

In the Long Shadow of War: The Second World War and the Soviet and Post-Soviet World

“I would rather hang myself [than] start erecting memorials to those butchers,” exclaimed a Belarussian veteran of World War II upon learning that his government had finally reached an agreement with Germany to bury the remains of fallen German soldiers, more than half a century after the end of the war. Others shrugged with disbelief at the sight of a color catalogue with pictures of clean and orderly German military cemeteries in other countries, bedecked with flowers. This was in rather stark contrast to the often-desecrated single German military cemetery in Belarus arranged under the aegis of the United Nations during the Gorbachev era.¹ Fifty-five years have passed, but the wounds of a four-year war with Nazi Germany have yet to heal. Meanwhile, less than a decade after the disintegration of the Soviet polity, the legacy and memory of the fifty-year Cold War are rapidly fading away. Whereas veterans of World War II are reluctant to forget or forgive the enemy they defeated, veterans of the Cold War are busily trying to co-opt or partially borrow the ideology and institutions of the very enemy that brought down their life’s work and cherished beliefs. The key to this discrepancy is the distinct nature and enduring legacy of World War II, an unprecedented cataclysm that affected practically every individual, family, and community in the former Soviet Union.

This, however, is far from the consensual view. Warren Kimball’s call to historians to reinstate the war to its deserved pedestal is both timely and on the mark. Gaps between the perceptions of foreign and native scholars should not come as a surprise. Still, few cases can match that of the American students of Soviet history and World War II. Whereas Soviet and post-Soviet citizens, politicians, and historians have consistently placed the war at the center of their private and public worlds, American specialists seem equally willing to argue the opposite. Following the short-lived yet promising start of several fine studies of the war and the Soviet polity, both dominant schools of Soviet studies sought to marginalize the role of the war in the evolution of Soviet politics and society. For totalitarians, who had it right regarding the role of ideology and institutionalized revolution, no event, however cataclysmic, could alter the course of

1. “Belarus Comes to Grips with Burying German War Dead,” *Russia Today*, 14 July 2000.

a polity in which administration replaced politics, ideology was fixed, and society was practically an irrelevant amalgam. Social and revisionist historians who rescued society from oblivion were keen on establishing the earliest possible end for the revolution in order to save the noble socialist idea from the throws of impure Stalinism, thus leaving the war an understudied and anomalous event of little relevance to the revolutionary course or sociopolitical values.² Generational change and access to previously closed archives does not appear likely to correct these historiographical biases. To judge from present research agendas, historians of the Soviet scene are rushing to the postwar era, once more leaving the war behind as an MIA of Soviet history.

Hence, the goal of the following lines is to explore briefly some of the more fundamental changes introduced by the war and its enduring legacy in the Soviet and post-Soviet world. Unlike other countries discussed in this roundtable, only Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states experienced a total overhaul of their social, political, and economic systems, a fact that only magnifies the impact of World War II in this part of the world.

The impact of the war on the evolution of Soviet state terror has been arguably one of the most profound changes and lasting legacies in the Soviet polity. It also looms large over the relations of the Russian Federation and the new independent states. "Stalin's decision to deport entire nations had a depressing impact on me," recalled Anastas Mikoyan. "I did not understand how one can accuse entire nations with treason while they had party organizations, Communists, peasant masses, and Soviet intelligentsia! Finally, many were mobilized into the army and fought at the front. Many representatives of these peoples were awarded as Heroes of the Soviet Union! This was a deviation from the class approach to the solution of the nationality problem."³

This was no accidental choice of words by the former Soviet leader. Mikoyan's observation reflected the unsettling effect of the shift in Soviet social engineering policies in the wake of the war. Whereas during the prewar era, the regime maintained differentiation and prospective reform and rehabilitation of groups targeted as internal enemies, in the wake of the war it approached such groups as undifferentiated, unreformable, and irredeemable collectives. The result was the unprecedented deportation of entire nationalities charged with harboring sympathy for the Germans or actively collaborating with them.⁴ Hand-in-hand, state terror reached a qualitative and quantitative climax. Internal enemies were no longer differentiated based on their alleged degree of

2. For historiographical surveys that punctuate these points see Stephen Kotkin, "1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (June 1998): 384–425; and Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2000), 12–21.

3. Anastas Mikoyan, *Tak bylo: razmysbleniia o minuvshem* [The way it was: Reflections on the past] (Moscow, 1999), 514.

4. On wartime and immediate postwar deportations see Nikolai Bugai, *L. Beria – I. Stalinu: "Soglasno Vasheму ukazaniiu"* [Beria to Stalin: In accordance with your order] (Moscow, 1995); and J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937–1949* (Westport, CT, 1999).

hostility toward the revolution and the Soviet state, or the presence of family members with proper political-ideological background who could spare the entire family. Deportations that hitherto had been confined to term sentences were now converted to permanent exile. At the same time, the number of Gulag inmates reached an all-time high in the immediate aftermath of the war – over 2.5 million. Not surprisingly, deportations and incarceration were extremely lethal operations, with about a quarter of the new deportees dying in the first three years of exile. The demographic and psychological legacy of the war for Soviet Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, and other deported nationalities has been devastating and continues to fuel animosities in the former Soviet republics, with Chechnya the example immediately coming to mind. While the Russian-Chechen clash is often justifiably referred to in terms of centuries, it is the living memory of the total and brutal wartime deportation that colors the contemporary Chechen imagination. Long repressed during the Soviet era, the memory of the deportations figured more than any other event in the emergence of Chechen separatism at the twilight of the Soviet era.⁵ And in western Ukraine and the Baltic countries, the memory of mass deportations and horrific casualties among nationalist guerrillas (over 114,000 killed in clashes in western Ukraine between 1944 and 1947) – often referred to as genocides – supplements already entrenched anti-Russian sentiments.

In essence, these acts constituted severe challenges to a hitherto sacred tenet of the Soviet enterprise, according to which individuals and groups were considered as sociological constructs, prone to transformation via Soviet acculturation. Accordingly, when the Jewish minority was targeted in the aftermath of the war, the exposure of the *real* names of assimilated writers who had adopted a pseudonym and exasperation with a people who appeared immune to sovietization, were at the core of the campaign. Racial characterization followed, with alleged Jewish embezzlers portrayed in the press as creatures with “long, fleshy noses, puffy lips, and small, rat-like eyes.”⁶

The shift in state violence in the wake of the triumphant conclusion of the war compels students of this era to pay close attention to the unique features of totalitarian purification campaigns in general, and the Soviet view of this event in particular. Ordained as the climactic Armageddon of the revolution that would usher in the era of communism, the war was also viewed as a final cleansing of the human “weeds” who survived previous cycles of purges. There was little hope for those stigmatized as having failed to rise to the occasion.

5. Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York, 1998), 56–75; John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (New York, 1998), 40–84.

6. On the shift from the sociological to the essentialist paradigm in the study of ethnicity see Yuri Slezkine, “N. Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenetics,” *Slavic Review* 55 (Winter 1996): 855–62; and Amir Weiner, “Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism,” *American Historical Review* 104 (October 1999): 1114–55.

The above shift proved to be one of the most enduring legacies of the war, one that has survived to the present. On the one hand, it was hardly surprising that this period saw segments of the Soviet citizenry beginning to ponder the hitherto unthinkable affinity between the Soviet enterprise and the Nazi totalitarian other. The firsthand exposure to Nazi atrocities prompted even communist true believers to reflect on the guiding principles of Soviet social engineering. It was at this time that Vasilii Grossman wondered in his epic *Life and Fate*, what the difference was between the Nazi racial persecution of the Jews and Soviet persecution of the children and grandchildren of merchants, priests, and aristocrats. Indeed, such a comparison was a thorny issue that troubled the regime before and after the war. Soviet leaders, Stalin included, went out of their way to emphasize their rejection of any form of biological-racial cleansing, whether death camps or exterminatory euthanasia, which had often been enthusiastically embraced in prewar Europe and the United States. Indeed, Soviet cleansing operations were not anchored in genocidal ideology and institutions, a fact that allowed the regime to inflict the harshest punitive measures side by side with cultivating segments of their targeted enemies viewed as legitimate and prone to sovietization.

The Soviets were adamant about defending these principles and insinuating them into the international arena. Paradoxically, the principles of Soviet social engineering that reached their maxim during and after the war found their way to none other than the United Nations Genocide Treaty. In 1948, the Soviets successfully imposed their agenda on the Genocide Convention by forcing both the omission of the category of political groups from the list of collectives whose destruction constituted genocide and the simultaneous inclusion of cultural genocide side by side with physical and biological extermination.⁷ Even with the current indiscriminate campaign in Chechnya in mind, one should not dismiss offhand Russian leaders' insistence that it is not the Chechen people in toto that they are after. The legacy of wartime and postwar flirtations with racial-biological cleansing and its unqualified rejection by the international community is still a powerful deterrent against an actual attempt at total cleansing.

At the same time, the persecution of alleged collaborators persisted well into the twilight of the Soviet era, with people convicted of active collaboration with the Nazi occupiers often executed. This was in marked contrast to the rest of Europe, which following a brief period of violent revenge opted for amnesty and amnesia. The recent turmoil in France, to cite the most visible example, over the long-delayed trials of wartime collaborators who led impressive public careers after the war only underlined this difference. Indeed, the postwar purge demarcated society into those who contributed to the war effort and those who

7. Nehemia Robinson, *The Genocide Convention: Its Origins and Interpretation* (New York, 1949).

did not.⁸ The stigma of collaboration or even passivity in the struggle against the Nazis remained irremovable, as both individuals and veterans of nationalist movements in the Baltics and western Ukraine have learned since the Soviet collapse. Intriguingly, the uncompromising and brutal revenge against those who espoused at any point fascist and ethnocentric ideologies or collaborated with the Nazis, however briefly, has helped to limit the scope of rehabilitations of wartime collaborators and the appeal and legitimacy of their present-day successors in already volatile societies and regions.⁹

Wartime losses are a key to understanding both Soviet and post-Soviet conduct at home and abroad and have developed into a cult of their own. Estimates seem to increase by the day to the point of losing credibility. Between the Stalin and Khrushchev eras and the post-Soviet years, estimates of wartime fatalities increased from seven to twenty to forty million. Recently, the more subtle voices seem to settle on approximately twenty-seven million dead, including soldiers and civilians.¹⁰ This is, of course, in addition to the colossal material destruction inflicted by the Nazis and their allies. Undoubtedly, improved analytical tools and freer access to formerly classified material helped reach a more accurate estimate. Political considerations figured in every calculation. Whereas under Stalin lower estimates could be plausibly attributed to the anxiety of exposing Soviet vulnerability at the early stages of the Cold War, his successors made the best of just the opposite, quite likely for the purpose of cementing social and political cohesion, an excuse for the enduring economic hardship compared to other countries, or conveying to the latter their due gratitude for Soviet (now Russian) sacrifices. However futile such calculus was – the passage of time does more than anything else to undermine political viability – it cannot and does not alter one basic fact: no financial losses inflicted by the Cold War's arms race and no casualties suffered in the invasions to rebellious satellites (1956 and 1968), in proxy wars in the Third World, or in the botched war in Afghanistan, came remotely close in comparison to the horrific losses of World War II and their impact on the physical and psychological makeup of Soviet society. From an enduring twisted gender ratio and millions of war orphans, to labor force shortages, to life expectancy, and finally, to the intangible yet formidable sense

8. On the European approach to wartime collaboration and postwar justice see István Deák, Jan Gross, and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, 2000); and Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 82–190, for Soviet policies in their Marxist and pan-European context.

9. V. Stanley Vardys and Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, 1997), 217–18; Andrew Wilson, *Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1990s: A Minority View* (Cambridge, 1997).

10. The forty million figure is offered by V. I. Kozlov, “O liudskikh poteriakh Sovetskogo Soiuzu v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 godov” [On the human losses of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War] *Istoriia SSSR* 2 (1989). Elena Zubkova, Russia's leading historian on the postwar era, refers to the figure of 26.5–27 million dead. Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost', 1945–1953* [(Postwar Soviet society: Politics and everyday life, 1945–1953] (Moscow, 2000), 25.

of vulnerability, no other cataclysm shaped Soviet and post-Soviet politics and society as did World War II.¹¹

As noted above, the memory of the war has constantly been invoked to boost claims in the international arena. Lavrentii Beria's boast in the Nineteenth Party Congress in December 1952 that "mankind and its civilization owed their lease on life to the tremendous sacrifice and supreme exertion of the Soviet people who saved them from Nazi barbarity" is echoed by the present-day Russian academic establishment and media. Somewhat more modest than Beria, a young Russian historian reminds the peoples of the former Soviet Union that among other debts, they owe the generation of the front "their independence and very existence." Israelis, too, find themselves recently on the debtor list, at least in one of Russia's leading newspapers, *Izvestiia*. Pointing with unconcealed pride to Israel's embrace of 9 May (V-Day in the Soviet Union and several former Soviet republics) as a national holiday and the plans for the erection of a memorial for the war, the correspondent informed Russian readers that "it was only the victory of the anti-Hitlerite, anti-Fascist coalition that created favorable conditions for the establishment of a Jewish state for the Jews in the Holy Land. Had there been no victory, there would not be Israel, either."¹²

What are the implications, if any, of such self-congratulatory rhetoric (whatever its merit may be)? Israelis, with a century-old Zionist legacy and the living memory of Soviet anti-Semitism would probably shrug off such claims, if they ever hear them. Less so, the former Soviet republics, still living under the shadow of their giant neighbor, whose every mention of certain debts tends to be interpreted as a revival of centuries-old Russian imperialism. The Lithuanian parliament's recent demand from Russia for compensation for the Soviet occupations of 1940 and 1944 is a stark reminder of both the lingering scars of the war and the opposing views of this event.

Closely related to the above, and not unlike their American counterparts, contemporary Russians view World War II as the last "good war." It was about defending home, family, locality, and lifetime projects against an unambiguously devilish enemy who sought their utter annihilation. It was, simply, everything that later military adventures were not. Just as the Vietnam experience ordained a nostalgic avalanche for the crystal clear days of World War II, so too did Afghanistan (the "open, bleeding wound" in Gorbachev's words) inspire a longing for the seemingly simpler, albeit brutal, days of glory. And

11. Fifteen years after the end of the war there were barely 633 men for every 1,000 women in the cohort of 35–44 year olds. Geoffrey Hosking, *The first Socialist Society* (New York, 1997), 296. For a judicious critique of the overemphasis on the impact of the Cold War on Soviet conduct in the international arena, as opposed to the weightier impact of the war itself, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know'?" *American Historical Review* 104 (April 1999): 501–24.

12. *Pravda*, 9 October 1952; Elena Seniavskaia, *Frontovoe pokolenie, 1941–1945: istoriko-psikhologicheskoe issledovanie* [The front-line generation, 1941–1945: An Historical-Psychological Analysis] (Moscow, 1995), 93; *Izvestiia*, 20 June 2000.

when such collective memory focuses solely on the battlefield, overlooking the less appealing aspects such as the wholesale wartime deportations, there was a lot to be proud of.

Contemporaries and present-day observers continue to be in awe of the performance of the Soviet rank-and-file. Their interpretations, however, are often troublesome. One disconcerting phenomenon in recent works is the persistent attempt to “rescue common soldiers from themselves,” or rather from the Soviet world. Often compared with the ideologically motivated German soldier, the Soviet soldier is referred to as the age-old Russian *muzhik*, bereft of any ideological convictions that are dismissed as the regime’s manipulation. True, some veterans are responsible for this development in their post-Soviet recollections and memoirs in which ideological commitment or devotion to Stalin were absent in the trenches. Without dismissing the sincerity of these reflections, they come about forty years after the event and in the throes of the disintegration of an already delegitimized system.¹³ It is refreshing in this light to read other veterans and young Russian historians conveying a subtler sense of the war generation without necessarily endorsing the Stalinist value system. The frontline generation, argues Elena Seniavskaia, was mostly a Soviet product. The majority of the fighting men and women were born into the Soviet system, where they acquired their world view, language, and manner of conduct.¹⁴ Unless one is determined to portray the Soviet regime as practically impotent and the majority of the population as immune to the most intense acculturation and coercion drives in modern history, then one should also pay attention to contemporaries’ own admission that they had known no other alternative system. In the evocative words of Vladimir Shubkin, a veteran-turned-sociologist, “it was the pre-war country that entered the war. Everything in that country was taken by the people to the front. Nothing was left behind, nothing was forgotten.” This mixture of capacity for self-sacrifice, cruelty, naïve romanticism, devotion, and deeply concealed doubts that Shubkin alludes to was, in essence, the Soviet package.¹⁵ Referring to the failure of wartime religious revival to penetrate the ranks of the largest Soviet institution, the Red Army, another veteran, and not necessarily a supporter of the regime, concluded, that “ours was still the Red Army.”¹⁶ Historians should take a note.

13. See, for example, Viacheslav Kondrat’ev, “Ne tol’ko o svoem pokolenii: zametki pisatel’ia” [Not only about my own generation: A writer’s notes], *Kommunist*, no.7 (1990): 113; and idem, “Paradoksy frontovoi nostalgii” [The paradoxes of front-line Nostalgia], *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9 May 1990.

14. Seniavskaia, *Frontovoe pokolenie*, 77, 85.

15. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 September 1987, cited in Chris Ward, *Stalin’s Russia* (London, 1993), 184–85.

16. Gabriel Temkin, *My Just War: The Memoir of a Jewish Red Army Soldier in World War II* (Novato, CA, 1998), 132. On the limited religious revival during the war see Karel Berkhoff, “Was There a Religious Revival in Soviet Ukraine under the Nazi Regime,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 78 (July 2000): 536–67; Daniel Peris, “God is Now on Our Side: The Religious Revival on Unoccupied Soviet Territory during World War II,” *Kritika* 1 (Winter 2000): 97–118; and Elena Zubkova, “Mir

In the same vein, often glossed over is the fact that this was a rare occasion when the Russian military gained fame for its skilled operations and not merely for its ability to wear out its enemy by sacrificing its own enormous human fodder. Stalin's boasts in 1945–46 that the Red Army proved itself as a first-class fighting machine certainly had political motive, especially when he celebrated the rank-and-file rather than the top commanders whose popularity arose his suspicion. But it is Western military analysts who concur that following its initial defeats, the Red Army bounced back with a command that is credited as the finest of its time, the formidable *Webrmacht* included. Indeed, something to aspire to by the present-day vintage of Russian generals muddling through their second fiasco in Chechnya.¹⁷

A final observation on the role of the war in Soviet history concerns the relations between this event and the disintegration of the Soviet polity. In itself, the gap of nearly fifty years between the war and the collapse warrants caution. Moreover, the war provided the polity with a supra-class, cross-ethnic myth, a previously absent integrating theme, and folded large groups that previously had been excluded into the body politic. Hundreds of thousands of "former people," namely kulaks and their families and ordinary criminals, won redemption through their combat exploits. For these people and millions of others, the war became an autobiographical point of departure, an experience that overwhelmed earlier formative experiences such as the civil war, collectivization, and industrialization. Such a development went hand-in-hand with the denunciation and removal of key elements of the Stalinist regime such as the Cult of Personality and mass terror, the partial acknowledgment of the crisis of command economy, and the routinization of other fundamentals of the revolutionary ethos.¹⁸

Not the least, the war provided the regime with an opportunity to practice a policy that it had had difficulty implementing during the prewar years. Long before the war, under the auspices of formidable state punitive institutions and extensive legislation, Soviet society evolved into a self-policing organ; a large part of the terror was conducted in public deliberations, with citizens attaching their signatures to denunciations of their fellow citizens, and having direct access to power in exercising such acts.¹⁹ One such policy vested rural

mnenii sovetskogo cheloveka, 1945–1948 gody" [The scope of opinions of the Soviet man, 1945–48] *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 3 (1998): 34–36.

17. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 456, 483.

18. See Christopher A. P. Binns, "The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System," *MamS*, no.1 (1980): 171–72; and Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 44–45, 68–69, 148–49, 323–24, 338–48.

19. For an insightful discussion of this aspect of the Soviet polity, which Jan Gross aptly terms the "privatization of power," see his *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, 1989), 114–22. See also Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999), for a discussion of this phenomenon, especially during the Khrushchev era; and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*:

communities with the power to select individuals for deportation from the village. The community did not have the power to lift or grant a delay in the execution of the decree, but it had complete control over individual fates. Tried with limited results during the initial phase of collectivization in the early 1930s – the embittered peasants either ignored it or dragged their feet – this policy was revived in the late 1940s with the clearly expressed goal of engaging the entire population in the process of self-cleansing. When Nikita Khrushchev, then leader of the Soviet Ukrainian Republic, contemplated in early 1948 the cleansing of the collective farms of those who led an “anti-social, parasitic way of life,” he bemoaned the overly administrative manner with which Soviet power exercised policing operations. “The promulgation of a law assigning the right to pass sentences on the exile of criminal elements,” reasoned Khrushchev, “will be more useful because the mass of *kolkhozniks* [collective farmers] will participate actively in the fight against the anti-social and criminal elements, and still more, the *kolkhoz* activists will be rallied and tempered.”²⁰ Needless to say, such an initiative did not win unanimous endorsement by the peasants. Most relevant, however, was the key role of wartime experience in the assemblies’ deliberations over prospective deportees. Veterans now at the helm of local power targeted those who had remained in the villages under German occupation. Peasants who had served under the Germans and those who had no relatives in the Soviet Army figured more than any other category in lists of deportees. Nearly two decades after it was first assigned the task of cleansing itself, the rural community became fully involved in this key feature of Soviet socialization. With the help of the war it was now a Soviet community par excellence.²¹

This, however, was only one side of the war’s legacy. The final exit of the Soviet polity would come only in the late 1980s, when, following two decades of economic stagnation and creeping apathy, the authorities in Moscow voluntarily withdrew their all-Union claims and opened the door for national republics to fill the power vacuum. It would certainly be a stretch to ascribe the war with a direct role in this outcome. Wartime experience rarely, if at all, breeds pluralism and tolerance, as most European countries learned after the Great War, and the eastern front in the 1940s was not an exception. True, the war led some high-ranking officers to question the fundamentals of the system. Retired general Petr Grigorenko (Hryhorenko) sacrificed his freedom when he became

Correspondence, 1982–1985 (Minneapolis, 1992), 55–58, for an incisive commentary on the deliberative operation of Stalinist terror in comparison to the Nazi counterpart.

20. “Neizvestnaia initsiativa Khrushcheva (o podgotovke ukaza 1948 g. o vyselennii krest’ian)” [Khrushchev’s unknown initiative: On the preparation of the 1948 Decree on the Deportation of Peasants], *Otechestvennye arkhivy*, no. 2 (1993): 31–38, quotation on 36.

21. On the implementation of the decree in various localities in the Soviet Union see Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 307; Zubkova, “Mir mnenii sovetskogo cheloveka,” 33; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 320–23.

a champion of the cause of the deported Crimean Tatars. Earlier, Generals Rybal'chenko and Gorodov lost their lives for challenging in private conversations the premise of collectivized agriculture and expressing a desire for a genuine democratic system. Notably, none of the above recanted despite years of harsh interrogation.²² These, however, were isolated cases and arguments still beyond the comprehension of most contemporaries who lacked, among other things, viable channels to disseminate their discontent. Not unlike the German officers and soldiers they encountered, Soviet veterans were by and large products of the Soviet system, and one could not in good faith expect them to question the high politics and philosophical dimensions of the polity that raised them. The transformation of personal grievances into political generalizations, and the articulation of political identities and agendas outside the Soviet realm would have to wait until much later. When such developments did occur, contends Elena Zubkova, they grew out of the dismantling of physical terror after Stalin's death, and not necessarily from the ranks of veterans.²³

Still, something else was taking place in the trenches that had a profound impact on the millions of men and women in uniform. For one, the sites of the war and the initial stage of the war were a major factor. During the preceding two and a half decades, Soviet citizens were exposed to relentless propaganda that inculcated a Manichaean world view through bestial, threatening, and decaying images of the capitalist world. It was the war, however, that brought home a sense of unprecedented immediacy and even more established personal experience that for many put official claims of Soviet superiority to the test for the first time in their lives. The result was a prolonged process in which ordinary men and women witnessed a growing, tangible tension between official claims and the actual turn of events. To start with, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact baffled a populace accustomed to a decade of vilification of the archenemy-turned-ally. Astounded by the abrupt end of the media attacks on the Nazi leadership, some citizens cynically wondered out loud if "Goebbels became a Bolshevik," while others felt bewildered since "yesterday we were taught to hate fascism but today to take it for a friend."²⁴

Nor did the encounter with entrenched hostility of the local population and exposure to the higher living standard in the Baltic states on the eve of the war and in east-central European countries from 1944 on inspire trust in the regime's propaganda regarding the superiority of the Soviet system and the locals' desire to join the Soviet family. Time and again, officials were compelled to issue warnings and pleas to the servicemen not to be fooled by the glitz and

22. See Petr Grigorenko, *Memoirs* (New York, 1982). Rybal'chenko and Gorodov, along with Marshal Kulik, were surveilled by the MVD, arrested in early 1947, and executed in August 1950. Nikolai Smirnov, *Vplot' do vysshei mery* [Even to the most extreme measures] (Moscow, 1997), 179–89.

23. Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy, 1945–1964* [Society and reforms, 1945–1964] (Moscow, 1993), 23–24. For similar conclusions on the role of veterans in postwar politics and societies see Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1979).

24. Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 371.

glamour of the capitalist economies they ran over in the course of expansion. The Soviets' industrious robbery of East-Central Europe was not only compensation for the Nazi devastation of the homeland. For the individuals who participated it was also a testimony to the failure of the regime to provide basic goods that the decaying capitalist world appeared to offer in abundance.²⁵ Thus, a side effect of the expansion was a crack in the hermetic wall surrounding Soviet society, which, along with the actual economic and political crises of the outside world throughout the 1930s, helped to inculcate the belief in the superiority of socialist ideology and institutions.

To compound these problems, the territorial expansion was far from smooth. The catastrophic Winter War in Finland – with approximately a quarter million casualties in less than four months of fighting – ignited widespread skepticism over the justification and mission of the war. All of this, however, dwarfed in comparison to the rapid and total collapse at the hands of the German army. Nothing could prepare Soviet citizens for the sight of German troops strolling in the streets of their major cities within weeks of the invasion. Long taught to expect a quick war that would end in Berlin, the crushing of the Soviet forces in 1941–42 prompted many to reassess twenty-five years of Soviet power.²⁶ It would require three years of unprecedented Nazi atrocities that dwarfed anything the Soviet regime had meted out and a decisive victory to stop the corrosive effect. Yet for a system built on total commitment and belief, even such unmaterialized reflections came at a heavy price. For this reason alone, 22 June 1941 (the day the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa) remained one of the longest enduring taboos in Soviet historiography, and arguably the most contested in post-Soviet studies.²⁷

Above all, the prolonged experience of warfare created a new mode of association and a sense of the self that did not run through the socialization channels provided by the regime. The war produced an assertive Soviet individual who held tight to his hard won right to define his identity and status based on wartime exploits. Returning soldiers displayed uncompromising

25. For the problem of exposure to higher living standards and the regime's reaction to it in 1939–40 and 1944 see Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*, 45–50; Mark von Hagen, "Soviet Soldiers and Officers on the Eve of the German Invasion: Toward a Description of Social Psychology and Political Attitudes," *Soviet Union/Union Soviétique* 18, nos.1–3 (1991): 79–101; Alexander Werth, *Russia at War* (New York, 1964), 947; and Vladimir Zenzinov, *Vstrecha s Rossiei: Kak i cchem zhiout v sovetskom soiuze. Pis'ma v Krasnuu Armiiu 1939–1940* [A meeting with Russia: How and on what they live in the Soviet Union. Letters to the Red Army, 1939–40] (New York, 1944).

26. Karel Berkhoff, "Hitler's Clean Slate: Everyday life in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, 1941–1944" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1998), 46–47; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 373–74.

27. See Aleksander Nekrich, *1941, 22 iunia* (22 June 1941) (Moscow, 1965); and Vladimir Petrov, *June 22, 1941: Soviet Historians and the German Invasion* (Columbia, SC, 1968); and the recent controversy over the revisionist allegation advanced by the unscrupulous Soviet defector Viktor Rezun (alias Suvorov) that it was Stalin who was about to launch an attack on Germany, only to be pre-empted by Operation Barbarossa. Gabriel Gorodetsky, *The Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, CT, 1999); Viktor Suvorov, *Ledokol: kto nachal Vtoruiu mirovuiu voinu* [Icebreaker: Who started the Second World War] (Moscow, 1992); and Teddy J. Uldricks, "The Icebreaker Controversy: Did Stalin Plan to Attack Hitler?" *Slavic Review* 58 (Fall 1999): 626–43.

reluctance to let others – the regime included – articulate for them the defining moment of their lives. Throughout some of the most repressive years of the Stalinist era, veterans churned out memoirs and wartime diaries that often defied the official line by parading unflattering scenes of panic or desertion at the front, or celebrated comrades who found themselves in political disgrace after the war. When the authorities lashed out in response, veterans closed ranks in public and prevailed. The right to unfiltered memoirs was gained in blood argued the defiant counter-response. Tellingly, however, this right was not perceived as a step outside of the Soviet world. “The defenders of the fatherland have the moral right to share with contemporaries [their] thoughts. Besides the direct conscious use and aesthetic satisfaction, they could play a significant role in the formulation of the history of the Great Patriotic War,” argued one of these veterans in the pages of a central journal.²⁸

Front-line assertiveness pervaded even the gulag and played a major role in bringing it to a close immediately after Stalin’s death. The waves of strikes that swept the camps during the last six years of the Stalinist era were instigated and led by new inmates who built on their wartime experience and utilized their military skills for the organization of networks of clandestine groups. Former Red Army servicemen, nationalist separatist guerrillas, and Vlasovites spearheaded the wave that eventually contributed to the crumbling of the penal system. Interestingly enough, the protests within the gulag echoed those outside. Demands for improvement of the brutal regime were often articulated within an orthodox Soviet frame, challenging the authorities to live up to their proclamations of legality, and in some cases when led by communist Red Army officers, fought what they perceived to be an “anti-Soviet and counter-revolutionary spirit.”²⁹ Notably, future attempts at reform that would lead to the final demise of the system operated upon a similar logic of challenging the regime to live up to long forgotten notions of legality and procedure.

One should not rush to the conclusion that the newly discovered self-assertiveness altered the regime’s policies. After all, it was still a ruthless power that proved – as Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists as well as the deported nationalities learned – that it would stop at nothing when challenged. Also, it was often the regime itself that initiated the redemption of former outcasts by allowing them to redeem their past sins, including that of wrong social origin, through wartime exploits. Yet, when the audience was considered less critical, the regime could afford and did make concessions. When Stalin and Beria rallied against Marshal Zhukov in March 1946, they found themselves

28. Amir Weiner, “The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity,” *Russian Review* 55 (October 1996): 650–52.

29. Andrea Graziosi, “The Great Strikes of 1953 in Soviet Labor Camps in the Accounts of Their Participants: A Review,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 33 (October–December 1992): 419–46.

confronted by the majority of top military commanders. The imposing and crude Zhukov was certainly not as popular among his peers as he was among ordinary soldiers and citizens. But, recalled Marshal Konev, his chief defender, they knew that if they did not protect Zhukov there would be a repeat of 1937, and besides, during the war they had become more courageous than before. Stalin consented to merely a demotion.³⁰ It seems that the learning curve of Soviet citizens empowered by wartime experience bred a new kind of citizen.

Often the war veterans' sense of accomplishment overpowered state assigned classifications of the prewar years, most notably in the countryside. Demobilized soldiers whose families had been dekulakized in the early 1930s did not shy away from demanding local authorities to return the family's confiscated property. Indeed, the postwar era saw war veterans and their families displaying a strong sense of entitlement based on their wartime sacrifice and exploits.³¹ The emergence of an assertive individual did not change the ABCs of the Soviet system. A single-party system and non-market economy persisted until 1991. Still, the fact that unlike the dissidents of later decades, assertive veterans were not an isolated cast of mainly intellectuals and their demands were often bereft of antagonistic, indoctrinarian ideologies, increased their impact. The discovery of individual voice and the will to defend it launched a long, slow, yet critical development in the relations between regime and citizen.

Like all other myths, if only in a more heavy handed manner than usual, the various incarnations of Soviet official memory of the war advanced a simplified tale aimed at the mobilization of the past in the service of the present and the future. Undoubtedly, it was an attempt to impose a single meaning onto a complex and diverse human experience, regardless of the pain such an act inflicted on various participants. And so, the blunders of early military defeats, desertion, collaboration, the sense of emancipation in the trenches of the front, and the unique fate of the Jews at the hands of Nazi invaders were all erased in favor of a narrative that celebrated an unmitigated communist heroism and universal suffering. Nor was the credibility of the myth helped by the relentless, bombastic claims such as those made about Leonid Brezhnev's heroic exploits under fire that increasingly set it apart from the experience and memory of the war.³²

Today, Russian, Ukrainian, and Baltic historians are beginning to address many of the missing aspects of the war experience, which until the Gorbachev era could at most be alluded to in passing in historical novels.³³ The question,

30. Cited in Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*, 311.

31. Veniamin Zima, *Golod v SSSR 1946–1947 godov: proiskhozhdienie i posledstviia* [The 1946–47 famine in the Soviet Union: Origins and consequences] (Moscow, 1996), 88–89; Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 325–30.

32. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, 1994).

33. For surveys of literature on these themes see Robert W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* (Bloomington, 1989), 100–14; and Mathew P. Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II: Myths, Memoirs, and Realities* (New York, 1963).

however, is whether components left undiscussed actually subverted the core message of the myth. This does not seem to be the case in the Soviet Union. Even with the atrocities of the Soviet regime acknowledged, it still remained a war against an unparalleled, monstrous enterprise. Moreover, such a perception was shared by large segments of the citizenry – the populations of the territories annexed after 1939 have been a notable exception. As recent studies noted, the Soviet system endured for such a long time to a large degree because of an effective fusion of personal and public imagination.³⁴ Even today historians should not rush to sign the death warrant for the cult of the war in its Soviet dressing.

Whereas the calendar in the former Slavic republics has been purged of Soviet holidays, 9 May (V-Day) remains the one holiday that both populations and governments of the newly independent states refuse to part with (the Baltic countries stand out in contrast). Soviet political culture allowed for the smooth appropriation of the war's mythology by the successor states and societies once the regime withdrew its all-Union claims. And so, the myth of the war today has been flexible enough to warn against the rising specter of domestic fascism, to promote nostalgia for lost glory and the last successful war in the Russian Federation, and to remind of the wartime sacrifice for the unification of land and people in Ukraine. In Minsk, the day of liberation from German occupation has been adopted as Independence Day of Belarus. Too important and meaningful to let it wither away, the cult of the war continues to thrive even as the war generation is passing away.³⁵

Eduard Shevardnadze's reminder to a group of visitors in June 1990 said it all. "The Soviet Union might have been waging a cold war with the United States for almost 40 years, but when [my] grandchildren play war games, Germany remains the enemy," remarked the Soviet foreign minister.³⁶ Neither historians nor politicians can afford the continued marginalization of the very event that gave the Cold War a name and a meaning and whose legacy has outlived it.

34. Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi," *Fabrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996): 344–73; idem, "Laboratories of the Self: Diaries from the Stalin Era" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

35. See Catherine Wanner, *Burdens of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (Park University, PA, 1998), 159–64, 191–94; and Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth," 658–60.

36. Leffler, "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know?'" 515.