

## CULTURE OF MEMORY IN RUSSIA 60 YEARS AFTER THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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*kultura*. Russian cultural review is published under the supervision of Professor Wolfgang Eichwede, director of the Research Centre for East European Studies at Bremen University.

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## RUSSIAN CULTURE OF MEMORY BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

## editorial

Much has already been written about the celebrations and debates that marked the anniversary of the Soviet victory in World War Two this year. *kultura* therefore concentrates on aspects of this topic that have hitherto attracted little attention.

In terms of the culture of memory, Russia today is in a state of transition. The generation that witnessed and experienced the war is slowly dying out. Because of the growing distance in time, the younger generation increasingly feels at a loss about what to make of war-time events, even though it does not question the outstanding significance of the victory. A new stage of remembering is setting in, marked above all by a search for new forms of expression.

Conspicuously, memory is becoming Europeanised, which has brought Russia both greater international acceptance and serious problems with her neighbours. In part, Russia is spurring on this Europeanisation herself, albeit tentatively. In political discourse, Western terminology is used increasingly alongside classical Soviet concepts and topoi. At the same time one can observe attempts to shift the focus of attention from the German-Soviet war to the events of the global war of 1939–45. This Europeanisation of the culture of memory in part has come to Russia from outside, sometimes prompting serious irritation. Before the Victory Day celebrations, the Baltic heads of state confronted Russia with the view that the Red Army had brought their countries not liberation, but a ‘third occupation’. Representatives of other countries from the former Soviet sphere of influence made similar critical statements, questioning one of the most resistant topoi of Soviet/Russian memory of the Second World War.

In recent years, there is a noticeable coexistence of heroic discourse and critical approaches to the war. Two traditions are meeting here: on the one hand, the classical Soviet view of the ‘Great Patriotic War’, and on the other hand the criticism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it was suggested that the victory may have come at an excessive cost and that there might be a need to discuss the failures of the political and military leadership. Those who had asked such awkward questions were already marginalised by 1995, in the run-up to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory. In 2005 it is now becoming clear that both lines still exist, although, of course, they do not carry the same weight. While heroic discourse clearly dominates, there are also unconventional and thoughtful reactions to the events of the war. An example that embodies this contradiction is the successful TV series *The Penal Battalion*.

It remains to be seen how the Russian culture of memory is going to develop in these times of transition. Although this year’s Victory Day celebrations were staged in a way that harked back to Soviet times – the 1940s, but even more the Brezhnev era – in terms of content, style, and iconography, this can by no means be described as a simple re-Sovietisation. In the final analysis, 9 May is experiencing little innovation, but that is not least due to its special significance for Russia’s culture of memory: it is the country’s only holiday that still has a potential for uniting Russians.

*Translated from the German  
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

## RUSSIAN TELEVISION'S COVERAGE OF VICTORY DAY

Marina Schmidt

## feature

*Russian television's coverage of the anniversary of the victory in the Second World War has made use of different strategies to orchestrate the 'unity of the nation' in Russia's rapidly differentiating society. Russia's two biggest TV channels each addressed a different age group, taking into account their respective viewing habits. Some programmes were designed to follow Soviet traditions in order to appeal to the older generation, while others targeted younger portions of the population and were thus more tuned into pop culture and Western patterns. The political part of the ceremonies was a decisive element in the cultivation of Russia's image in the world.*

'...these are our victors...' a male voice proclaims. A female voice continues: 'They are the central figures of this day'. A huge convoy of World War Two trucks drives past us. The vehicles are moving slowly, three in each row. There are people on the trucks, old people. They are holding carnations, waving and smiling. Who are they looking at? Who are they greeting?

This is a live TV broadcast from Moscow. Russia is celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in the 'Great Patriotic War'. It is under this name, coined by Stalin, that the years from 1941 to 1945 have burned into the minds of most Russians. We are on Red Square, on 9 May 2005. And the largest two Russian TV channels are now capturing the events of this day to make millions of viewers at home and abroad share this gigantic show.

Every show needs a preparatory phase. In Moscow, the advertising campaign for the great victory celebrations began as early as April 2005. About 50,000 flags, 3,000 huge posters and 200 kilometres of fairy lights were already ready for installation. This time, however, one hardly sees any flags displaying the national colours, white, blue and red, for these had been worn by the Vlasov army, which sided with the Germans. Instead, Moscow is bathed in red, as in the past. The celebration's symbol is a five-pointed star bearing the inscription '60 Years of Victory' – a slightly modified version of the 'Victory Medal', the highest Soviet military decoration in the 'Great Patriotic War'. A big media event is be-

ing prepared, intended to reach as many people as possible. For Victory Day 2005 is something very special. It is the last milestone anniversary of the end of the war which can be celebrated on a large scale together with the veterans. The generation who witnessed the war is slowly dying out, and for the generation of their grandchildren, the Second World War belongs to history. This is the only Russian holiday that still fosters a sense of unity; this makes it all the more important to stage it in such a way that it will go down well with almost everyone.

Sound ready! Camera ready! 32 cameras are installed all over Red Square, including a 'flying' camera fastened with a rope to the huge ruby star on Spassky Tower and to the roof of the Historical Museum; it will take high-angle shots of every detail. This camera allows us to follow the entire course of the celebrations. At the moment, Red Square is still empty. It is 6 am and still quite dark. Moscow is waking up.

Our attention is focused on the two biggest Russian TV channels, *Channel One* and *Rossia* ('Russia'). At 6 o'clock sharp the Russian national anthem is played, which has the same melody as the Soviet anthem, but a different text. Accompanied by the music, the festive marathon begins with close-up shots of the still-drowsy city. And here the two channels part, at least for this early morning in May.

First we step into the Studio of *Channel One*. It is prepared to welcome numerous guests. Red

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is the dominant colour. There are many flowers. The host is a woman in her mid-forties. She is sitting at a wooden table of a light colour; there is a teacup in front of her that she never touches. The woman's task is to coax war stories out of her guests.

The use of phrases such as 'this day' or 'today we are celebrating' creates the illusion of a live broadcast. But by the time the second guest has spoken one suspects it is a recording. Several inconsistencies have apparently been cut out: certain reactions by the invited veterans and the moderator are missing. One quickly discerns the structure of the conversation: the guests' tales must sound as straightforward, true to life, and human as possible – as if they had only just been created in the studio. The host thanks her guests warmly in the name of all viewers; her general mood seems sentimental. Her tone of voice is irritating; she always speaks more loudly than the guests and seems to know everything in advance, leaving no room for casual conversation. Different guests have been invited, obviously on purpose: among others, a Hero of the Soviet Union and a film star with a past that has been marked by the war. One of the veterans in the studio gets to have his say:

*Moderator:* What did you get the Hero Star for?

*Veteran:* Oh, that's a very special story... my unit shot down 30,000 Germans without a single casualty on our side.

Soon afterwards there is a report on the legendary Kalashnikov – a Soviet assault rifle famous for its robustness which became a symbol of the Red Army's strength. Fittingly, the next guest is a submachine-gunner: not a highly-decorated veteran this time, but an 'ordinary' one.

*Moderator:* Georgy Ivanovich, were there situ-

ations when your submachine gun saved your life?

*Veteran:* It was around February 1942. I was a reconnaissance scout then. Our unit was withdrawing and I had to cover them. And suddenly – must have been a kind of sixth sense – I turn around and see a German...

*Moderator:* Ah!

*Veteran:* ...5–7 meters away from me. I react... This is how my submachine gun saved my life.

There follows a discussion of the Molotov cocktail and its use against German tanks. This simple but effective weapon has also become a symbol of the victory.



Zap! Now we're watching *Rossia*, watching a young man, thirty years old at most. There is a little rain. He is keeping us updated on the course of the ceremony, for the military parade on Red Square is about to begin and we must not miss the heads of the leading European states and the USA. The young man is neither as sentimental nor as articulate as his colleague from the competing *Channel One*. Is it because he is freezing a little? The image is pale, the sound is imperfect, and on the whole the reporter seems to be taking the whole thing more lightly than his older colleague. He is speaking directly into the camera, following the classical pattern familiar from West European television. 'There is nothing to see yet; everything is ready, but it's too early', he tells his colleague in the studio. They address each other by their first names. This way of presenting things reminds one of the count-down before an Oscar ceremony. Only in this case we're waiting for heads of state, not film stars.

If it wasn't clear before, we now realise that the two channels have divided up the television audi-

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ence among themselves. *Channel One* is addressing the older generation, i.e. the veterans and all the others who directly experienced the war, and/or those missing the Soviet-era TV aesthetic.

*Rossia* mainly caters to a younger generation and displays more flexibility and sense of drama in staging the countdown to the parade. Several correspondents of the *Vesti* ('news') program are deployed in different parts of Moscow to provide live reports about the preparations. There are also live broadcasts from other Russian cities. Strikingly, the journalists are on average 25–30 years old. Without fear of making slips of the tongue, they instinctively use the language of the younger generation in their reports. They interrupt each other or spontaneously cut their reports short to allow the channel to switch over to wherever anything more important has happened. *Rossia*

also employs a team of reporters rapidly riding minibuses equipped with satellite dishes through a number of 'hero cities' in order to capture the festive mood locally. A report from Vladivostok highlights the size of the country: since there is a seven-hour time difference with Moscow, the correspondent can only tell viewers in the capital: 'Everything is over back here.' In all regions there are people who have a marked fondness for re-enacting the war, clad in wartime uniforms and using wartime equipment. The veterans are already too frail for such games: they can only watch.

All differences in style notwithstanding, the two channels convey similar content. They barely dare to offer new perspectives on the sacralised war.

The clock strikes ten. The bells of Spassky tower fall silent; the parade is starting. Red Square is



Veterans take part in the parade on Red Square in faithful replicas of wartime trucks, the famous SIS-5, purpose-made for the ceremony. Photo: [www.may9.ru](http://www.may9.ru) (official anniversary web site).

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decked out with (mostly Soviet) flags and banners, red flowers, historical posters – a colourful sight.

'...these are our victors...' a male voice proclaims. A female voice continues: 'They are the central figures of this day'. A huge convoy of World War Two trucks drives past us. The vehicles are moving slowly, carrying people, old people. They are waving and smiling. Who are they looking at?

We follow their gaze to the over fifty heads of state on the tribune. On the left, next to Putin, is US president George Bush, on the right we see Jacques Chirac, and next to him the then federal chancellor, Gerhard Schröder. His presence underscores the new German-Russian relationship. Never before has a German head of government been invited to a parade on Red Square. He recently referred to the reconciliation of the two former enemies, Russia and Germany, as 'historic'. The presidents of Estonia and Lithuania, Arnold Rüütel and Valdas Adamkus, are missing. They are boycotting the event to protest against Russia's failure to recognise the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states as illegitimate.

2,500 war veterans and 7,000 soldiers are taking part in the parade. 20,000 policemen are shielding the city from terrorist attacks. For fear of such attacks the entire city has been placed on the highest state of alert. In 2002 and 2004, terrorists carried out heavy bomb attacks in the North Caucasus on Victory Day, killing dozens of people both times.

Four elite soldiers are carrying the flag of victory on Red Square. It is a replica of the flag that was hoisted above the Reichstag on 2 May 1945. The Soviet war photographer Yevgeny Khaldey's still-classic picture of this event went around the world at the time. It had been contrived, however: the shot was taken specially for posterity on the next day after the seizure of the Reichstag.

There is no longer any use in zapping between

the two channels; both are now showing the same thing. Sergei Ivanov, Russia's defence minister, is driving past rows of soldiers in a Russian-made open limousine. His car is also equipped with a camera, and so we can watch the soldiers' faces at close range.

'Dear friends! We have never claimed the victory for ourselves only!', a voice is assuring us. 'We shall always remember our allies' help.' '80 per cent of the world's population was drawn into the blazing circle of the Second World War [...]. But the most cruel and decisive events [...] took place on the territory of the Soviet Union.'

'...the blazing circle of the *Second World War*'... Here Putin is producing a little sensation – perhaps this is the first time that a leading Russian politician is using the term 'Second World War' alongside the concept of the 'Great Patriotic War'. He is thereby inscribing the commemoration of the victory into European culture of memory. Putin goes on, very distinctly, dryly, without emotion:

'A striking example of [...] politics [based on the ideals of liberty and democracy] is the historic reconciliation between Russia and Germany. In my opinion this is one of the most valuable achievements of post-war Europe, an example that should set a precedent in contemporary world politics'.

Over large stretches of his speech, Putin says the things that were usual in Soviet times. He keeps stressing that the victory over Nazism was mainly due to the Soviet Union. At the same time he is trying to meet Western expectations by also acknowledging the allies' contributions.



The historical part of the parade is starting: over 2,500 veterans ride across the square in faithful replicas of Soviet wartime trucks. Five years ago,

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the veterans, many of whom are frail people, had to parade on foot, which was heavily criticised after the event. The guests give them a standing ovation. Units belonging to the most diverse branches are marching past: first a canine unit, then cavalry, then bands playing the 'Sacred War' song, which has a highly emotional meaning for many Russians; it was to this song, written in the very first hours of the war, that the first Red Army soldiers marched into battle. A few fighter jets fly past in diamond formation, then three airplanes spray the three colours of the Russian flag across the sky. An hour later, the parade ends with a Brezhnev-era song called 'Victory Day' sung by the pop singer Lev Leshchenko, a fixture of Russian and Soviet popular culture of the past decades. Most people in Russia know both songs by heart: they have long been indispensable components of the Victory Day celebrations.

The camera dwells on an old man in a navy uniform covered with medals. He is furtively wiping the tears out of his eyes. The minute of silence begins.... Since the late 1960s, this is the official highlight of 9 May. The voice of Russian star TV presenter Kirillov rings out. He reads out the unchanging first phrase of the Soviet Information Bureau's war reports: 'Moscow speaking...'. His voice is reminiscent of the impressively sonorous voice of Stalin's favourite radio announcer, Yuri Levitan, who read out all war reports in 1941-5. Then silence falls... an imaginary clock is ticking.

We may suppose that at this moment, millions of people are remaining motionless and silent in front of their TV screens, and many tears are falling. This is the crucial moment: now all of Russia's citizens should feel part of a great community.

The parade and the ensuing colourful staging of the history of the war may also be perceived as Russia's political message or statement to the

outside world. The show is in full swing: it has the quality of an opulent musical. The imagery of the event's television coverage reminds one of MTV-style music videos. This is especially true of the permanent shift of camera perspective and the unusually frequent cuts. But something does not fit into this show: the faces of the young actors, no doubt carefully cast for this spectacle, no longer reflect any Soviet meekness. These people clearly belong to our times, and so there is reserve in their handling of the memory of the war.

The camera positions and cuts don't seem to follow any clear plot, so one only gets a vague idea of the historical events. One has to be quite well-versed to be able to recognise the battle of Stalingrad or the defence of Sevastopol. Nevertheless, many are deeply moved by the show. But an unpleasant taste remains: the ceremony's dramaturgy serves only one aim – to convey the impression that what is happening is grandiose, significant, destined for eternity. And it is this great symbolic power of Victory Day that prevents Russian society from approaching the history of the war critically. The Soviet army did liberate its country from German occupation, but at the same time it occupied the states of Central Europe, installing Stalinist regimes there. The 'Great Patriotic War' is a central chapter of Russian history that is still far from completion; ignorance and clichés from Soviet historiography still prevail among the population. But cracks have long since appeared in this image, and it will continue to disintegrate.

The 9 May TV broadcast is almost over. The theatrical interpretation of the war on Red Square is followed by the film *Diversant* ('The saboteur'), then a documentary called *Aviareis dlinnoi v 60 let* ('A flight that lasted 60 years') about a Soviet pilot's unfulfilled love, and finally a critical documentary on the Soviet Union's two most important military leaders, Zhukov and Rokossovski...

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The world-famous baritone Dmitri Khvorostovski sings a final wartime song:

*Nightingales, don't wake the soldiers,  
Let the soldiers sleep...*

Night has fallen. Stop. End of the programme.  
Next year there will be another Victory Day celebration; but the number of victors is dwindling.

*Translated from the German  
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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Marina Schmidt is studying East and Central European cultural history at Bremen University. Her article is a revised version of a paper presented in the summer term of 2005 at Isabelle de Keghel's and Rüdiger Ritter's seminar on 'Strategies of Dealing with the Past in Late Socialism and Post-Socialism'.

## SUGGESTED READINGS AND LISTENINGS:

- A selection of Soviet songs on the 'Great Patriotic War', including two of the songs mentioned in the article, may be found at the following URLs: <http://www.kriegsende.aktuell.ru/lieder/> and <http://www.sovmusic.ru/english/list.php?part=1&category=marsh>
- Andreas Langenohl, 'State visits: Internationalized commemoration of World War II in Russia and Germany'. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-05-03-langenohl-en.html>
- Igor J. Polianski, 'Die kleineren Übel im großen Krieg. Der 60. Jahrestag des Sieges: Das Fest des historischen Friedens und der Krieg der Geschichtsbilder zwischen Baltikum und Russland', *Zeitgeschichte-online*, Thema: *Die Russische Erinnerung an den 'Großen Vaterländischen Krieg'*, Mai 2005, [http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/\\_rainbow/documents/pdf/russerinn/polianski.pdf](http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/_rainbow/documents/pdf/russerinn/polianski.pdf)

‘THE PEOPLE’S HEROIC DEED IS IMMORTAL’: THE HISTORY OF 9 MAY AS A  
STATE HOLIDAY IN THE SOVIET UNION

Lars Karl

looking  
back

The 'Day of Victory in the Great Patriotic War' (*Den Pobedy v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine*) occupied a special position among Soviet holidays. According to the Russian historian Alexander Grossman, 9 May was 'probably the only day in the political culture of the Soviet Union when the official point of view of the CPSU coincided with people's personal experience'.

While it may be questionable whether private and officially prescribed war memory were really as congruent as Grossman claims, 9 May did serve the Soviet Union's political leadership as a propagandistic occasion to stress the alleged superiority of socialism. Holidays such as Victory Day were

an important tool for legitimising their rule and articulating claims to rule. Until the beginning of Perestroika, however, the official memory of the war and the celebratory culture that went with it were not unified but rather followed the political twists of post-war Soviet history.

In the Soviet Union, news about Germany's capitulation was broadcast on Radio Moscow on the morning of 9 May.<sup>1</sup> The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet declared this day a nation-wide public holiday to honour the victory over Hitler's Germany (*Prazdnik Pobedy*). Considering its outstanding historical significance, however, it is astonishing that during Stalin's lifetime very little

<sup>1</sup> The capitulation was signed on 8 May 1945 shortly after 11pm in the Soviet headquarters in Berlin-Karlshorst. Since Moscow is in a different time zone from Berlin (CET + 2 hours), a new day, 9 May, had begun by that time in the Soviet capital. Because of this difference of calendar, the end of the war is celebrated on 8 May in several West and Central European countries, and on 9 May in Russia (*Ed.*).



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was done to commemorate the war publicly. Thus Victory Day was abolished as a non-working public holiday as early as the end of 1946 without an official explanation, and turned into a simple remembrance day among a great many others in the Soviet calendar.

It was only after Brezhnev took power in the mid-1960s that intensive public commemoration of the war began. At that time the Soviet leadership was looking for new sources of legitimation in order to secure the loyalty of a population who felt increasingly alienated from the official doctrine of Marxism-Leninism. Brezhnev's new Kremlin leadership began to stage a vast programme of ritualised manifestations of loyalty. In this context, the CPSU (re-)discovered the 'Great Patriotic War', and in 1965, on its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Victory Day was once again made a public holiday.

In the run-up to this anniversary, a specific repertoire of ritualised celebrations of victory was created, which afterwards remained largely unchanged and was quite different from other political orchestrations, such as the celebrations on 1 May. Military ceremonies were basic dramaturgical components of the vast majority of Victory Day rituals. Visual symbols from the Second World War were omnipresent at the celebrations, and the presence of war veterans was often central to the festivities, which the state regularly took as an occasion to bestow new benefits upon survivors of the war. Under Brezhnev, 9 May was a big, carefully staged ritual, every element of which was in accordance with ideological expediency. All actions and speeches were coordinated so as to be mutually reinforcing. The act as a whole thus carried a self-contained political message. The Victory Day celebrations also offered an emotional framework which demanded participation from the viewers. The mood that was conveyed to them was not so much mournful commemoration as optimism based on the

Soviet Union's military, economic, and ideological victories. Taken together, the Soviet state's victory celebrations as a whole thus triumphantly affirmed the system. The staging of this holiday resembled a total work of art created by the party elites.

The thirtieth anniversary in 1975 stood out against the annual celebrations through its sumptuousness. The firmly institutionalised training of the personnel employed in the festivities ensured a hitherto unknown level of professionalisation. The celebrations were made to span a whole preparatory year in order to instil a sense of national pride and solidarity with the single ruling party into the mass of Soviet citizens.

By 1985, the 9 May campaign to legitimise the regime and motivate citizens had reached a scale that suggested to Western observers that in the face of manifold, above all economic, problems the memory of the war had become the only reliable bond between party and people as well as between the different peoples of the Soviet Union. Moreover, official propaganda was consistently making an effort to consolidate the political and social status quo. Implicitly, the 1985 celebrations therefore largely mirrored the problems the Soviet Union was struggling with at the beginning of the Gorbachev era. The invocation of the heroic virtues of wartime was apparently intended to contribute significantly to overcoming those problems. 9 May 1985 was also the last mass holiday of such scale staged in the honour of a system which was soon to become a thing of the past after Glasnost and Perestroika.

*Translated from the German  
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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## READING SUGGESTION:

Lars Karl 'Der „Tag des Sieges“ in der Sowjetunion: Inszenierung eines politischen Mythos'. Tübingen 1999 (MA thesis). Available at [http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/\\_rainbow/documents/pdf/russerinn/karl\\_9mai.pdf](http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/_rainbow/documents/pdf/russerinn/karl_9mai.pdf)

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 RUSSIAN SOCIETY'S CONTRADICTIONARY PERCEPTIONS  
 OF THE 60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORY
 

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Sofia Chuikina

## analysis

*The Victory Day celebrations in 2005 have met with very different responses in Russian society. This is illustrated by an analysis of sample sources drawn from the Internet as well as from student essays from Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. On the one hand, nobody questions the historical achievement of the victory over Fascism. On the other hand, as the obligatory Soviet rhetoric has disappeared and as the war generation's grandchildren are growing up, spaces have opened up for other 'stories' – private, egocentric, and critical ones. Society's responses to the 9 May ceremonies are therefore full of contradictions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Victory Day is the only official Soviet-era state holiday that has kept both its name and its former significance, embodying continuity between Soviet times and the present day.

9 May is celebrated the same way across Russia, and 9 May 2005 was no exception. From 10 am to noon, veterans, military personnel, and well-wishing schoolchildren defile through the city's main square, while representatives of the city administration and cultural personalities read out congratulatory addresses. This is followed by a range of events organised at various venues. In the evening there is entertainment for young people, often bearing no thematic relation to Victory Day. The whole thing is crowned by late-night fireworks. This outline has barely changed since Soviet times. Unlike the ritual programme in the morning, the evening funfair and fireworks attract crowds of townspeople. Victory Day is the most traditional Russian official holiday, one that shuns innovation. It includes no avant-garde

artistic projects that might give rise to original interpretations.

Just like other mass festivals, Victory Day contributes to creating a symbolic order for contemporary Russian society. This holiday highlights social hierarchies, appeals to national and local identities, legitimises the political order, creates a link between the present political regime and its predecessors, and serves to unite the nation. A mass festival is also a means of propaganda that uses a language different from the media and political journalism or manifestos. In this case, communication takes place through a symbolic idiom of images, hints, and allusions.

In this article I shall explore what message the celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory conveyed and how this message was interpreted by different segments of Russian society. My essay is based on an analysis of Russian websites<sup>1</sup> containing publications and forums devoted to the anniversary as well as 35 essays written by sociology students at Kazan University at my

<sup>1</sup> [www.pobeda-60.ru](http://www.pobeda-60.ru), [www.may9.ru](http://www.may9.ru), [www.victory.tass-online.ru](http://www.victory.tass-online.ru), <http://blokada.otrok.ru>, [www.iremember.ru](http://www.iremember.ru), [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru), [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com), [www.fom.ru](http://www.fom.ru).

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request, describing their impressions of Victory Day.

ON THE 'SIGNIFICANCE'  
OF THE 60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

In the debates about the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory we may observe the coexistence of a Soviet apologetic language and a new, questioning and critical rhetoric. However, neither of these languages casts doubt on the significance of this holiday as a public event. The following section will look at how the notion of the 'significance' of this day manifests itself in official and informal discussions.

The data about Russians' perceptions of Victory Day published by the Public Opinion Foundation, which is close to the president, may be considered to express the 'official truth' on this issue. The central and regional press across Russia quoted these figures on the eve of the anniversary: 'If, in 2003, 83% of those surveyed said that 9 May was a special, significant, important day for them, by 2004 the figure was 88%, and in 2005, 91%' ([www.fom.ru](http://www.fom.ru)). Thus the nation-wide acknowledgement of Victory Day as an important date was widely announced and 'scientifically corroborated'.

The meaning of this acknowledgement needs to be deciphered. The student essays I collected in Kazan and discussed with the authors in my seminar showed that in abstract discussions about Victory Day almost everyone says it is 'an important date', because we need 'to express our gratitude to the veterans', 'to preserve the memory of their exploits'. However, when asked about their own participation in the celebrations, many say they do not take part in them; for them this date means nothing more than a day off work.

An analysis of web-based forums (such as [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com) or [www.iremember.ru](http://www.iremember.ru)), which mostly present the perspectives of socially

active people, also provides reasons to consider Victory Day a significant day, albeit from a different point of view. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory has exposed the painful spots of the Russian public mind and laid bare the wounds of memory, once more hinting at what remains unsaid through all the high-blown phrases.

The Soviet people's victory in the 'Great Patriotic War' was a 'holy cow' of Soviet discourse, questioned by no-one. Even oppositional intellectuals never focused their attention on this issue. Victory was the main bulwark of Soviet patriotism, an object of pride that united people from different strata. The Soviet period saw the creation of prototypical memoirs and the adoption of a certain way of talking about the war. There was a consensus on how to assess the key events of the war, such as the battle of Stalingrad, the siege of Leningrad, or the seizure of Berlin. Towards the end of the Soviet period, an ambiguous attitude towards Victory Day emerged. The official part of this holiday was perceived as an essential part of the Soviet ideological facade. At the same time many families celebrated this day informally out of respect for those who fought in the war. This ambiguity remains to this day.

Victory Day raises numerous questions and triggers many observations about Russian society. One of the main questions that Russian citizens ask themselves concerns the continuity between the Soviet period and the present day. Any discussion on Victory Day is in fact a debate about the image of the USSR. Although this image remains 'off-camera', it plays a significant role in perceptions of Victory Day, provoking controversies between apologists and opponents of the Soviet-type state bureaucracy. The war was not included in the reassessment of Soviet history that started in the late 1980s, with the exception of a few isolated events. The need to discuss this topic more actively has made itself felt in society

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simultaneously with the rise of policies aimed to revive a 'united' Russia.

## THE VETERANS' VIEWS OF VICTORY DAY

Judging from recently published memoirs and interviews, we may single out three different attitudes among war veterans towards the anniversary of the victory and towards the remembrance of the war in general.

The largest group among them reproduces Soviet stock phrases celebrating the warriors' heroism. Such memoirs portray true heroes who strove to be where they were most needed, condemning doubters. They imply that during the war everyone lived for the common goal, and individualistic aspirations took a back seat to the common cause.

The second type of narrative is similar to the first and can be called 'egocentric'. These narrators

seek to assert themselves by telling stories about their own resourcefulness, keenness of wit, and luck, and relating extraordinary and unbelievable occurrences.

The third type of account, on the contrary, softly disputes the canonical version of events. What is striking here is the absence of collectivist rhetoric. Thus, for example, some accounts of the Leningrad siege show that people were forced to eke out a near-animal existence, spending their time hunting for cats and rats. Thoughts about one's daily bread as well as the deep sorrow, weakness, and perplexity are ingrained in the memory of these Leningraders, whereas according to the canonical account of history their spirits were sustained by love for the motherland and loathing for Fascism.

On the eve of the anniversary, the socially active veterans were divided. Some of them readily



Posters near Poklonnaya Gora in Moscow, late April 2005. The poster on the left stresses the intergenerational continuity of memory: 'Grandfather's Victory is my Victory'. The one on the right announces a concert of Soviet-era star singer Iosif Kobzon to honour the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory.

Photo: Ann-Kathrin Mätzold.

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agreed to take part in the celebrations and march past the authorities' stands. Others used the festivities as an opportunity to voice their grievances against the authorities over the monetarisation of social benefits for pensioners. On 1 January 2005, a range of social benefits (e.g. free use of public transport, free telephone lines) were replaced by inadequate cash payments. Many veterans see this reform as an expression of disdain for their outstanding services, since the benefits veterans had been receiving for their contribution to defending the country in the 'Great Patriotic War' are among those that fell prey to monetarisation.

## THE GRATEFUL DESCENDANTS' SONG OF PRAISE

The memory of the special role played by the Soviet Union in overthrowing Fascism remains important for many young and middle-aged Russians. Victory in the Second World War is perceived as a guarantee of Russia's strength. It is an object of pride that has a tinge of contempt for other nations who were forced to surrender and endure German occupation. The pride for events of the 1940s fosters a positive identification with one's own country and links the present with the Soviet period.

Mass survey data show that the anniversary of the victory is considered especially important by elderly people, while all those who said this date was unimportant for them are among the youngest groups of those surveyed. Nevertheless, there is a conspicuous lack of differences between the types of language used by people of different ages to speak about the victory, especially those who do not tend to subject this date to critical scrutiny.

Thus, for example, when a website called 'Our Victory' (maintained by the *RIA Novosti* press agency) organised an essay competition of the same name for schoolchildren, most of the essays sent in did not carry any trace of the present. An

external observer would not be able to determine whether these are contemporary essays or texts from the 1980s or 1970s. The essays start with the statement that war is horrible. There follows an account of the author's (great-) grandmother's or (great-)grandfather's deeds during the war. At the end there are words of gratitude to the veterans: 'Thank you for my life, for my well-nourished childhood', 'We owe the veterans our lives', 'They cleared the homeland inch by inch', 'If not for the victory, we wouldn't be here'. The same thing is characteristic of a significant part of my Kazan students, who reiterated the Soviet clichés uncritically.

In the political arena, the position of refusing to reassess history and sticking to hymns of praise is advocated by the "Idushchie vmeste" ('Walking together') and "Nashi" ('Our people') youth movements.<sup>2</sup> On 15 May 2005, 'Our People' activists staged a mass meeting in Moscow under the slogan 'Taking the Baton from the Veterans', which was attended by about 60,000 people from different regions of Russia. The activists swore an oath of allegiance to the veterans with the following words: 'We shall never give up our country to anyone, there shall never be anyone but us in our country, and only we shall govern it.' In return for this the chairman of the Moscow Region Veterans' Council handed the participants a symbolic token of the victory: a cartridge he had carried with him through the entire war.

## REASSESSING THE WAR AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VICTORY DAY

Reassessing the war is a painful effort for all groups among the Russian population, regardless of their political position. One of the most difficult questions is 'who was defeated'?

Quite obviously, what is celebrated is the victory over Fascism. However, there have been changes since the Soviet period. Out of political correct-

<sup>2</sup> See: Jens Siegert, Politische Jugendorganisationen und Jugendbewegungen in Russland, in: *Russlandanalysen* 83 (2005), S. 2–6, <http://www.russlandanalysen.de/content/media/Russlandanalysen83.pdf> (in German).

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ness, the typically Soviet term 'German Fascism' is less and less used in both official discourse and texts written by private persons. This new consensus is hailed by democrats but hurts the opponents of a rapprochement between Russia and the Western countries, who condemn the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe and the collapse of the USSR.

An even more controversial question is 'who were the victors?' The problem here is that while there is a reunited Germany on the map of Europe, the victorious USSR is no longer there.

Re-examining the ideologically laden term 'Great Patriotic War', as the war was always called in the USSR, is also fraught with difficulty. It is now more and more often called the Second World War in political discourse and the media, although many people continue to insist on the former designation.

Another painful question is whether victory was worth the price paid for it. Critics point to the soldiers used as cannon fodder: the volunteers who had to share a rifle with another soldier, or the penal battalions. They also highlight the tremendous sacrifices of the siege of Leningrad, the demographic losses wrought by the war, and the post-war repressions against returning prisoners of war. Discussions about the price that the Russian people paid for victory arouse especially nervous reactions, since they threaten to overthrow the myth of Russians' selfless and irrational heroism that is important for the Russian national consciousness.

A much-debated and much-condemned thesis has it that Stalin, just like Hitler, was planning an offensive war, but did not have the time to start it. Russians prefer to think that the war was defensive. On the whole, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary provoked a new debate about Stalin. Some spoke out in favour of rehabilitating the Leader of Peoples in his function as Generalissimo. Several times

the suggestion to erect Stalin statues in various Russian cities was raised, but this was rejected everywhere except in the town of Mirny in Yakutia, where a bust was installed.

In contemporary Russia, unequivocally negative attitudes towards the very fact of celebrating Victory Day are characteristic of those who are inclined to radical criticism of the political and economic situation, in particular some activists of the National Bolshevik and Communist parties. Their disdain for the festivities was accompanied by criticism of the war veterans for accepting presents from the current authorities and being prepared to march past their tribunes. They also criticised the fact that the veterans are shamelessly used by the authorities for political aims, especially before elections.

The debate among intellectuals, in particular among historians and sociologists, writing for a large public is more nuanced than discussions among people in the street. Some intellectuals staged an interesting if timid attack on an official pre-anniversary strategy comfortable for everyone, which consisted in reducing discussions of the war in the central media to 'preserving family stories'. In 2004–5 there was a series of radio and TV shows where people spoke about their relatives' war-time experience. The media broadcast these as short clips presenting 'stories from real life'. Such programmes undoubtedly turn Victory Day into a more familiar and significant event. However, as some critical observers have remarked, private stories should not eclipse political questions about the authorities' wartime mistakes, blunders, and crimes, thus taking the issue of the administrative machinery's accountability to the people off the agenda.

## CONCLUSION

In transitional societies with unsettled ideologies and hierarchical systems, mass festivals and

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anniversaries carry a special significance, since they contribute to creating and legitimising a social order. The language of mass festivals always combines several traditions, which may well be politically contradictory. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory was no exception.

The Victory Day celebrations are above all a symbolic probing of the prestige of the USSR and contemporary Russia in the international arena. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary has made a contribution to the formation of a Russian identity. It has allowed them to remember that their national character includes 'heroism' and 'the capacity to perform great deeds'. This holiday affirms a great-power identity as well as ethnic identities. Thus, for example, in Tatarstan the celebrations, which were staged in a traditional fashion, included Russian and Tatar sports shows, performances, and concerts in both languages. The city was decorated with Soviet, Russian, and Tatar symbols.

It is no secret that the social order that asserts itself with the help of this holiday is the state bureaucracy. From this point of view, the celebrations have fulfilled many of their symbolic

functions in legitimising this regime, with one exception: it was left unclear whether there is continuity between the then leadership of the Russian state and its current successors.

Having opted for a general strategy for Russia's future development, Victory Day discourse has not established any authorities or defined any priorities. It has mainly concentrated on the more neutral issue of the Russian people and its capacity to endure great suffering and perform great deeds.

*Translated from the Russian*

*by Mischa Gabowitsch*

*Illustration courtesy of Ann-Kathrin Mätzold*

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*THE PENAL BATTALION: A RUSSIAN TV SERIES BETWEEN REASSESSING HISTORY AND STAGING PATRIOTISM*

*Isabelle de Keghel*

## film review

Home-made TV series have become more and more successful in Russia in recent years. They have edged out from TV screens the foreign series that dominated in the 1990s and have become an important medium for ideological messages. The anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War served as an occasion for the production of numerous 'patriotic' series about the war.

*The Penal Battalion*, by the well-known Russian director Nikolai Dostal, was the most successful among them. The 11-part series was broadcast on

prime time on Russia's *Channel One* in the autumn of 2004, achieving record viewing figures of almost 45%. The series apparently owes its success to the fact that the audience perceived it as a faithful depiction of the war, and that it deals with aspects of war history that had been put under taboo for decades: the penal battalions and Stalin's infamous orders 227 and 270, whereby all soldiers who retreated a single step or did not commit suicide to avoid being captured by German troops were declared traitors. The series drew a lot of reviews and provoked intense

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debates. Most reviewers praised the quality of the script, the exceptional acting, and the documentary-like aesthetic.

The series tells the story of one of the numerous Soviet penal battalions in the Second World War from beginning to end. The diverse group is made up of criminals and political prisoners – an explosive mix. Both groups volunteered for the war while imprisoned in camps. The criminals had been following their own code of honour before joining the penal battalion, making no secret of the fact that they disliked the Soviet authorities and would not lift a finger for them. The political prisoners are also enemies of the Soviet system, not least because of their experience of its arbitrary justice. The two groups cautiously begin to draw together during their first joint march; they both now subordinate to the common aim of defending their home country. When the commander orders his men to sing, the criminals begin to chant the frivolous, anti-Soviet ‘Murka’. The political prisoners counter with the patriotic ‘Sacred War’ song, and gradually the entire battalion joins in.

The film’s main character is the commander of the penal battalion, expressively named Tverdokhlebov (‘hard bread’). Since he was captured alive by the Germans, he counts as a traitor, although he refused to join the Vlasov Army that sided with the Germans, and was therefore put before a firing squad. He is heavily wounded but manages to fight his way through to ‘his people’, only to face brutal interrogation. He narrowly escapes the death penalty and is made commander of the penal battalion. Tverdokhlebov proves merciless in upholding discipline, but also puts his weight behind improving ‘his’ men’s rations and having them rehabilitated.

The series is a mix between a critical re-assessment of the history of the war and a patriotically exalted view of that history. It shows very clearly

that the soldiers in penal units were treated in an inhuman and cynical way and used as cannon fodder.

These soldiers fight on two fronts, facing the German Wehrmacht and, in their rear, NKVD (secret police) units under orders to shoot and kill every retreating or deserting penal soldier without question. The NKVD troops sometimes mow down dozens of them during action for no reason at all. Their chances of survival are slim; they are driven over uncleared minefields or have to attack German units despite being heavily outnumbered and outgunned. The tasks they are assigned are often pointless or superfluous: at the end of the series, the battalion storms a hill that has no strategic significance whatsoever, and all of its members perish in the process.

At the same time, the series has a decisively patriotic touch. The soldiers in the penal unit may be anti-Soviet, but they did volunteer for the battalion because they wanted to defend their home country, no matter what its political system and ruling party. The series is full of passionate professions of patriotism, e.g. when, in a highly emotional scene, commander Tverdokhlebov beseeches his company commanders to lead their men into the first, almost hopeless attack. The professional criminal Glebov then declares that ‘Russian soil’ is sacred even to a crook.

The role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the series is worthy of note. Father Mikhail, who appears towards the end of the series, offers the soldiers words of encouragement; he even takes part in the fighting. At the very end of the film, an image of the Mother of God appears over the corpse-filled battlefield, accompanied by Rachmaninoff’s ‘All-Night Vigil’ as a kind of requiem. The soldiers’ death is thus given a transcendental meaning. This makes it clear that, despite striking some critical notes, the tenor of the series is patriotic.



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There is much else to object to. In the Russian debate about *The Penal Battalion*, doubts were raised about the series's faithfulness to reality. Contrary to the depiction in the series, the commanders of penal battalions were regular officers. Furthermore, the people who fought in those units were not former inmates, but officers temporarily demoted for certain offences. The openly critical remarks about the Soviet authorities that run through almost all conversations among the battalion's soldiers would have been unthinkable. And finally, while Stalin did raise the profile of the Church during the war in order to use its mobilising potential, its importance is greatly exaggerated in the series: military chaplains never existed.

Despite these qualifications, *The Penal Battalion* remains one of the outstanding Russian productions of recent years.

*Translated from the German  
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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Isabelle de Keghel works at Bremen University's Research Centre for East European Studies. Her research focuses on types of discourse about the past, visual culture, and gender identities in the late and post-Soviet periods.

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