



# The Post-Trauma of the Great Patriotic War in Russia

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*Abstract:* Collective memory often functions as embeddedness for a narrative that can have profound legitimization consequences. In order to make a population ‘buy’ a narrative, memory entrepreneurs can manipulate traumatic memories in a population to justify the subversion of democratic processes, which is particularly dangerous. The ‘Great Patriotic War’, as World War II is known in Russia, commemorates not just the defeat of fascism, but also the survival of the nation in the face of extinction. It is also the most important heroic and unifying event in recent Russian history and is now actively used in nation-building efforts. The main argument of this essay is that due to the very traumatic nature of the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War in Russia, its citizens are bound to react in an emotional way to the issues that are discursively connected to the war.

*Keywords:* Russia, Ukraine, trauma, fascism, commemoration, memory, epigenetics

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‘To have the glory of the past in common, a shared will in the present; to have done great deeds together and want to do more of them, are the essential conditions for the constitution of a people’.

*Ernest Renan*

Renan was referring to nation-building in late 19th century France, but his words ring true today. Memory, or to be more precise, emotive memory is indispensable for nation-building; almost all nations have foundational myths that are based on more or less authentic memories of greatness and suffering. These are the foundations for the collective identity that is often deemed necessary in order to maintain social cohesion and political stability within a state (Boym 2007; Misztal 2010; Bendix 2017). Moreover, collective memory functions as embeddedness for a narrative that can have profound legitimization consequences

(Stritzel 2007, 2014; Balzacq 2011; Guzzini 2011). In order to make a population ‘buy into’ a narrative, memory entrepreneurs such as high-ranking politicians or journalists can manipulate traumatic memories in a population to justify the subversion of democratic processes, which is particularly dangerous.

The ‘Great Patriotic War’, as World War II is known in Russia, commemorates not just the defeat of fascism, but also the survival of a nation faced with possible extinction. It is also the most important heroic and unifying event in recent Russian history and is now actively used in nation-building efforts (Gudkov 2005; Kucherenko 2011; Oushakine 2013; Gaufman 2017). This is all the more so given that the war was one of the main impetus’ for the Soviet Union’s rise to great power status (Zhurzhenko 2007). Thus, this collective memory is guaranteed to have an important impact on Russian politics when used for legitimization purposes.

The main argument of this essay is that due to the profoundly traumatic nature of the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War in Russia, its citizens are bound to react in an emotional way to topics that are discursively connected to the war. For most Russians, the memory of fascism is associated first and foremost with the immense suffering of the Soviet population, especially the civilian population in occupied territories. As Maksym Yakovlyev notes (Yakovlev 2014), the primary chain of associations evoked by the Red Army’s victory over fascism focuses on atrocities perpetrated against Soviet women and children. These associations work for most Russian citizens, because even if they paid little attention to history classes in school, they must have at least watched a few movies about the war, seen a parade on the Red Square and most likely have a family member who was directly affected by the war experience (Oushakine 2013). This essay goes beyond the literature on collective memory and explores the underlying biological foundations of memory and trauma. By analysing digital discursive struggles surrounding the Great Patriotic War on Russian social media, I show how Russian netizens articulate their (post)-traumatic experiences in the course of the Ukraine crisis with illustrations from VKontakte, Facebook, and Twitter in 2014-2015.

## **Post-Trauma of the Great Patriotic War**

Collective memory builds upon individuals’ memories, and while there have been numerous excellent studies on collective memory from Halbwachs and Nora to Assmann and Etkind, it is also crucial to delve into the processes of individual memory transmission. The study of digital memory has become a field in its own right, but it’s also important to explore its connection with other disciplines that can shed light on the biological foundations of memory. While still considered as new and controversial for trauma studies in social sciences, epigenetics and neurobiology can provide many insights to the field. Epigenetics is a study of heritable changes in gene function (Russo 1996) that includes the process of genetic inheritance of a memory (Bird 2002; Roth et al. 2011). The inherited memory, however, might not necessarily be an authentic one: as some studies suggest, it just needs to be emotional, as our limbic system has many ways of influencing cognitive processes and is integral to collective memory formation (Rolls 2015). Moreover, the more traumatic the memory, the more likely it will be passed down to the next generation as it will have more chances to affect the genes

(Vukojevic et al. 2014), because epigenetics serves to prepare an offspring for an environment similar to that of their parents (Yehuda et al 1995, Rodriguez 2015), while stress hormone regulation in particular is the one with a proven epigenetic trail (Yehuda et al. 2014; Bowers et al. 2016). In the case of the Great Patriotic War, given the significance and length of the experienced war trauma, epigenetic memory seems to play an important role in collective memory formation (Caldwell 2014): the traumatic experiences encompass not only a significant loss of life, but also the harsh conditions of the civilian population, which included deportation, incarceration, hard labour, and severe food shortages to name a few<sup>1</sup>.

Mercer (2014) argues that ‘identities exist at individual, group, and state levels of analyses because emotion exists at these different levels’ (Mercer 2014: 530). Thus, when it comes to traumatic events, collectives seem to experience similar issues with emotion control, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a mental disorder that can develop after a person is exposed to a traumatic event. Its symptoms may include disturbing thoughts, feelings, dreams related to the events, mental or physical distress to trauma-related cues, attempts to avoid trauma-related cues, alterations in how a person thinks and feels, and an increase in the fight-or-flight response (APA 2013). While PTSD is obviously a personal experience, on a mass scale certain cues can be identified that trigger a similar emotive – and more importantly – traumatic response. After all, the hippocampus, a memory archive that helps our brain reference received pictures and/or discursive constructions (Eichenbaum and Cohen 1993), tests the ‘embeddedness’ of the received information stimulus. This process provides neurobiological grounding for the so-called ‘pathos formula’ (Eyal 2007; Warburg 1956) previously described in cultural studies: a traumatic experience will be more likely to be remembered and re-lived during a similar verbal/non-verbal representation.

The post-trauma is a more complicated social phenomenon that, as also in the case of the Great Patriotic War in Russia, rests on at least three factors: epigenetic memory, collective memory, and commemoration rituals. There is limited scholarly literature on the epigenetic memory of Great Patriotic War survivors, but the literature on epigenetic memory of Holocaust survivors is quite expansive and often includes findings from people originally from the Post-Soviet space (Kellermann 2013; Thomson 2013). Even if the majority of the contemporary generation has not epigenetically inherited the trauma of witnessing death and physical suffering (which is also possible), most children or grandchildren of Great Patriotic War veterans were confronted with a variation of ‘eat what you have on your plate, we had to eat potato peels during the war’, watching ‘The Dawns Here Are Quiet’<sup>2</sup> or listening on TV to the unfailingly heartfelt and moving eulogy preceding the minute of silence on 9 May every year. Thus, the trauma is also being learned in everyday practices and routinely passed down several generations, thereby creating the corresponding emotional memory in younger hippocampi that would be used in future references.

The interplay of epigenetic and collective memory could also be seen in the reaction to the sanctioning of European food products in 2014. After the downing of the MH17 plane that killed almost 300 people, the European Union (EU) imposed sanctions on Russian officials. The Russian government retaliated by imposing an embargo on food produced in the

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<sup>1</sup> See below on epigenetic memory of food shortages.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dawns Here are Quiet* is a 1972 Oscar-nominated Soviet war drama, one of numerous films about the Great Patriotic War.

EU. When sanctioned produce kept coming into Russia anyway, the authorities authorised the destruction of the confiscated foodstuffs. Mainstream TV stations dutifully reported burnt cheese and frozen geese smashed by tractors. A number of bloggers (Novaya Gazeta 2015) were confounded that a child of Leningrad (Putin) whose parents survived the 1941-1943 siege and the ensued famine could just destroy and waste food like that, instead of donating it to people in need. A Russian blogger and financial analyst Slava Rabinovich phrased it the following way on Facebook:

Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich, President of the Russian Federation, was born on October 7, 1952 in Leningrad. Putin's father, Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin fought [in the war], defended the Nevsky; after the war [he was] a master at the Egorov factory. Mother, Maria Ivanovna Shelomova, also worked at the factory, survived the blockade of Leningrad [...] Therefore, Maria Ivanovna Shelomova survived the siege of Leningrad with slightly larger stocks than 125 grams of siege bread per day.

What is 'siege bread'? It is: food pulp - 10%, cake meal - 10%, wallpaper dust - 2%, scraps from bags - 2%, fir needles - 1%, rye wallpaper meal - 75%. When baking this bread, baking moulds were lubricated with diesel oil (there was no other). And this bread was only 125 grams per person per day.

Seventy years after the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin, a former KGB major, introduced a food embargo against the Russian people and began to burn food in mobile crematoria throughout the country (Rabinovich 2015).

The passage above is an illustrative example of PTSD: the food destruction in this regard serves as a trigger that revives the traumatic post-memory of the Great Patriotic War that includes a painstaking description of the 'bread' and evokes the hardships Leningrad inhabitants had to withstand. Moreover, the use of the word 'crematoria' additionally reinforces the parallel with Nazi concentration camps and equates Putin's and Hitler's regimes. While the 'Putler'<sup>3</sup> meme has been quite common in Russian (and now in Ukraine) oppositional circles (Gaufman 2015), this post implicitly makes this connection.

As Caldwell notes (2017), practices related to food consumption (and not only in Russia) occupy one of the most intimate bodily spaces and are thus more susceptible to emotive responses. Even without the sanctions, one of the staple parts of the Great Patriotic War commemoration by governmental officials and the general populace involved a culinary dimension by 'drinking the front 100 grams [of vodka]' and eating 'field porridge' with the veterans (Motrenko 2011; NTV 2013), not to mention the practice of 'pominki', a type of wake when people commemorate the dead by having a communal meal.

As scholars of PTSD argue, in order to provoke the anxiety that stems from the neuroendocrinology of this condition, individuals need to be confronted with certain triggers of the traumatic event (Yehuda et al. 1998). Even though individuals with PTSD tend to avoid memories of traumatic events, the state-sponsored commemoration and social pressure associated with it provides for a re-traumatising of the population (Martin-Berestain et al. 2010; Fisher 2013). At the same time, most Russians, including the author of this piece, consider collective remembrance of the War and their relatives who fought in it, such as the minute of

<sup>3</sup> 'Putler' is a conflation of Hitler and Putin that is also an entry in the Russian language encyclopedia of internet memes ('Vladimir\_Putler', 2017).

silence, as an act that honours the sacrifice of their close relatives and the nation in general. Moreover, current generations experience a type of survivor's guilt, especially given the appalling life conditions the war generation had to go through to ensure the survival of their offspring (Etkind 2006, 2013; Oushakine 2009).

One of the more mass scale grass root initiatives for Second World War commemoration that emerged in 2011 in Tomsk is called the Immortal Regiment and functions both online and offline. Offline, people gather on the streets on 9 May and carry portraits of their parents and grandparents who fought in the war. Russians post photographs online with descriptions and often hashtag the #immortalregiment (#bessmertnyipolk) and the official page of this movement has over 130,000 subscribers. This initiative was high-jacked by the government in 2015 and the immortal regiment marches were organised by local branches of government and the All-Russian People's Front (Meduza 2015). The institutionalisation of this practice by the government has made this type of commemoration more widespread, but also added an additional way to experience the post-trauma by the current generation that might not even know their relatives who fought in the war personally.

The post-trauma of the Great Patriotic War can also be a reason why the stories of alleged extreme cruelty in Ukraine were believed and disseminated so fast through mainstream and social media. The most notorious example was the fake 'crucified boy' that was reported on Pervyi Kanal. The Pervyi Kanal report on the 'execution of the small son and wife of an opolchenets [Russian positively connoted term for separatists in South-East Ukraine]' on Lenin Square in the centre of Sloviansk/Sloviansk. According to this report, a three-year-old boy had been 'nailed like Christ' to a noticeboard on the square (Pervyi Kanal 2014). Subsequent investigations found that the 'refugee' who had allegedly witnessed the 'executions' was not really from Sloviansk; and that there is in fact no Lenin Square in Sloviansk. The obvious point of this fictitious report was to show the 'barbarity' of the pro-Ukrainian side, but on the other hand crucifixion stories have been a staple diet of Anti-Semites in their blood libel accusations (Rose 2015) as well as in war propaganda (Tate 2013). Hence, images of children were often used on social media to identify the primary 'target' of the Ukrainian army to discursively connect the events in Ukraine to Nazi atrocities during the Great Patriotic War and the current Ukrainian regime (see below Image 1).

The same mechanism was at work with the downing of MH17.<sup>4</sup> While reluctant to believe that the pro-Russian side could have anything to do with such a horrendous act, social media users had no trouble attributing it to the other side of the conflict. Wide speculation surrounded the question of why black boxes took so long to decode, which fueled further threats that "Ukros [Ukrainians] will have to answer for the downed Boeing".<sup>5</sup> On the most popular anti-Maidan public page on Vkontakte – Antimaidan, which boasted over 500k subscribers at the height of the crisis, featured few posts related to MH17, concentrating rather on the sanctions that '[America] should shove up its Europe' (Antimaidan 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> MH17 is a Malaysian Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17/MAS17) that was a scheduled passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. It was shot down on 17 July 2014 while flying over eastern Ukraine, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew on board.

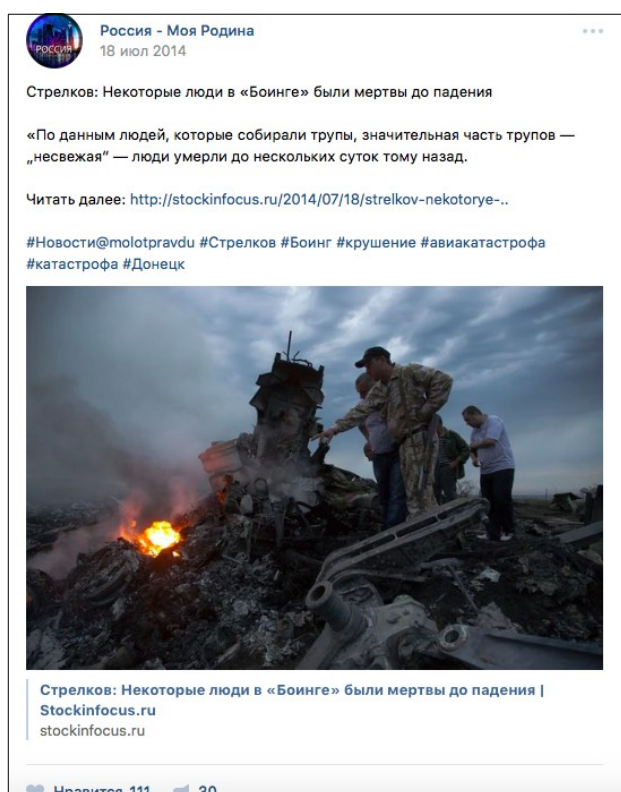
<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the following tweet by user called Van Diesel (2014): '@EuroMaydan a kogda velikiye ukry otvetyat za samolet sbityy. ili kak vseгда, chushki, spryachete golovu v trusy obame. vkusen chlen makaki' [@EuroMaydan and when the great ukra will answer for the plane that was shot down? Or as always, pigs, hide your heads in Obama's underwear. Macaque's dick is tasty].

**Image 1.** #Save Donbass from [the] Ukraine Army [Soon the punishers will start bombing #ATO #Donetsk #Luhansk #Slavyansk #Mariupol]



*Source:* Screenshot from Twitter

**Image 2.** Strelkov: Some people in Boeing were dead before the fall



*Source:* Screenshot from Vkontakte.ru

Of course, the wildest conspiracy was the version voiced by Igor Strelkov, one of the then leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. According to the former leader of the separatist movement in Donetsk Igor Girkin (Strelkov) (Rossiia - Moia Rodina 2014), the flight was full of dead bodies and the plane was shot down by Ukrainian soldiers to blame Russia and the separatists. This version became so popular that it made it to the pages of the most widely circulated newspaper in Russia: the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Demchenko 2014). MP Zhirinovskiy also reiterated the same version in an interview (Vesti FM 2014): the plane was filled with corpses that Americans [!] bought in Dutch morgues in order to blame Russia for the catastrophe.

The fact that Soviet citizens suffered from PTSD can also be inferred from the lack of commemorative practice right after the war – people who have experienced a trauma try to avoid triggers that would remind them of the events. Victory day became a day off only in 1965, while parades on the Red Square were quite irregular until Secretary General Brezhnev, who also instituted a minute of silence and unveiled a grave of the Unknown Soldier (Babicheko 2005). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and since 1995, military parades became a yearly occurrence and in 2008, they started to feature military weaponry and aviation. This militarisation could have been one of the factors that contributed to the de-traumatisation of the memory of the Great Patriotic War. By introducing war heads and tanks in commemoration, the focus was shifted from human loss to military supremacy that incurred a self-aggrandising component, which substituted the traumatic one. In other words, for some individuals, the memory of the War was no longer associated with feelings of sadness or loss and instead became infused with excitement and aggression.

While Rösen (2004) argued that remembering human suffering and coming to terms with the past can be beneficial by opening up avenues for reconciliation and preventing ethnocentrism, a re-traumatisation is not necessarily what the whole population experiences every year and social networks provide alternative examples of commemoration as well. While in many countries the most common slogan associated with World War II is 'Never Again' (Bode and Seo 2017), Russian uber-patriotic segments of social networks came up with a meme 'mozhem povtorit' (we can repeat) that also became a car sticker, and which features variations of a male figure with the head of a hammer and sickle sodomising another male figure with a head of a swastika (see below Image 3). This meme specifically shows how closely the narrative of the Great Patriotic War is interlinked with Russia's national identity as a 'great power' and as the 'liberator of Europe'. As Tatiana Zhurzhenko has noted, by condemning 'neo-fascism' in the Baltic states and Ukraine, Moscow not only positions itself as the true defender of European values, but also relives its moment of 'geopolitical triumph' (Zhurzhenko 2007). This memory is cherished especially dearly in the context of the international order that was formed with the end of the Cold War and the emotions linked to the perceived downgrading in status that came with the demise of the Soviet Union.

The image above obviously has nothing to do with war trauma. Rather, it is more connected to the trauma of the loss of great power status after the collapse of the Soviet Union where Russia's role was no longer seen as a decisive one on the international stage. By emphasising Russia's 'male' position in the intercourse the sticker also establishes Russia's role as hierarchically higher and dominant in history. It is further confirmed by the findings of the Russian centre for the study of public opinion – Levada, – that established in 2014 that the

majority of Russians (54%) regret the breakup of the Soviet Union. The reason for the regret, however, was the sensation that ‘a feeling of belonging to a great nation was lost’ (56%) and this feeling of loss has been consistent since 2006, often overshadowing economic collapse or the ‘increased feeling of mutual distrust’ (Levada 2014). The fact that the defeat of fascism is associated here with homosexual rape is quite a crude gendered metaphor that is also a sign that a subset of the population is concerned primarily with asserting the country’s geopolitical dominance and hypermasculinity, regardless of the loss of life even on their own side.

**Image 3.** ‘1941-1945 [We] can repeat’



*Source:* AntiMaidan, <https://vk.com/antimaydan> (29.04.2018)

The evidence for digital transmission of suffering can also be seen in the image analysis of Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017): most visual posts made in a pro-Russian group related to the Ukraine crisis pertained to ruins (31%), combatants (18%), civilians (10%), equipment and trophies (both 8%), and the dead (6%). Given that the Ukraine crisis is inextricably embedded within the Great Patriotic War commemoration, these findings reflect the diverging trajectories of framing the Ukraine crisis that coincides with the diverging trajectories of the Great Patriotic War commemoration: so far it centres mostly around the loss and to a lesser degree on the glory of the war. Both cases, however, point to a significant traumatic component experienced by the generation that never suffered in the war.

## Conclusion

The Russian nation does not necessarily suffer from PTSD related to the Great Patriotic War, but the sheer scale of deliberate planning and investment devoted to commemorative parades, ceremonies, statues, museums, televised programs and other proceedings keeps the War's (epigenetic) memory, glory and trauma alive, despite its events being a post-memory for the



overwhelming majority of Russian citizens. Traces of this trauma emerged in spectacular fashion during the Ukraine crisis, as the Russian government and official media deliberately drew discursive parallels between the suffering of Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine and the ordeal of the Soviet population during World War II. Even though the continued re-traumatisation of the population through the remembrance of national sacrifice is the dominant practice and serves, to a certain degree, as an antidote to chauvinism (Rüsen 2004), some segments of the population have shrugged off the war's post-trauma in favour of great power ambitions associated with the defeat of Nazism. This has led to an increase in jingoistic and uber-patriotic rhetoric that has nothing to do with human suffering and everything to do with national self-aggrandisement.

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