

looking
back

on commemorative culture and the politics of history in Eastern Europe, and the history of cinema in Russia and the Soviet Union.

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

 RUSSIAN SOCIETY'S CONTRADICTIONARY PERCEPTIONS
 OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORY

analysis

Sofia Chuikina

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 60th 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 websites¹ containing publications and forums devoted to the anniversary as well as 35 essays written by sociology students at Kazan University at my

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

analysis

request, describing their impressions of Victory Day.

ON THE 'SIGNIFICANCE'
OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY

In the debates about the 60th 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*). 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* or *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 60th 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

analysis

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 60th anniversary of the victory.

Photo: Ann-Kathrin Mätzold.

analysis

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.² 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-

² 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).

analysis

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 60th 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

analysis

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 60th 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 60th 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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sofia Chuikina holds a PhD in sociology. She works at the Centre for Independent Social Research (St. Petersburg) and is a Visiting Lecturer at Kazan State University. Her research interests include urban sociology and the sociology of memory.

*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