

Jacob Lassin

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Iremember.ru, Oral Histories, and Myth of World War II in Russian Cyberspace

While World War II ended over 65 years ago it is still an event often looked to with pride in Russia and the former Soviet Union due to the immense loss of life and destruction of property experienced by the Soviet population and their resilience to defeat Germany and fascism. This has been the classic story told to generations of Soviet and now Russian citizens and acts as one of the unifying events for all Russians. In order to mark the profundity and centrality of this event, Soviet authorities poured a great deal of resources into commemorating the war in all corners of the country, from the massive monuments marking key battles and eternal flames to small displays within schools, there was no escaping reminders of the great sacrifices and victory of the Soviet Union in World War II.

In contemporary, post-Soviet Russia this narrative of World War II is still touted as one of the key, uniting events after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Indeed, in a state no longer guided by the Communist Party, there is no longer any ideological reason to commemorate May Day or the October Revolution on a grand scale. Under the old system, it was these days that along with Victory Day were met with a sense of solemnity and jubilation, a moment to reflect on the past, remember what events united Soviet citizens and finally to celebrate what it meant to be Soviet. In the new Russian Federation, all of these functions fall on Victory Day, May 9, as a time of mass celebration and remembrance and identity.

The celebration of Victory Day focuses around the Soviet myth of the World War II. In this sense I mean myth as Peter Burke does,

not in the positivist sense of 'inaccurate history' but in the richer, more positive sense of a story with symbolic meaning made up of stereotyped incidents and involving characters who are larger than life, whether they are heroes or villains (103-104).

World War II certainly took on immense symbolic meaning in the Soviet Union and now in the Russian Federation. This myth largely was forged during the late 1960s to the early 1980s in the Soviet Union, a period known now as Stagnation in the West. It was during this period that the most recognized symbols of the war became solidified in the collective consciousness of the Soviet population. These include everything from knowing that 20 million Soviets perished during the war and the Soviet flag being raised above the Reichstag to the heroic exploits of partisan fighters in the Belarusian forest, and the constancy of Leningraders surviving the 900-day blockade by the Nazis. Even the name that Russians give to the war, the Great Patriotic War is meant to connect it with Russia's past military glories. The defeat of Napoleon is known as the Patriotic War in Russia. All of these watchwords and events work together to allow the war myth to transcend everyday reality and become something greater, a national struggle that binds all Russian citizens together, giving them insight into their past glories and sacrifices.

Thus, the transition of the Great Patriotic War from event to myth has endowed the narrative with a certain sacred character. In his book *Telling October: Memory and Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Frederick Corney notes the "foundation myths are only successful insofar as they are able to implicate the individual in the tale" (1). In this respect the myth of the Great Patriotic War has been wildly successful, as people have dutifully taken part in moments of silence, marched in parades, read war novels, placed flowers at eternal flames, taken wedding

photos at monuments, connecting their personal and familial memories with the overarching collective one.

Much of this success in creating a unified, succinct version of the war narrative is attributable to the hierarchical social structure of the Soviet Union in which top-down decrees and the party-line were accepted, at least publicly, without much incident. As Roger Bastide writes:

It is not the group as such that explains the collective memory; rather, it is the structure of the group that provides the frameworks of the collective memory, which is no longer defined as collective consciousness but rather as a system of interrelating memories (Bastide qtd. in Wachtel 215).

Thus, in an authoritarian society like the Soviet Union and the current superpresidential administration of the Russian Federation, where the state has a monopoly on discourse, it becomes quite easy to subsume the strong personal memories of the war, which persist to this day within the greater “official” narrative and to control what Alon Confino calls “vehicles of memory,” which include everything from movies and books to speeches and monuments, and allow particular memory to be passed from generation to generation (1386).

The Putin/Medvedev regime understands the power and importance of Victory Day and has worked to milk it for all of the political capital it can afford. As a result, Victory Day celebrations are the largest and most coordinated that they have ever been with massive parades and outdoor festivities in Moscow and other large cities throughout the Russian Federation. Television coverage on state-owned channels (which are most of them) involve 24-hour coverage related to the War including classic Soviet films about the war, documentary series and

of course official speeches from the Kremlin thanking the veterans for securing the future of the Russian people and freeing them from the yoke of fascism.

Moreover, because of the powerful resonance of the “canonical” telling of the war myth from Soviet times there is great effort taken by the current regime to preserve this version of events and to stamp out any attempts to infringe upon the fundamentals of the inherited war myth. The regime has gone to great lengths to do this including setting up a commission to fight historical revisionism and issuing statements criticizing the OSCE’s position equating Stalinism with Nazism.

However, the Russia is quite a different place now than it was under the Soviet Union. The intellectual openness brought in by *perestroika* in the late 1980s has exposed new views to some of the most protected aspects of the war myth during Stagnation. Furthermore, the advent of the Internet, its democratic nature which allows anyone to post whatever they wish, and its popularity with the youth has forced the Putin/Medvedev regime to adapt the war myth to be compatible with new media, in the process fundamentally shifting how it is perceived by the public.

In this research I focus specifically on one example of the Russian government’s tactics in moving the war myth onto the Internet, Iremember.ru. Iremember.ru is a website which includes hundreds of oral history interviews with veterans of the war from all different types of service during the war along with other articles that speak about certain technical aspects of the war and even criticisms of how certain books and movies portray the war. Most importantly, the site receives its funding from *Rospechat*, the Russian state ministry of publishing.

In my thesis I argue that state-sponsored websites negotiate between the canonical narrative of the war inherited from the Soviet era and the new media and cultural environment of

post-Soviet Russia. In particular, I examine various discourses that find their way into personal memories of the interviewees; the strategies of making the sites appealing to international audiences; and the participatory nature of the internet which facilitates public discussion of contentious issues.

In the final analysis, however, Iremember.ru, and other similar sites attempt to erase the revisions of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War of the late 1980s and 1990s and to use this narrative to bolster the authority of the Russian state (“Putin's strong hand”) and, at least partially, to rehabilitate the Soviet identity as a building block of the highly unstable new Russian identity.

The sheer amount of information on Iremember.ru is quite impressive and the act of collecting so many oral histories from veterans from such varied war time experiences is commendable in light of the reality of how quickly this generation is disappearing. Probably the most interesting aspect of these oral histories is their personal candor. The veterans are open to addressing almost all aspects of the war including their lives before and after the fighting and their opinions on Stalin and the party leadership. These details may seem mundane to a Western observer, but in the context of the Russian telling of the war this is not the norm. Rather, Soviet citizens grew up with a telling of the war on a macro-scale, as sacrifice of the Soviet people collectively led by the Communist Party and, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the time period, Comrade Stalin.

What, then, explains this shift in how the war myth is presented? One reason comes from the very medium through which one receives Iremember.ru. As scholars Elena Trubina and Jussi Lassila have observed, the Internet is a transnational medium, people from all over the globe can access this information. They have written that the memory of the war must become

“cosmopolitan” and the accounts from the war need to converge to some extent. Thus in order to attract international readership and support, the Russian government has to provide something palatable and relatable so as not to alienate transnational readers. This also helps to explain why political commissars and secret police officer because of their unpopular perception globally, do not have their own delineated sections on the site’s menu, despite their important role in the Soviet war effort. Personal recollections of the war are quite familiar and popular in the West and are readily accepted by non-Russian audiences as legitimate sources of information from the war.

Another reason to consider is the tumultuous couple decades that Russia has weathered from *perestroika* to the present. During the 1980s and 1990s nothing was sacred and reams and reams of information came out showing the untruths and negative aspects of all that Soviet trusted and believed in. Much of Putin’s popularity indeed derives from his work to restore the tarnished image of these cherished Soviet beliefs and equate his rule with the stability which reigned during the height of these national myths, chief among them the myth of the Great Patriotic War.

Reading the oral histories, one does find them to be surprisingly open and honest. The site’s editors have prepared a rather exhaustive list of questions which delve into many of the everyday aspects of fighting the war, as well as the technical. However, despite all of their openness and honesty, the answers rarely greatly transgress the fundamentals tropes of the “canonical” war myth. When speaking of their pre-war lives, most speak of idyllic childhoods on collective farms. One veteran, Vasilii Andreev mentions how he just picked up his uncle’s accordion and learned peasant songs and dances by ear. These anecdotes could have been lifted

directly from some Soviet war films and reflect the “official” story which spoke of a peaceful pre-war Soviet life, irretrievably lost after the German invasion.

Similarly, the veterans’ comments concerning Stalin are not direct attacks on the former leader, but rather sarcastic comments or ambiguous statements. One woman for example mentions her father sardonically referring to the paltry food they had left as “Stalin’s bacon” and others tactfully state that he did many positive and negative things, but do not really get beyond that. While it is progressive in Russian terms to hear personal opinions of Stalin in a state-sanctioned forum, it is clear that the interviewers mitigate the extent of what the veterans say on this topic and the veterans themselves consciously limit what they say about Stalin. For all of the supposed openness within the narrative with individual accounts, there is still a great deal of conforming to the Soviet war myth from the state funded site editors.

One, unique section of the site also demonstrates the fact that Iremember.ru ultimately does not transcend the Soviet war myth at all and instead supports the same narrative inherited from Stagnation. This is the “Wall of Shame” section on the site. On “Wall of Shame” there are articles which criticize books and films which challenge certain assumptions or dare to say that the Germans were more organized during the war or had superior technology. The most fascinating aspect of this section is the free for all occurring in the comments section. Here, users of the site can hide in anonymity behind a username and castigate the author of the book crudely and harshly. Some comments concerning a book comparing German and Soviet ground attack aircraft state that the author of the book was in love with the Luftwaffe at first sight and that the author loves to praise the valiant Luftwaffe, throwing out his argument wholesale due to its audacity to perform true historical research. Meanwhile, commentators who ask for textual proof of the author’s misinterpretation of facts receive negative votes and no actual answers. This

section of Iremember.ru offers nothing palatable to a transnational audience, does not attempt to deal with the facts released to the Russian population in the 1980s and 1990s, and as a result is only present in Russian, so as to minimize potential for the global audience to see it.

While Iremember.ru does to some extent allow for individual memories to emerge and contradicting voices to be heard, in the end they mostly conform to a Soviet telling of the war myth. The state-sponsored site, attempts to offer a place for negotiating contentious issues, appealing to a transnational audience and fostering discussion on the events of the war and their meaning. However, the reality of the veterans' answers and the inclusion of a section like "Wall of Shame" illustrates that in fact the site is focused on reversing revisions of the telling of the Great Patriotic War of the 1980s and 1990s and to reinvigorate a key aspect of Soviet identity to be used for the still ill-defined Russian identity.

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