

May 9th and Russia: Past, Present, and Future
PONARS Policy Memo 366

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CSIS

July 2005

History is complicated, and important. One of my dearest friends was born in a refugee camp in Germany after the war: her family was one of the lucky ones that escaped Estonia as Soviet troops occupied the country after defeating Germany's Nazi forces in the Baltics. Another dear friend and colleague who is a native son of St. Petersburg has shared with me stories of how his grandmother found food for her daughter – his mother – during the brutal Siege of Leningrad: everyone I know who is from that city has such stories of desperate survival, of grandparents starving so the children could live, of eating rats, horses, anything to survive. I remember the day I learned that one of my mom's acquaintances was a Holocaust survivor: I saw the number tattooed on his arm and he told me how he would have perished in a death camp, but for liberation by Soviet forces.

Does the survival of my Estonian friend and her life of service as an American citizen negate the value of the survival of my Russian friend's mother, and through her the life and work of a brilliant Russian scholar? Does the value of a life lived by a Jewish survivor because Soviet soldiers destroyed Hitler's armies justify the trauma of my Estonian friend's family forced to flee their country for fear of occupation – or worse – by those same Soviet armies?

From the commentary issuing from official and private antagonists in the weeks leading up to the May 9 commemoration of the 60th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany, you would think so. You would be under the impression that one has to choose which of these lives had more value, or was the greater victim of repression and the evil that totalitarian political systems and their leaders wrought in the 20th century. You would think it was impossible to stand in Moscow on May 9th and honor the few remaining veterans of the Soviet Army, those who suffered unspeakable hardships in breaking the back of the Nazi military machine in Stalingrad – truly the beginning of the end for Hitler's insane dream -- while also denouncing Stalin's imposition of Soviet rule in eastern Europe by exploiting the presence of those same armed forces.

An open letter is circulating that criticizes commemoration in Moscow of the defeat of fascism because Russia's political system fails to meet European standards of civil liberties, political freedom, rule of law, and democratic institutions. In an interview this week, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov justifies the occupation of eastern Europe

as a better fate for those countries than the failure to defeat German fascism. Both statements claim, in effect, that one of those lives was more valuable than the others. Both statements are tragic failures to accept the responsibility to make the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Europe an honest embrace of history in all its complexity, one in which equally valuable lives were lost because of political systems that crush the value of the individual and fail to acknowledge that heroism and sacrifice are achieved by individuals, not by political systems.

Given that the defeat the Soviet Army would have given Hitler control of strategic resources and territory that almost certainly would have made Germany's defeat impossible, it is entirely appropriate for President Bush to acknowledge in Moscow the historic debt of the American people to those 27 million Soviet soldiers and civilians who died in the war. Given how Stalin used that victory and the sacrifices of those soldiers and civilians, it is at same time entirely appropriate for President Bush to travel to Riga to denounce how the Soviet leadership turned wartime cooperation in defeating one totalitarian regime into the pretext for imposing another totalitarian system in eastern Europe.

American citizens and their leaders should be deeply troubled that Russia's leadership has not only failed to denounce Stalin's annexation of the Baltic states and Soviet occupation of eastern Europe, but has sought to justify and even glorify the Nazi-Soviet Pact and post-war imposition of Soviet-style regimes in eastern Europe. This failure is both a symptom and cause of Russia's inability to become a successful and modern major power in the 21st century. The failure to face their history with honesty in its entirety prevents Russia's leaders and citizens from fully acknowledging how its contemporary political system is weakening the country and squandering the opportunity of its post-Soviet transition. Russia's leaders and the country's people aspire to security, prosperity, and a global role. Instead, Russia's failure to build democratic institutions, rule of law, and protections for individual rights has perpetuated corruption, ineffective government, and an economy dependent on simple resource extraction for growth. Russia will not be a 21st century great power as long as it is not a democracy, and a weak Russia is not in American national interests.

However, Americans should also understand the truly heroic role that the citizens of what was the Soviet Union played in World War II. Americans should work hard to distinguish the people from the regime – indeed, precisely because the Russian political system is not democratic – and understand that millions of Soviet citizens were themselves victims of Stalinist repression. Americans should use the May 9th anniversary of the defeat of fascist Germany to acknowledge the great sacrifice and role of Soviet citizens, and re-affirm our common interest in a secure and prosperous democratic Russia.

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