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Longing for peace: how the Kremlin co-opted Victory Day

What once was the most important and sacred national holiday for Russians has become a day of shame

In April of this year, millions of Russians received an electronic letter via the government's online portal Gosuslugi, in which they were encouraged to 'show gratitude' by donating to help veterans. Doing so would be a 'sign of respect and a recognition of those who secured our future', according to the patriotically charged missive.

This initiative, launched by the Memory of Generations Foundation with support from Sberbank, is just one of the innumerable projects, concerts, flash mobs, competitions, film screenings, stage performances, school sports days, parades and even online games being organised across Russia to mark the 80th anniversary of Victory Day on 9 May, the date on which Russia celebrates the Soviet Union's triumph over Nazi Germany — the latter's unconditional surrender having been signed late in the evening of 8 May 1945 or early on 9 May by Moscow time.

'The war gets further and further away, but the pain in my heart grows stronger and stronger.'

For generations of Russians, 9 May was a deeply emotional date — a symbol of the terrible shared suffering and of the historic victory over Nazism. Known in Russia as the 'Great Patriotic War', the conflict claimed 27 million Soviet lives. The losses were indescribable, a mass trauma that affected every family. I too grew up conscious of its significance. I remember how, every 9 May, we would visit my grandfather. A humble driver during the war, he survived and returned home in 1945. That's all I know — because he was unable to talk about his experiences. I just recall how he always cried on that day every year, and how his hands shook when he silently raised his obligatory glass of vodka in a toast to his fallen comrades. In the words of an old Soviet song that most Russians

still know by heart, Victory Day is a 'holiday with tears in the eyes.'

80 years on, the wound that the Great Patriotic War inflicted on Russia has still not healed. As one Russian poet wrote, 'The war gets further and further away, but the pain in my heart grows stronger and stronger.' In recent years, I have, however, watched with increasing concern as this day of remembrance has changed, becoming increasingly politicised, stage-managed in the media, ideologically charged and reshaped via state propaganda. Instead of healing, the wound is thus being rent open. Instead of being a day of mourning, 9 May has become a demonstration of power, an occasion for reinforcing loyalty — collective remembrance has turned into a highly state-orchestrated act of military fetishism.

A gradual militarisation

A case in point is the Immortal Regiment, which started out as a grassroots movement initiated in 2012 by a local journalist in the Siberian city of Tomsk. Back then, it was a silent, dignified event devoid of sloganeering, in which citizens took to the streets bearing portraits of relatives who fought in the war. It was about family histories, about a collective chronicling of pain. The idea quickly gained in popularity. By 2015, Immortal Regiment peace marches were attracting around 12 million Russians across various cities. This success, though, led to them being taken over by the regime.

Today, the state organises the 'Immortal Regiment of Russia' — with pathos, stage performances and central marching routes. The original project is barely recognisable. Many people no longer even know which movement they are following. Instead of mourning and gratitude, national strength and fighting spirit now dominate.

The pictures of grandfathers and great-grandfathers have been joined by images of Stalin and Lenin and, more recently, of soldiers killed in the war against Ukraine, thus conflating the heroes of 1945 with the 'defenders of 2022'. School events organised by the ruling United Russia party feature the motto 'Our grandfathers were victorious — we will be too!' Stickers bearing slogans such as 'To Berlin!' can be seen on car bumpers and even on pushchairs. The message is clear: Russia is fighting fascism once more — only this time, it's in Ukraine.

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This day of remembrance now positively drips with militarism and features an ideological fervour that, at times, expresses itself in bizarre ways. In the maternity clinic of Kemerovo in

Siberia, for instance, babies born on 9 May were photographed dressed in tiny military uniforms complete with red stars on their caps — 'Patriotism from the cradle' ran the approving headline in *Komsomolskaya*

Pravda. In a school in the Nizhny Novgorod region, pupils put on a 'Concert for the Immortal Regiment', but instead of a human audience, the hall contained only portraits of fallen soldiers. Heart-warming and moving, the organisers called it. In Vladivostok, primary school children, clad in uniforms representing various branches of the military, took part in a parade that bore the motto 'grandchildren of victory', as the regional governor reported with pride on his Telegram channel.

For decades, Victory Day was one of the few symbols around which a deeply divided country could come together. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the triumph over Nazi Germany was one of the last remaining reference points with which people in the new Russia could still identify. But by 1995, when the tradition of military parades was reinstated, we were already seeing signs of the gradual militarisation of this day of remembrance. From 2012 on, it also became increasingly politicised as the Kremlin pursued a distinctly right-wing conservative course.

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Today, the original meaning of the 9 May commemorations risks being lost. The motto 'Never again!', with which generations of Soviet citizens grew up, has been replaced by 'We can do it again!' As one Russian journalist recently wrote, 'What was the most important and sacred national holiday for Russians has become a day of shame.' The Kremlin has appropriated the day for its own ends — and stripped it of its popular character. Yet paradoxically, doing so has also damaged its last remaining unifying symbol; many Russians are sick of the ubiquitous war narrative. They long for a Victory Day that commemorates peace rather than celebrating war on new fronts. The tone in Russian social media is increasingly critical. One comment on a 'patriotic' initiative sums up the feeling: 'When will they finally understand that those who fought 80 years ago fought so that no one would have to wear a military uniform ever again?!' It's a question that chimes with me too,

resonating more than any parade.

According to official figures, only around 7 000 veterans of the Great Patriotic War are still alive today. They too are increasingly being instrumentalised, starring as extras at events or being replaced by young men whose medals were earned not in the fight against Hitler but in the so-called ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine — the regime thereby adding the final touch to its new iconography of remembrance. All this, though, risks turning Russia’s most important national holiday into a hollow gesture, one that is loud, overblown and deeply devalued.

There is one other 9 May tradition: a minute’s silence to remember the fallen. Television and radio stations preface it with the words ‘No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten.’ For 60 seconds, you just hear a pulse or see the flame flickering at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier beneath the Kremlin Wall. In our family, it was traditional to stand up in order to remember the victims. Last year, I realised I’d forgotten to observe this minute’s silence. Perhaps I was subconsciously breaking with a ritual that is no longer mine — because it has become part of someone else’s show.



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