1917, in 1921, in 1929, and in 1937 [the enumerated years refer, respectively, to the Bolshevik Revolution, the brutal suppression of worker and peasant rebellions at the end of the Civil War, the forced collectivization drive, and the Great Terror]. During the war, God himself said not to pity, victory was more important. In our country results of some kind are always more important than anything else, more than people. Russia has plenty of people, she has enough of them to waste.'[7]

The bitterness of the remembrance of war in those confused times was nowhere more evident than in a photo-essay that ran in the same issue of the *Literary Newspaper* as Kondratiev's article. A dramatic full-front photograph of an old and shabbily-dressed veteran with a raised hand and clumsy prosthesis instead of a right leg, was accompanied by a long caption that included the following thoughts:

> *Is Everything Forgiven?*
>
> Victory – and much is forgiven.
>
> Victory – and the victims are justified: the millions including those (whom we especially remember today) hundreds of thousands of lives lost on the eve of the Day we are now commemorating, lost by one military commander only in order to seize Berlin, which already had one foot in the grave, before another military commander.
>
> And the lies, the brutality of a regime that drowned the humane in human beings, that sowed enmity everywhere; this too is justified.
>
> I feel shame before those who stole the Victory – who gave out commemorative parades instead of apartments, token gifts instead of food, honorary badges instead of normal lives, lives that people deserve…
>
> … He raised his hand to stop me taking his photograph. His only medal from the war was a wooden leg. 'Don't take my photo!' he said harshly. 'We won the war, but we did not liberate ourselves or you …'
>
> I took his photo anyhow.[8]

Numbers madness: a peroration

In his 1990 Victory Day speech, Mikhail Gorbachev upped the estimate of Soviet wartime deaths from the legendary 20 million to 27 million. The assessment of wartime losses had turned into a politicized numbers game in which the more

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radical, anti-Stalinist, anti-Soviet critics estimated ever-higher losses and pointed to them as a reflection both of the system's incompetence at waging war, and of Stalin's direct and indirect role in those millions of deaths.

Boris Sokolov's controversial book *The Price of Victory*, an obsessively determined effort to pin down both Soviet and German wartime losses published in Moscow in 1991, put Soviet real and potential (that is, people who would have been born had it not been for the war) dead at 46 million. Other estimates ran as high as almost 50 million wartime losses.[9]

How many of the tens of millions of Soviet lives lost in the war must be blamed on the Soviet people and their Supreme Leader? The Soviet Union's enormous wartime losses, which so deeply impressed themselves on its allies, and President Roosevelt in particular, had been decisive at the war's end in enabling Stalin to capitalize on those losses and build for himself a vast empire in Eastern Europe.

Some might argue that the numbers are unimportant, that 'war is war', and that any belligerent power inevitably destroys many of its finest sons needlessly through error or the chaotic circumstances of war. But such an assertion willy-nilly leads to the troubling question of numbers. What if it turned out that, in fact, the Soviet Union had been directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of two million of its own men, or four million or 15 million? Should one say that two million self-inflicted losses properly can fall under the rubric of 'war is war', but 15 million cannot? And if it could indeed be determined that Stalin and his compatriots must be blamed for 15 million, or one-half of all wartime losses, do we accord the Soviet Union 50% less respect and sympathy than if the Germans had in fact killed the entire 30 million?

That way lies madness. It spills over into the whole bedevilled question of the quantification of suffering. Did the Soviet people suffer five times as much as the Jews because they lost more than five times the number of people? The answer to that question is clearly no. Victims of terrible ordeals, such as enslaved Afro-Americans, the Jews in the Holocaust, the Soviet people in the Second World War, become aggregates of national suffering on behalf of which future generations make compensatory claims. Few would dispute the legitimacy of such claims in principle. However, fewer still would be prepared to rationalize numerically the intensity of a nation's ordeal and the assessment of its demand for recompense.

And yet on some level numbers do matter. It does in fact matter whether a significant portion of the Soviet war deaths cannot be blamed on the Germans, not because we need to know just how much to temper our sympathy for the Soviet side, but because in that case the decades-long Soviet mourning for their 20 million martyrs was in part a cover-up for the past sins of Stalin, his system, and his legacy.

Professional historians in the Soviet Union, most of whom had been a conservative lot, scrambled to keep up with the imperatives and opportunities

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offered by *glasnost* and the call to fill in the 'blank spots' in Russian and Soviet history. Characteristically, the dominant figures in the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History were rather slow to join the de-Stalinization bandwagon. First they waited a while to check how the wind was blowing, and then to check again.

Only towards the end of the 1980s, after the country had long been convulsed by the tumult of truths about the reality of high Stalinism, did the previously sacrosanct topics of Lenin and the Great Patriotic War come under scrutiny. In 1989, the Institute of History took on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Finnish War of 1939–40, and only later did it move on Operation Barbarossa and after.

At the end of the 1980s, the Institute of Military History undertook the research, writing, and publication of a ten-volume work entitled *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People*, underlining the populist twist to the war generated by *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The project included many scholars of varying skills and political views. The editorial board boasted some excellent military historians who themselves were high-level officers in the army – Col. Viacheslav Kulish, Col. V.I. Dashychev, and Col. General Dmitrii Volkogonov, who supervised the work on the first volume.

Early in 1991, Volkogonov presented the first volume, the Soviet Union on the eve of the war, to the Ministry of Defence, and on 7 March 1991 he and the volume were the focus of a heated discussion. Excerpts of this volume were published the next week by the editors of the enterprising newspaper, *Independent Newspaper* (*Nezavisimaia gazeta*). The Minister of Defence, Yazov and others vilified Volkogonov for having 'blackened' Soviet history by describing the country and the army on the eve of the war as having been thoroughly disorganized and crippled by Stalin's policies.

Volkogonov resigned from the directorship of the Institute of Military History, and the ten-volume history of the war was abandoned. But only a few months would pass before his accusers would participate in an unsuccessful coup d'état that would land some of them in jail and bring Volkogonov to within a telephone call from the President.

The most provocative of all the revisionist books on the Soviet Union in the Second World War was without a doubt Viktor Suvorov's *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* which appeared in translation in France in 1988, in Germany in 1989, and in the UK in 1990. It was not published in his native country until 1992, when the Soviet Union had already ceased to exist. This daring, possibly reckless, volume posited the thesis that Stalin was, in the fullest sense, responsible for having started the war. Determined to bring about the Socialist revolution in Europe that Lenin had dreamed of in 1918, Stalin had supported the Nazis almost from the beginning, envisioning Hitler and his party as the 'icebreaker' that would forge the path to revolution in Europe by exhausting that

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continent with a debilitating war. According to Suvorov, Stalin was planning all along an offensive war in Europe, and was ready to give up everything – including millions of Soviet lives – for the goal of world revolution.[10]

Hill of Prostrations

In the western part of Moscow, along the old Smolensk Road, there once stood a hill, called Poklonnaia Gora, the Hill of Prostrations. From its grassy height travellers and pilgrims approaching Moscow from the west first caught sight of the magnificent panorama of the 'city of churches'. Seeing the hundreds of gleaming golden domes, they would prostrate themselves in reverence.

Most Russians know of Poklonnaia Hill from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. First we see General Kutuzov, commander of the Russian forces, approach the hill, dismount, and convene a council of war during which he lets his officers babble on to each other about possible strategies for battle, while he himself ponders deeply and concludes that the city will have to be abandoned to the French. Then, five days later, on 2 September 1812, fresh from his pyrrhic victory at Borodino, Napoleon appears with his troops. 'A town occupied by the enemy is like a maid who has lost her honour,' he thinks to himself as he gazes greedily upon the city whose countless cupolas are 'twinkling like stars' in the early autumn sunlight.

He sends his adjutants galloping off to Moscow to fetch the 'boyars' who will enact the formal surrender of the city. While awaiting the deputation, he strolls back and forth along the hill, composing in his mind the dignified and magnanimous speech he will make to the vanquished boyars. But none are found by the French officers. The emperor, impatient and irritated, rides off towards the city only to find it empty and in flames. This marks the beginning of his defeat.[11]

As of 1957, the Hill of Prostrations was the designated site of a central, all-Union memorial complex dedicated to the victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War. For the better part of four decades, the proposed monument on the site had been the focus, first of infighting among the denizens of the Moscow cultural elite, and, during the Gorbachev era, of major public debate. Poklonnaia Hill had played no significant role in the Second World War, and the area had clearly been chosen for its association with the victory of the Russian nation in 1812.

In 1957, Poklonnaia Hill had been levelled, but not because of the proposed monument. As Margarita Astafieva-Dlugach, a sophisticated and well-connected researcher in an Institute of Architectural History explained in an interview, the hill was levelled for security reasons. 'It was deemed unacceptable to retain any height from which someone could shoot at the limousines on Kutuzovskii Prospekt bearing Politburo members and ministers behind their drawn curtains', she said. 'A tunnel was equally risky. So the hill was removed, or rather moved,

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since the excavated earth was piled up into a large mound. Added to it was a front portion of the hill that was taken down to make way for the construction of a large apartment building. People came gradually to call that mound Poklonnaia Hill.'

A closed competition in 1979 eventually yielded plans for a grandiose memorial ensemble with an elaborately contrived symbolic structure. Visitors were to ascend a vast set of stairs arranged in five groups – one for each year of the war – with bas-reliefs recounting the main events. On either side there were to be fountains with precisely 1418 jets of water – one for each day of the war.

At the rear of the complex, a museum was planned, and its most dramatic room was to be the circular Hall of Glory, a focus for the ritualized exaltation of the victory. Along the walls of that hall, white marble posts topped with bronze wreaths symbolizing glory were to display the engraved names of all 12 400 Heroes of the Soviet Union. A glass case in the centre of the room was to display the 'holy of holies', the original 'victory banner' flag hoisted atop the Reichstag in Berlin on 30 April 1945.

This 'Victory Banner' provided the theme of the central monument to the victory planned for Poklonnaia Hill. A 70 m high wavy banner of red granite with a huge bas-relief of Lenin's familiar three-quarter profile would be held aloft by a group of diminutive Soviet people crowded onto a tall pedestal. The design was graceless, stolid, and ugly, and its small figures dwarfed by the Lenin banner hardly seemed to commemorate the victory of the Soviet *people*.

By the spring of 1984, one year before the 40th anniversary of the victory, the construction of the ensemble finally got underway, more than a quarter-century after the initial Politburo resolution. The mound people called Poklonnaia Hill was razed and lovely woods destroyed to make way for the foundation. Vast sums of money had been collected to fund the project, most of them from *subbotniki*, 'voluntary' labour days.

But before the 'Victory Banner' monument could be constructed, intrigue within the powerful community of Soviet architects and sculptors (major monuments were *big* business in the old Soviet Union) combined with a growing *glasnost*-inspired sentiment that the people should have the right to control public culture, did away with the 'Victory Banner'. Instead, a series of open competitions allowed a broad spectrum of designers to make a bid for the authorship on what was billed as the Soviet Union's planned central monument to the victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War.

In April 1988, 470 designs for the monument on Poklonnaia Hill were displayed in the cavernous Manezh central exhibition hall. The hall displayed a tremendous variety of monument models: a grouping of primitively crafted people and centaurs made of in coloured clay and grouped on and around an elaborate clay pedestal; a gaily painted hemisphere bearing Lenin's stern profile and into whose north polar region was stuck a matrix of metal wires studded with star-shaped

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twinkly lights (visitors were invited to press a button to turn the lights on); a truly adorable enormous tableau populated by charming clay figures some of which held up globes, while others supported a map of the USSR displaying the mythic number 20 000 000; a large funky collage that included cut-out photographs of a variety of Soviet people, a red toy tank at the foot of a mock obelisk, and other purportedly special objects; two enormously long skinny modernistic brass arms extended up to support a wire globe (one of several hand-held globes featured in the exhibit) with a brass soldier posing awkwardly between the two arms. These and several others were bold, fanciful and even playful, and very unlike the tens of thousands of actual ponderous and stolid monuments evident in Soviet cities and towns.

The exhibit also contained a plethora of homely, even dreadful designs that often represented clumsy attempts to realize forms that have become traditional: red stars, rifle-bearing soldiers, mothers (with or without children, wings, branches or orbs), Lenin (and sometimes Marx), eternal flames, columns, obelisks, Kremlin towers and other phallic objects, eagles, doves, flowers, rainbows, globes, banners and arches.

Some of the most popular designs expressed the neo-Slavophilism of the Gorbachev years. Church-like structures replete with onion domes and eight-pointed crosses embodied the mood of the times, as did several models that envisioned as a victory monument a reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

In the end, none of the open competitions yielded any winning designs that the jury could endorse. Democrats maintained that no monument should be built, and that the money intended for its construction should go to aid elderly veterans. The army and its supporters insisted on a monument. Some consideration was given to a plan to transport to Poklonnaia Hill a monument erected by Soviet sculptor Evgenii Vuchetich in Berlin's Treptower Park in 1949 as a memorial to the two thousand Soviet soldiers who died in the storming of Berlin. The statue, which shows a resolute representative of the Soviet army's finest holding in his powerful arms a little German girl he has rescued from the flames of Berlin, had long been a prime symbol of the mature war cult. Even more to the point, some canny individuals doubtless figured out that it would be better to remove the ponderous reminder of the Soviet domination of East Germany than to wait for an angry German populace to tear it down. And, as an article on the monument published in *Komsomolskaia pravda* put it, 'The army is going away from there – why leave that one Soldier standing?'[12]

As the years went by and the Soviet Union imploded, the plans for a central victory monument temporarily fizzled, but the building to house the museum of the Great Patriotic War was in fact constructed, and the museum opened on 9 May 1993, Victory Day, with a temporary exhibit.

Finally, in the spring of 1995, 'Victory Park', as the complex is called, was

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madly rushed into completion just in time for the 50th anniversary of the victory on 9 May 1995. US President Clinton's presence at part of the 1995 commemoration, and his warm and direct acknowledgement of the Soviet Union's immense wartime losses, stood in poignant contrast to the 40th anniversary of VE Day in 1985, when President Reagan chose to visit a military cemetery in Bitburg, Germany.

Yuri Luzhkov, the immensely powerful mayor of Moscow, had commissioned his sculptor friend, Zurab Tsereteli, to design the central monument in Victory Park. A hugely tall and skinny obelisk 141.8 meters high (for 1418 days of war) covered with bas-reliefs of soldiers, arms, and the names of the hero-cities of the Soviet Union, rises out of the central plaza of the complex, with a Nike figure attached near the top, and a graceful statue of St. George the Dragonslayer at the bottom. A far more powerful and less triumphal sculptural grouping rests behind the museum building. Slim monoliths representing all peoples of the Soviet Union who fought and died in the War gradually transmogrify into solemn and gaunt human figures – the Soviet populace that had died in the Great Patriotic War. The vast, domed museum building also includes battle panoramas, mostly of victories such as the Stalingrad battle and the triumph in Berlin, a flamboyant 'Hall of Glory' under the dome, done up in the old style of totalitarian kitsch, and a 'Hall of Remembrance and Grief,' with a pietà, a sculpture of a woman – Mother Russia – bending over the body of her dead son.

In a striking departure from Soviet-era memorials, a handsome white church with a gilded dome invites worshippers to remember the war dead rests some distance from the main building, and (in an even greater departure from the Soviet style) a mosque and synagogue have also been erected. The synagogue, opened in 1998, was funded in large part by the oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, A place more for show than for worship, it also houses Russia's first and only 'Museum of the Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust.'

On 9 May 2003, Victory Park received its own shiny new metro station, replete with a triumphal mural depicting jubilant people crowding the East Berlin statue of a Soviet soldier holding a little girl. A few weeks later, on 22 June 2003, the 'Day of Remembrance' of the 1941 invasion was commemorated in Victory Park. In most respects, the experience was entirely Soviet, with wartime songs blaring from loudspeakers, bemedalled veterans clutching flowers and a grand concert of Russian patriotic and wartime music and poems, dedicated 'to the glory of the Russian military,' according to the concert programme. A ritual lighting of candles and tea-lights in the Hall of Remembrance and Grief had replaced the eternal flame of Soviet times with something closer to Orthodox tradition. The speeches were intensely political, linking the Soviet Union's lack of preparedness for Operation Barbarossa with the current need for powerful and vigilant armed forces.

The presence of President Vladimir Putin's political machine was evident in

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the line of young people who began the 22 June ceremonies by running in formation as they waved red banners. Putin has been conspicuous in his determination to exploit the memorialization of the war in order to foster patriotism.

The memory of the real experience of the Great Patriotic War is fading as its survivors die off, but the myth of a war now considered the Soviet Union's finest achievement, will continue to be used to legitimate the history of the USSR, to bolster national pride, and to support the weakened and demoralized Russian army.

Notes

1. 'Prazdnik pobedy', *Pravda*, 9 May 1945.
2. Quoted in L. Lazarev (1991) Kak ne byla gor'ka, *Kommunist*, No. 8, p. 29.
3. See S. Fitzpatrick (1985) Postwar Soviet Society. In S. J. Linz (ed), *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Totowa, New Jersey), especially pp. 150–51. The 1939 figure of 190.7 million population of the Soviet Union includes the territories annexed during the war in western Ukraine and Belorussia, Moldavia, and the Baltic states. (1961) *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1960 g. Statisticheskii ezhegodnik* (Moscow), p. 7, cited in Fitzpatrick, Postwar Soviet society, p. 131.
4. *Pravda*, 9 May 1949; *Krasnaia zvezda*, 9 May 1949; *Izvestiia*, 8 May 1949; *Vechernaia Moskva*, 8 May 1950; *Pravda*, 9 May 1949; *Pravda*, 9 May 1950.
5. *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 5 May 1990.
6. V. Kondratiev (1990) Parii voiny. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 31 January. For a letter to the editor by a group of veterans protesting Kondratiev's sympathetic review of the film, see *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 7 March 1990.
7. Cited in G. Gibian, World War 2 in Russian National Consciousness: Pristavkin (1981–7) and Kondratyev (1990), In J. Garrard and C. Garrard (eds), *World War 2 and the Soviet People* (New York: St. Martin's Press), p. 153.
8. V. Kondratiev (1990) Paradoks frontovoi nostalgii, Iu. Rost, Proshcheno?.. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9 May 1990.
9. B. Sokolov (1991) *Tsena pobedy* (Moscow). See also I. Geller (1989) Nevernoe ekho bylogo. *Druzhba narodov*, No. 9, pp. 229–244.
10. V. Suvorov (1990) *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London: Grafton Books).
11. L. Tolstoy (1965) *War and Peace*, translated by L. Maude and A. Maude (London: Oxford University Press), book xi, chapter 19, pp. 70–73.
12 I. Virabov (1991) Manevry na Poklonnoi gore. *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 12 September. Novelist Vladimir Karpov figured among those who favoured moving Vuchetich's monument from Berlin to Poklonnaia Hill. See his article in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9 May 1990.

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