

The Immortal Regiment: the pride and prejudice of Russia

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Theme

The March of the Immortal Regiment has been celebrated each year since 2012 in hundreds of Russian cities and many others beyond Russia.

Summary

The March of the Immortal Regime is a *performance*, a massive parade that has been celebrated in major cities both inside and outside Russia every 9 May (Victory Day, the Russian equivalent of VE day, which is 8 May in other countries) since 2012. The participants carry placards with black and white photographs of women and men who died or were wounded in the Second World War. The photographs are accompanied by flowers, Russian flags and even the old red Soviet flag with the hammer and sickle. In the front line of the procession a group of people carry an enormous banner with the following words: *Bessmertniy Polk* ('The Immortal Regiment').

The Immortal Regiment is one of the many tools that the Kremlin uses to disseminate its vision and interpretation of the Second World War. The march represents the incarnation of the political use of history by the government elite as a tool of political argumentation, an attempt to impose a particular historical interpretation of the war.

The main aim of this paper is to: (1) analyse the narratives and messages used to shape the Immortal Regiment; and (2) define its principle political objectives and functions in Russia, the ex-Republics of the USSR and in the Western countries.

In Russia the March's principal political objectives are: (1) to reinvent the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War (the name by which The Second World War is known to the Russians); (2) to redefine Russia's national identity in the post-Imperial and post-Soviet era; and (3) to promote national unity by invoking patriotism, great-power status for Russia and national pride.

In the former Republics of the USSR, the March is the Kremlin's response to their disconnection from Russia and a tool to strengthen the *Russky Mir* ('the Russian world'). In Ukraine it plays a particular role as the people's preparation for war and to justify the 'fight against fascism', the annexation of Crimea and Russian support for the rebels in Donbas.

In the West, the Immortal Regiment reflects the attempt of the Kremlin to monopolise the victory over fascism and to present itself as a great power and guardian of international order.

Analysis

(1) The main features of the March of the Immortal Regiment: from a citizen's initiative to a quasi-religious cult

In 2012, in the city of Tomsk in Siberia, three friends who were journalists –Igor Dmitriyev, Sergey Lapenkov and Sergei Kolotovkin– organised the first March of the Immortal Regiment. Their motives were neither commercial nor political but rather ‘the preservation of the personal memory of each family of the generation affected by the war’. The idea caught on. News of the March spread throughout Tomsk and the journalists began receiving calls from all over Russia from people expressing interest in participating and in organising their own versions of the event. The following year, in 2013, the Immortal Regiments marched in 120 Russian cities and in 2014 they paraded through 500. In 2018 the March was organised in more than 1,000 Russian cities.

At the beginning of 2015 the founders began to lose control over the annual March due to Nikolai Zemtsov, a Communist Party deputy in the Moscow Assembly. Zemtsov forged links with political movements associated with President Vladimir Putin and, subsequently, the Kremlin took over the March, appropriating it.¹ This ‘poster patriotism’ extended further with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially in 2015 when Vladimir Putin began to participate in the Moscow Immortal Regiment, carrying a placard with a picture of his father, the war veteran Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin.

Currently, the March of the Immortal Regiment in Russia is a state event which complements the military parade celebrated on the same day. In his address on 9 May 2018 Vladimir Putin claimed that ‘the ninth of May unites the generations through a history of courage. Each family has its own heroes, who live on in our hearts. They are with us here in the ranks of the Immortal Regiment’.² This ‘history of courage’ has become a tradition worldwide, in cities in more than 80 countries including Spain, the US, the UK, Germany, France, Israel, Argentina, Serbia, Ukraine, Vietnam, the Republic of the Congo, South Korea, Canada, Cambodia and Austria.

It is impossible to understand the reach of the influence of the Immortal Regiment without understanding the significance for the Russians of the Great Patriotic War and the celebration of Victory Day.

(2) The unifying narrative and the messages upon which the March of the Immortal Regiment is based

Any form of communication takes place within a context that can be immediate or broader in a cultural, geographic, social and historical sense. All communication has three basic elements: (1) the sender or emitter; (2) the message; and (3) the recipient. The emitter and the recipient must have a common code and share a common context;

¹ Peter Hobson (2016), ‘How Russian Authorities Hijacked a WWII Remembrance Movement’, The Moscow Times, 6/V/2016, <http://old.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/how-russian-authorities-hijacked-a-wwii-remembrance-movement/567938.html>.

² ‘Great Putin’s Speech at Victory Day Parade 2018 in Moscow, Russia’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsRnPKK7zQ4>.

without this there can be no communication. The emitter uses the message to express emotion, while the recipient decodes the message. The message is transmitted/received through different channels to fulfil its prime function, which is referential. The message is typically transmitted through language, visual and/or audio channels (note: this paper's analysis is based on the videos of the Immortal Regiment whose references are noted at the end).

(2.1) The context

The physical and temporal context of the Immortal Regiment is framed by Victory Day. There are now 'performances' in Russia, in the ex-Soviet Republics and in many Western cities. In his address on 9 May 2005 Vladimir Putin said:

'Victory Day is the dearest, the most emotional and the most inclusive holiday in our country. For the people of the former Soviet Union, it will forever remain a day of the people's great heroic deed, and for the countries of Europe and the entire planet – the day on which the world was saved.'³

The organisation of the Immortal Regiment is associated with the Victory Day celebration and its military parade, providing a link between the people and the army. The simultaneous 'performances' of the March in many places create a nexus between thousands of people at the same time. It does not matter where they are: it is a spiritual connection. Putin's presence in the military parade (as an observer) and in the March of the Immortal Regiment (as a participant) reinforces his masculine image as an autocratic ruler and a man of the people. But the most important context is historical.

After the collapse of the USSR, all the old Soviet Republics faced the problem of reconstructing their national identities within new geographic borders and symbolic limits, and of adapting established narratives from their various collective pasts in a new political context. In the case of the Russian Federation, the task has been complicated by many factors, but especially by its imperial outlook. Given this difficult situation, and in the absence of a grand commonly accepted narrative, the memory of the Great Patriotic War has shown itself to be the most 'politically useful' narrative of the Russian past for the national construction agenda because it enjoys a high level of social acceptance and only rarely has it been the object of criticism. Practically all Russian families suffered from the war and the entire country is familiar with the war's iconography from Soviet cinema and television. Since the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Russia's participation in the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the stories of the Great Patriotic War have taken on a new dimension: they are now used as a marker of post-Soviet imperialist identity and they have been closely associated with pro-Putin 'patriotic' attitudes. Both heroism and suffering –the central theme of the war narratives– have been overshadowed by another feature: the pride in a glorious past that raises national self-esteem in the present.

³ BBC (2005), 'Full text of Putin VE Day Speech, May 9, 2005', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4528999.stm>.

(2.2) The emitters (the message senders)

Each person holding a banner with a photograph of a family member is an emitter, or sender, of the message. Their primary reason for forming part of the March is the wish to commemorate the loss of their loved ones and all those who took part in the war. Vladimir Putin is a very special emitter, although he cultivates the image of being one among thousands. The leading message sender is the March's organiser, that is, the organisations close to the Russian government represented by its President.

(2.3) The message

The prime channel transmitting the message is the 'performance' itself as a spectacle. The 'performance' is an intentional reincarnation of 'sentimental memory', both personal and collective. The central players of the representation are the war veterans and their families. However, the essence of the message is not the presence of living women and men taking part in the March but rather the absence of the dead whose faces appear on placards and banners. The secondary channels of transmission are the media: newspapers, television, radio and social networks.

(2.4) The recipients

The recipients of the message both inside and outside Russia decode three principal meanings: (1) it is a commemoration, a homage to millions of Soviet victims of the Great Patriotic War; (2) it is a promise to always follow the example of those remembered; and (3) the March is a nationalist affirmation for Russians, although the message is also aimed, perhaps primarily, at foreigners.

(3) The main functions and objectives of the March in Russia

(3.1) The main functions of the March in Russia

The March of the Immortal Regiment is part of an annual complex of rituals in which Vladimir Putin participates personally in military parades, meets veterans, visits churches associated with the war and tells stories of the sufferings of his own family during the siege of Leningrad. These rituals serve multiple purposes: (1) they call to mind the Great Patriotic War and Victory Day; (2) they provide a moral tale of suffering and redemption and exemplify a foundational myth for post-Soviet Russia; (3) they conflate the myth of victory with the myth of saving Europe; (4) they create a Putin personality cult through his deep connection and identification with victory, exalting him as the defender, and even the saviour, of the homeland; (5) they reinforce internal unity; (6) they support a revived military ethic; and (7) they teach a 'Lesson of Memory' (*urok pamiati*).

References to the Second World War in Russia today –especially those that are a 'performance' like the Immortal Regiment– appeal to an 'iconography' of the Great Patriotic War as a paradigm of both suffering and victory. It is an icon because it is perceived visually and through emotion, not reason. The March reflects the enormous number of Soviet dead –more than 25 million– with the object of highlighting the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War and of claiming for Russia the leading role in fighting fascism. The idea is to 'nationalise' the victory for the Kremlin –Russia had the largest number of deaths and therefore defeated fascism singlehandedly– and to

‘personalise’ the victory in Vladimir Putin. The Russian President’s personal participation in the March –as an obedient son and as national leader– is not only in this way linked to myth but his participation also helps to keep it alive. As a good son, he listens to his elders, sympathises with their loss and promises to keep their memory alive. He is also the son who remembers the war in a personal way by telling his family’s story. This identification of the person and the nation with the celebration and the victory generates an ‘iconic’ character for the government of President Putin and for Russia itself. Representing the war as both a personal and sacred matter, Vladimir Putin has created a myth and a ritual which raises him up personally, uniting himself to Russia (at least rhetorically) and revealing himself as a natural hero, a warrior who is personally associated with the defence of the nation. Putin is therefore at once a populist and an autocrat. He has the glamour of the present but he is also a hero from the past. He can now be associated in the popular imagination with the victories of Russia’s greatest hour, while ignoring as much as possible the country’s failures of Russia during the war and its more morally ambiguous moments.

As with many nationalistic and patriotic rituals, the Immortal Regiment also has an educational function. Putin’s participation in the procession is a way of renewing the practice known as the ‘Lesson of Memory’ (*urok pamiati*). This was common during Soviet times when students would meet war veterans to record their experiences and collectively grieve. The object of these lessons is to prompt teachers and pupils to participate in a committed emotional ritual to see the war as a moment of moral victory. The ‘lessons of memory’ teach not only pride in one’s country but also respect for veterans, empathy for the suffering of others, the subordination of individual needs and interests to the common good, and the fear of anarchy and disunity.

(3.2) The political objectives of the Immortal Regiment in Russia

The primary political objectives of the Immortal Regiment in Russia are: (1) to reinvent the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War; (2) to redefine Russian national identity in the post-imperial, post-Soviet era; and (3) to promote national unity invoking patriotism, great power status for Russia and national pride.

By shifting public attention from historiography –archives, history books and memoirs– to the incarnation of memory –the ‘performance’– the Kremlin has generated the effect that ‘memory is occurring’. The ‘performance’ highlights the emotional part of the historical event and omits the ‘disagreeable parts’ of real history, including Stalinism, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, the Katyn tragedy and the national sentiment of the countries that formed part of the Soviet Union.

One of the most important objectives of the Immortal Regiment is to reflect the Kremlin’s idea of the Russian nation.

The Anglo-Irish statesman and conservative philosopher Edmund Burke (1730-1797) summed up the idea of a nation as an association not only of the living but also of the

living, the dead and those yet to be born.⁴ The March of the Immortal Regiment perfectly reflects this definition –the living carrying photographs of the dead– along with the promise that their sacrifices will never be forgotten in the process of nation-building.

(4) The main functions and primary objectives of the Immortal Regiment outside Russia

Commemoration is the main object of the March, both in the former Soviet republics and in Western countries. The theme of heroism and mass suffering as the ‘enormous price’ paid for the victory takes centre stage in the canon of the commemoration. Nevertheless, the political objectives are different in places beyond Russia.

(5) The objectives of the Immortal Regiment in the former Soviet republics

(5.1) *The context*

For most of countries that emerged from Soviet imperialism 27 years ago, independence from Moscow generated a legacy of jumbled ideas about their common history. From the Baltics to the Balkans there is a story of collaboration and betrayal, resistance and subjugation. A single army is seen as the liberator, conqueror and occupier, depending on the identity of the onlooker. The former Soviet republics have externalised communism as a foreign regime imposed on their nations from outside with the aim of mobilising their populations around the project of ‘returning to Europe’. These countries have an explicitly anti-communist and anti-Soviet stance in their versions of the Second World War. The rejection of the destructive Soviet regime is the cornerstone of the construction of national identity for these newly independent states. What the Kremlin celebrates as an indisputable victory over fascism they lament as the beginning of Russian occupation. Despite this, however, there is a significant Russian population, or one whose first language is Russian –some 25 million people– now living in the new independent states. Many of them support the Immortal Regiment out of nostalgia for the USSR and the desire to render homage to their loved ones. In this context, it is relatively easy for the Kremlin to exploit Soviet myths and historical stereotypes.

Putin’s addresses on Victory Day almost always contain contradictory references to the participation of other countries in the Soviet fight against fascism. Sometimes the victory is presented as a common political and historical legacy of the post-Soviet countries. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the victory in 2005, Putin spoke of the sacrifices made by ‘all the peoples and republics of the Soviet Union’ and concluded that ‘9 May is a sacred day for all nations in the Commonwealth of Independent States’.⁵

But another narrative focuses primarily upon the Russian contribution –different from that of other peoples of the USSR– in a dichotomy which pits the good Russians against the fascists.

⁴ ‘[Society] is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’. See Edmund Burke (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, Vol. 3, p. 359, 1999 edition.

⁵ See note 4 above.

(5.2) *The objectives*

In the former Soviet republics the main object of the March of the Immortal Regiment is to strengthen *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian world) and to revive the spirit of unity among Russians and all those who feel 'ex-Soviet' and currently live in the independent States. According to *Fond Russkiy Mir*, almost anyone can be a member of *Russkiy Mir*.

'*Russkiy Mir* is not only those of the Russian race, not only our compatriots in the former Russian republics and immigrants in foreign countries and their descendants. It is also the citizens who speak Russian, who study and teach it, those who are sincerely interested in Russia and who are concerned for its future.'⁶

This concept of *Russkiy Mir* aims to appeal to historical unity but also to confuse and create an artificial rift between ethnic Russians and others, thereby interfering in the internal affairs of the independent states. But more than anything else, in the old Soviet Republics the Immortal Regiment represents the Kremlin's response to their disconnection from Russia.

The foundational myth of the Soviet Union as a Bolshevik state was the Russian Revolution of 1917. The founding myth of the USSR as a superpower capable of competing with the US during the Cold War and maintaining two empires –one internal, roughly coinciding with the frontiers of the Tsarist Empire, and another external, including the satellite countries of the Warsaw Pact– was victory in the Second World War. The fact that the Kremlin identifies the Russia of today with the USSR through its victory in the Second World War is not just a coincidence. It reflects the intention to lend continuity not to communist ideology but rather to the notion of Empire.

(5.3) *The March of the Immortal Regiment in Ukraine*

The March of the Immortal Regiment in Ukraine is an extreme example of the political use of history. It reveals that remembering the Great Patriotic War has not only become a tool for the consolidation of Russian national identity but also a way of preparing the people for war and to justify 'the fight against fascism', the annexation of Crimea and Russian support for the rebels in Donbas. In the Ukrainian context, history has been turned into a convenient tool in the information war, wielded to legitimate the Kremlin's actions and to discredit the Ukrainian authorities. The March in the Ukraine, more than anywhere else, is a symbol of victory over fascism. Its aim is to strengthen the Kremlin's view of the Ukrainian conflict and to encourage all those fighting against the 'fascist government' of Kiev.

⁶ *Russkiy Mir*, <https://www.russkiymir.ru/languages/spain/index.htm>.

(6) Objectives of the March of the Immortal Regiment in Western countries

(6.1) *The context*

The West and the USSR/Russia have never had a common narrative about the Second World War. The differences between the two stories have deepened with the Russian interpretation of the Ukrainian conflict.

In all his Victory Day speeches Putin systematically refers to the cooperation of the Western Allies –the US, the UK and France– during the Second World War only in relation to contemporary problems in Europe and the world. In 2007 Putin emphasised a ‘common responsibility and an egalitarian association’ in international relations as a strategy to face the new threats caused by ‘the same disdain for human life, the same claims of absolute exclusivity’ that have their roots in the fascist ideas of the 20th century.

(6.2) *The objectives*

In the Western countries the Immortal Regiment reflects the Kremlin’s attempt to monopolise the victory over fascism and to present itself as a great power. The logic here is that Russia is the country that defeated Hitler’s Germany and liberated Europe from the Nazis, winning for itself the moral right to be the guardian of international order. For Russia, the Soviet version of the Second World War is the cornerstone of its prestige and of its claim to deserve great-power status in the world.

The March of the Immortal Regiment in Western cities aims to symbolise the old alliance and the idea of combating evil, regardless of its partners’ ideology. Its main political object is to bring together a similar alliance to fight another common enemy: jihadist Islamism.

(6.3) *The Immortal Regiment in Spain*

In Spain, and in Madrid, during the last two years some 500 people have participated in the ‘performance’. In the Spanish case, victory over fascism is specific: it is an invocation of the Civil War and the defeat of the Blue Division (the 40,000 Spanish volunteers sent by the Franco regime to fight with the Nazis against the Soviets). The participants have been both citizens of Russian origin and Spaniards with family members who died in the Spanish Civil War.

Conclusions

Given the central function of the war myth in the construction of the post-Soviet Russian nation and its self-perception as a great power with geopolitical ambitions in Europe and in the world, it is easy to explain its resistance to historical revisionism, especially with respect to the role of the USSR in the Second World War. While the memory of the war serves as an important source of legitimacy for Russian foreign policy, the Immortal Regiments will continue to march through the streets of cities both in Russia and beyond.