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NCSEER NOTE

This paper is a contemporary, analytical discussion of the impact of Glasnost on Soviet citizens' perceptions of the experiences and memories of World War II, "The Great Patriotic War." It is expected to be published in a more compressed form in an upcoming issue of The Atlantic.
Today, fifty years after Operation Barbarossa, the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, the winds of glasnost and perestroika have demolished that sonorous combination of self-pity and self-congratulation that for so long had characterized the official memorialization of the "Great Patriotic War". An enshrined, idealized saga is being replaced with raw human memory. "Our understanding of the war," historian Mikhail Gefter remarked to me not long ago, "is being transformed from a heroic farce to the tragedy that it really was."

My final report is a summary article based on my forthcoming book, Russia Remembers the War. In 1985, when I began the book, its subject was the cult of the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union. The astonishing events of the past five years have forced me to transform the book into an exploration of the history, successes, and sudden demise of the war cult.

In the quarter-century that began with Leonid Brezhnev's accession to Party rule in 1964 and ended at the close of the 1980s with the devastating collapse of the system he had inherited from Stalin, an organized cult of the Great Patriotic War celebrated the Communist Party's greatest and most effective legitimizing and unifying myth. Its focus was an idealized memory of the war that drew upon a post-hoc messianism depicting the Soviet people and army as twenty million martyrs who had delivered the world from fascist enslavement.

Today, the cult of the Great Patriotic War has given way to an admixture of passion,
regret, nostalgia, rage and remembrance. In recent years, Soviet scholars and ordinary citizens alike have been gripped by a compulsion to set the record straight about their country's experience in the Second World War, an urge that is less historiographic than it is moral or spiritual.

The de-Stalinization process has inspired published criticisms that stand the old myths about the war on its head. Stalin, assert the critics, is as much to blame as Hitler for the war and its dazzling destructiveness. With his policies of collectivization and five year plans, Stalin destroyed the Soviet economy, instituted a purge and mass terror that devastated the Party and populace, wiped out the officers corps in his 1937-9 purge, entered into a criminal pact with Nazi Germany, demonstrated to Hitler and the world the utter weakness of the Red Army in his war of aggression against Finland, and in 1941 refused to prepare his country against attack lest he provoke Hitler into a premature incursion into Soviet territory. And after the surprise attack of 22 June 1941, Stalin waged war without giving a thought to the lives of Soviet soldiers and officers. Worse yet, he used the war to try to rid his country of social elements that might eventually give rise to a postwar opposition.

Many critics now see a significant portion of the war dead primarily as victims of Stalinism. "How to distinguish between those Hitler killed and those Stalin killed, if they killed our people the same way -- one entering the country from the outside, the other -- from within?" wrote Ales Adamovich, the famed Belorussian novelist.

The legendary figure of twenty million losses has been abandoned; in his 1990 Victory Day speech, Mikhail Gorbachev quoted a figure of twenty-seven million. The assessment of these figures today seems thoroughly politicized, a grisly numbers game in which the more
radical, anti-Stalinist, anti-Soviet critics estimate ever-higher losses and point to them as a reflection both of the system's incompetence at waging war, and of Stalin's direct and indirect role in those millions of deaths. Some estimates run as high as almost fifty million wartime losses.

Painfully, insistently, real memories of the 1941-1945 war are coming out, from the bottom and the edges of Soviet society. Recent Soviet publications and films about the war have been relentless in their drive to reveal the ugliest aspects of the war, and in particular, Stalin's brutality toward his own populace. Many war prisoners ended up in Soviet labor camps for the crime of having surrendered to the enemy, victims, first of Hitler, then of Stalin. Now a few survivors of this fate and their children are demanding that they be rehabilitated and given veterans' benefits. In former battle zones volunteers have been combing forests and slogging through swamps where an estimated two million war victims still lie unburied and unidentified.

The 1945 victory -- the Soviet Union's greatest success -- is no longer widely accepted as a victory at all. "We live like beggars," an old veteran said to me last May as we strolled around Leningrad's Piskarevskoe cemetery, the resting place of some half a million siege victims. "There is nothing in our stores, nothing. And our former enemies are living like kings. So for what kind of victory did we sacrifice tens of millions of Soviet lives?" Others gripe about their pitiful pensions and lack of the most basic amenities. Most painful, perhaps, is the bitter inter-generational hostility brought about by the dashed hopes and hard times of the past two or three years. Younger people now increasingly demonstrate their irritation with veterans, who are entitled to some modest privileges, such as going to the head of food lines. "It was you who stuck with this terrible life, you who ruined everything for us!" shouted an irate young man to
some shapeless old women in flowered dresses and sweaters, sitting in a Moscow dry cleaners last year.

Exactly fifty years after the German invasion, the people of the Soviet Union are living through a time of troubles as terrifying as any they have confronted since the war. The breakdown of the economy, the utter despoliation of the environment, the fear of total civil war, the loss of their status as a global superpower, the collapse of every legitimizing myth that had bound them together, have led to a societal atomization. For the defunct leadership and many of its supporters, the idealized memory of the Great Patriotic War was the last remaining source of national pride. Today, even the Soviet army has been unable to work out a convincing line on the remembrance of the war, embracing instead the most reactionary kind of Russian nationalism.

Can the Soviet Union find a social cement to replace the idealized memory of the Great Patriotic War? Until just a few years ago, memories and legendary recollections about the war years had created a cosmology that informed Soviet political culture, providing generations of Soviet citizens and their leaders with the fundamental lexicon they drew upon to explain themselves to the world. Now the loss of this shared memory has left the Soviet people in the throes of a spiritual crisis every bit as wrenching as the political and economic shocks that have sent their country spinning toward chaos.
On June 22, 1941, more than three million German troops, 3,350 tanks, and 7,184 pieces of artillery were poised to invade Soviet territory. At dawn, with the Red Army utterly unprepared for the attack, Operation Barbarossa began. Nine hours later, German bombers had demolished 1,200 Soviet airplanes — 800 of them on the ground — and the German army was rolling eastward with dazzling speed. By the second half of July, enemy forces had occupied a chunk of Soviet territory more than twice the size of France. In September they surrounded Leningrad in a blockade that was to last over three years and kill one million of the Imperial capital’s three million inhabitants. The Soviet Union had suffered the greatest military disaster in the history of modern warfare.¹

The war was an ordeal of monumental proportions that, according to recent estimates, left at least thirty million Soviet citizens dead. It lasted 1418 days, until May 8, 1945, when the Germans surrendered to the Red Army in Berlin.

Operation Barbarossa was launched a half-century ago. Yet so traumatic were the invasion and war — affecting virtually every family in the Soviet Union — that they left a profound imprint on the deep structure of the Soviet body politic and psyche. Memories and

legendary recollections about the war years created a cosmology that informed Soviet political culture, providing generations of Soviet citizens and their leaders with the fundamental lexicon that they drew upon to explain themselves to the world.

Today, fifty years after the invasion, the winds of glasnost and perestroika have demolished that sonorous combination of self-pity and self-congratulation that for so long had characterized the official memorialization of the war. The enshrined, idealized saga of the Great Patriotic War is being replaced with raw human memory. "Our understanding of the war," historian Mikhail Gefter remarked to me recently, "is being transformed from a heroic farce to the tragedy that it really was." And the loss of this shared memory has left many Soviet people in the throes of a spiritual crisis to match the political and economic shocks that have sent their country spinning toward chaos.

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In recent years, Soviet scholars and ordinary citizens alike have been gripped by a compulsion to set the record straight about their country’s experience in the Second World War, an urge that is less historiographic than it is moral, spiritual, even religious. In the summer of 1989 in a discussion with members of the USSR Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Ethnography, I asked the members to plumb the real meaning of rituals and myths celebrating the Great Patriotic War. Immediately a young man in his late twenties or early thirties stood up. He was tall, pale, and mustachioed, and neatly attired in a light-blue shirt and navy trousers. "The Great Patriotic War was the greatest catastrophe in the history of
Soviet foreign policy," he said. "And so to cover up the disgrace, our authorities canonized it and called it a victory. But what kind of victory was it if we lost twenty or thirty million people and the Germans lost two or three million?" After a stunned silence I called on a middle-aged man who, in a bold voice, said that "ours was a victory because even though the costs were enormous, we did save the world from fascism."

"Save the world from fascism?" shouted the young man, jumping up again. "On the contrary, we brought fascism to East Europe and enslaved our own people as well. What kind of salvation was that?"

Then a stout elderly woman in a blue and white flowered dress slowly stood up. Her thin white hair was pulled back in an old-fashioned knot. She looked directly at the young man and in a quivering but determined voice said, "We Russians have always had in our hearts a special place for victims. You are right in saying that the war was an incomparable catastrophe. But the victims of that catastrophe — the millions and millions of war dead, the countless orphans and widows — shall always, yes always merit our compassion, and our love."

The old woman was right, of course. No matter who is to blame, the victims' sufferings were real. Indeed, the pathos of their deaths surely is not diminished, but rather heightened by the fact that so many succumbed to the evils of their own leaders. Self-inflicted wounds on the body politic are always the most painful.

Much of the struggle that, by the beginning of the 1990s began to pull the Soviet Union apart, has been about memory as a source of power. The yearning to reclaim the past is what underlies many of the passionate nationalisms that have brought the USSR into crisis.
But wrenching as it is, the revival in the USSR of post-traumatic real memory may be a sign of mental health. Societies -- like individuals -- may gain strength and eventual wisdom from repeated intensive recollections of traumatizing experiences. And they are emotionally crippled by successful efforts to keep those recollections below the surface of consciousness.

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"During the first twenty years after the war's end there was a decided effort to forget about the war, to push it into the background," observed Lazar Lazarev in an interview not long ago. An elderly literary critic with a specialty in war literature, Lazarev received me in his large, shabby downtown Moscow office at Voprosy Literatury (Problems of Literature). His mobile face expressed a gentle good humor, wisdom, and enormous fatigue.

"Undoubtedly my life-long interest in the war is autobiographical, since I belong to that generation of people who in 1941 went to war directly from high school. In '41 I was seventeen. At eighteen I already commanded a reconnaissance detachment and fought for two years until I was wounded in August 1943." The fourth and fifth fingers of his right hand were missing -- a legacy of the war. With the remaining three he chain-smoked the Marlboros I had brought as a gift.

"In school we had all believed the myths about the all-powerful Supreme Leader. The military catastrophe of 1941-42 forced us for the first time to question Stalin, and threw us back onto our own resources. So for many of us, those first two years of the war coincided with a spontaneous destalinization. We felt that everything depended on us personally, and
that gave us an extraordinary feeling of freedom."

Lazarev’s tired, strained smoker’s voice provided a dramatic dissonance to his palpable passion for the war and its legacy. "Remember that the Stalinist system relied not only on terror, but on deception as well. Stalin was the focus of a brilliantly orchestrated public worship. Even before the war’s end he knew very well that truth had eroded the illusions on which his rule was based, and he moved swiftly to suppress my generation, which had matured in the terrible freedom wrought by the shock of war. He was afraid — and in this he proved to be correct — that we might give rise to some kind of dissident movement, just as some of the young officers in the first Patriotic War of 1812 had later become the Decembrists who in 1825 tried to prevent Nicholas I from ascending the throne. In May 1945, at a Kremlin banquet celebrating the victory, Stalin made a famous toast in which he said ‘Let us drink to the patient endurance of the Russian people, because under these circumstances any other people would have long ago toppled their government.’ What he meant was that the war was over and best forgotten lest the truth about his conduct of the war erode some of his total authority."

Lazarev then mused about Leonid Brezhnev’s decision to resurrect the Great Patriotic War, exploiting it to serve political ends. "Those of us who had fought in the war thought, at first, that at last the war was getting the attention it merited," he said. "But in fact that attention was purely an official attempt to turn the war into a show made up of concocted legends."

Lazarev’s observation was exactly right. In the quarter-century that began with Leonid Brezhnev’s accession to Party rule in 1964 and ended at the close of the 1980s with the
devastating collapse of the system he had inherited from Stalin, the Communist Party created nothing less than a cult of the Great Patriotic War, including a panoply of saints, sacred relics, and phony sagas of the war endured by millions of tired tourists held hostage by their Intourist guides at the most famous of the USSR’s thousand upon thousands war memorials. What visitor to the Soviet Union does not remember the goose-stepping adolescents wielding automatic rifles while serving as honor guards of those memorials’ eternal flames?

The saga’s basic plot was a kind of post-hoc messianism: collectivization and rapid industrialization under the first and second Five Year Plans prepared our country for war, and despite an overpowering surprise attack by the Fascist Beast and its inhuman wartime practices, despite the loss of twenty million valiant martyrs to the Cause, our country, under the leadership of the Communist Party headed by Comrade Stalin, arose as one united front and expelled the enemy from our own territory and that of East Europe, thus saving Europe — and the world — from Fascist enslavement.

The cult narrative fixed the number of wartime losses at twenty million, a legendary figure that Nikita Khrushchev had offered in the 1950s. Like world Jewry’s appeal to the six million Holocaust victims, the Soviet Union’s purported twenty million war dead came to represent a set store of redemptive suffering that the Brezhnev regime called upon again and again as evidence of the country’s unique position in world history.

The organized cult of the Great Patriotic War was an effective system of political symbols and rituals. It celebrated the great legitimizing myth of the Party and government, helped inspire respect for the armed forces even during the demoralizing Afghanistan war, bolstered pride in the USSR and its socialist economy and served to justify foreign policy
positions. It also provided a vision of a powerfully united nation as a centrifugal counterweight to the centripetal tensions straining the nation’s periphery. At the same time it was genuinely popular: the war cult illuminated legions of moral exemplars to inspire the increasingly cynical and apathetic populace; it shored up the self-esteem of elderly war veterans, provided a source of nostalgia for their wearily disillusioned ranks, and helped resolve intergenerational tensions in favor of the fathers.

The frequently-trumpeted motto of the Great Patriotic War cult — "No one is forgotten, and nothing is forgotten" — is the last line of a poem by Olga Berggolts engraved on the rear wall of Leningrad’s Piskarevskoe cemetery, the resting place of more than a half-million of the wartime siege victims.

"No one is forgotten, and nothing is forgotten." What a poignant contrast to the Brezhnev regime’s malignant silence about the 1930s! But the motto was fundamentally mendacious. The official remembrance of the war, managed by the Party and the Soviet Army, promoted a standardized version of the war experience that was meant to celebrate their own wartime successes and provide an image of exemplary unity and popular heroism. That image took the form of a glittering mosaic of truths and lies and unforgivable blank spots: the Nazi-Soviet pact and its secret protocol; Stalin’s 1940 massacre of thousands of Polish officers in the Katyn forest; the Holocaust; the real extent of Lend-lease; Soviet prisoners-of-war who were later incarcerated for the purported treason of surrendering to the enemy; and the millions of Soviet citizens whose wartime deaths were caused, directly or indirectly, by Stalin’s grisly policies.

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May 9, 1985 was the fortieth anniversary of the Victory, and was the USSR’s final flamboyant, tastelessly orchestrated megaholiday celebration, replete with billboards splattered with self-congratulatory slogans, posters of idealized soldiers with Candide’s innocent eyes and Dick Tracy’s chin, a military parade in Red Square -- the first held on Victory Day since 1945 -- and thousands of bemedalled veterans strutting proudly before their respectful younger compatriots. The festivities were presided over by the new General Secretary, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, but organized by the administration of his predecessor, Brezhnev’s old crony, Konstantin Chernenko.

On May 7, 1985 I wandered into the restaurant of Moscow’s National Hotel in search of lunch, and was seated at a table with a couple in their thirties. Zhemel, hirsute and swarthy, was consuming an appetizer -- ovals of white bread topped with butter and smoked fish. Ira, an overly-made up woman in a turquoise dress and dangling earrings, with a small garnet cross at her neck and a mop of curly, blond hair, was trying to talk without too much obvious slurring. Next to her plate was a two-thirds-empty bottle of vodka. (A month later, Gorbachev’s anti-alcoholism campaign was to make such lunchtime drinking a thing of the past). Responding to their questions, I explained that I was an historian who had come to Moscow for Den Pobedy -- Victory Day. At this, Ira, who had been laughing quite a bit, grew serious, even maudlin.

"Den Pobedy is the only real holiday, the only one that means anything," she said thickly, fumbling clumsily in her purse for a cloth handkerchief. "As for their holidays -- their May Day, their anniversary of the revolution -- you can send them all to hell! But Den Pobedy...can you imagine, twenty million dead? Twenty million! So much suffering." She
dabbed at her eyes, now heavily laced with smeared mascara. "I always cry on Den Pobedy." The May 9 rituals began on May 8, at 3:00 in the afternoon, with the big Torzhественное заседание, ceremonial meeting, of the Party and government, held in the Kremlin’s Palace of Congresses. It was a televised, carefully orchestrated quasi-religious service. After the playing of the national anthem, everyone rose as the Victory Banner was carried into the hall by a naval honor guard to the rousing march, Den Pobedy, the holiday’s inappropriately bouncy theme song. Sometimes called the "holy of holies" (the epithet given to the innermost sanctuary of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem) this flag was hoisted onto the Berlin Reichstag building on April 30, 1945.

I watched the television coverage of the meeting in the apartment of Mikhail Gefter, a small, wizened, elderly historian, an invalid of the Great Patriotic War (he retired early because of a chronically debilitating war wound), and for more than a dozen years my informal academic mentor. Mikhail Gorbachev’s keynote address was called "The Soviet People’s Immortal Valiant Deed (подвиг)." His style of delivery was crisp and unpretentious, but the speech was a string of cliches: the heroic Soviet people saved Europe from fascist enslavement; the victory has not receded into the past, it is embodied in our present and future; congratulations to our front-line soldiers, partisans, and resistance fighters. "Glory to your great deed, in the name of the Motherland, in the name of life on earth!... The mortal danger dangling over the homeland and the tremendous force of patriotism elevated the entire country to fight a people’s war, a holy war. Soviet people drew strength in the great Leninist ideas. They rose to the defense of their motherland... The roots of the victory are in the nature of socialism, in the Soviet way of life... It was a victory of our ideology and
morality...."

The ritual display of stentorian speakers, gold-embroidered flags and bemedalled military men on the screen made the Victory Day anniversary seem a sham. Worse, its managers were out to manipulate popular emotion inspired by a genuinely traumatic past experience, in order to mobilize public energies in support of the Party and state.

At the same time, as Ira, my tipsy lunch partner of the previous day, had observed, it was the only real holiday on the calendar of the now-defunct Party-sponsored civil religion. Many people were manifestly content to be swept along by the torrent of newspaper and journal articles, television and radio programs, posters, postcards, paintings, slogans, leaflets, znachki, plays and poems — especially war veterans, who were heaped with honors for the occasion. Others had managed to make Victory Day their own. In the Gefter household, May 9 was usually a day given over to family and the company of wartime friends. On the fortieth, Mikhail was not well enough to receive groups of visitors, but our conversation was repeatedly interrupted by telephone callers bearing holiday greetings. In addition he had received a stack of Victory Day letters and cards, including one crayoned by his granddaughter. He read me a letter from a wartime buddy, now a mathematician in the Siberian city of Tomsk. It was reflective, even profound, the way ordinary letters sometimes used to be in our own country in past decades. "All this talk of triumph reminds me even more of that constant sickening fear we lived with, fear not only of the enemy, but of our own war administration, and fear for all humanity. I feel a similar tremor now as I wonder, is the world now threatened by a new Hitler?" The reference was to Ronald Reagan.

Victory Day was both the tool of propagandists touting its triumphs, and a memorial
day for millions of relatives and friends of the war dead -- a time for an inescapable barrage of self-serving hype, and a day for families to lay flowers on the graves of their loved ones, or to leave a bouquet at their local war memorial.

I spent the morning of May 9 leaning out of my hotel room window as a formidable display of military hardware rolled down Gorky Street and into Red Square, emitting deafening noises and belching smelly puffs of smoke. The long, sunny afternoon I devoted to mingling with the enormous crowds of bemedalled veterans who gathered in front of the Bolshoi Theater and in Gorky Park as they do every year, to sing old war songs, to receive little bouquets of flowers from young well-wishers, and revel in each others' company. In the evening I watched "In Memory of the Fallen Heroes," an elaborately contrived quasi-religious ritual of mourning aired annually since 1967, and intended as the emotional climax of Victory Day. Accompanied by romantic music, a mellow male voice intoned a prose-poem lament to the unknown soldier and the twenty million war dead, in an all-knowing, compassionate basso that Americans are used to hearing in laxative ads. The program -- the highest ritual in the entire liturgical calendar of Communist Party culture -- culminated in a minute of silence.

Four years later, in June of 1989, Nikolai Volkov, a representative of the Soviet Committee of War Veterans, assured me that the forty-fifth anniversary of the victory in 1990 would be commemorated with great fanfare. "At the fortieth anniversary our country had seven and one-half million veterans. There are now about five million left and our numbers are rapidly dwindling. How many of us will be around in 1995 to enjoy the fiftieth?" For most Soviet veterans, the forty-fifth would be their last hurrah.
But by May 1990 hard times had arrived. Really hard times. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had melted down into an unhappy collection of warring nationalities. As in earlier upheavals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, social protest and brigandage, often indistinguishable from one another, had permeated the polity with a lurking sense of danger and the nearness of chaos. There was a upsurge of violent crime. The Soviet army was rife with revolt. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which for decades claimed most of the credit for the victory in the war, appeared to have lost its last vestigés of credibility. The socialist economic system was in complete disarray, with consumer goods in increasingly short supply. With dizzying speed East Europe had overthrown Soviet-imposed communist regimes, and the old "good" and "bad" Germanies were busy uniting.

The old, roseate version of the war experience had been a carefully orchestrated symphony in a major key, promoting an image of national harmony and unity. But now that symphony was drowned out by a cacophonous clamor of dissonant voices, memories, passions. The remembrance of the war had become a prism refracting an entire spectrum of emotions unleashed by five years of perestroika and the most fundamental kind of social disintegration.

A futile search for the design of a new, national monument "to the victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War" intended as a unifying process fizzled badly, bringing into high relief some of the most pernicious divisions tearing at the fabric of Soviet society. In 1986, after decades of monuments sent down from above like so many icons to the high priests of the Party-run civil religion, the Ministry of Culture opened to the public a competition for the design of a memorial to be constructed on Moscow’s Poklonnaia Hill, the
site from which, in 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte had waited in vain for a delegation of "boyars" to present him with keys to the vanquished city. Three years later, after two open competitions and nearly a thousand submitted projects, the search foundered primarily on nationalist hatreds: the design that garnered by far the most public enthusiasm was the work of an outspoken Russian nationalist and was based on the form of a Russian Orthodox church; the jury's choice was an elegant, abstract construction of nesting arches designed by a dark-haired young woman whom right-wing groups identified as a clandestine Jew. Under these circumstances, on Christmas day 1989, the jury announced its decision to end the competition without naming a winner.

Yet one more competition - this one a closed competition - is in the offing for summer 1991. But I have also heard of a current plan to transport to the designated Moscow site a monument erected by Soviet sculptor Evgeny Vuchetich in Berlin's Treptower Park in 1949 as a memorial to the two thousand Soviet soldiers who died in the storm of Berlin. The statue, which shows a resolute representative of the Soviet army's finest holding in his powerful arms a little German girl whom he has rescued from the flames of Berlin, has long been a prime symbol of the mature war cult. Even more to the point, some canny individuals doubtless have figured out that it would be better to remove the ponderous reminder of the Soviet domination of East Germany than to wait for an angry German populace to tear it down.

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In early May, 1990 I came to Moscow for the forty-fifth anniversary of the victory.
The city felt solemn and hard-edged, with none of the ready-for-a-party feel that prevailed at the 1985 jubilee. The conspicuous absence from Moscow buildings and streets of the usual megaholiday slogans, gargantuan posters, and omnipresent red bunting was perhaps indicative of the management's nerves following a May Day counterdemonstration in Red Square at which people jeered Gorbachev, shouting, among other things, "Hands off Lithuania!"

Situated in the broad expanse between the Kremlin and the Lenin Library, the Manezh, Moscow's Central Exhibition Hall, is a fine example of early nineteenth century Muscovite architecture, with thick walls the color of beaten eggs stretching out over an entire city block, and an elegant, neo-classical facade punctuated with fat white columns. For the 1985 jubilee the Manezh had displayed, predictably, the traditional all-Union exhibition of commemorative art. Filled with resolute soldiers, grieving mothers, and the like from all over the USSR, it was a collection of the worst kind of romantic, military kitsch and featured an enormous painting of Marshals Zhukov and Rokossovskii on white and black horses, respectively.

Five years later, in May 1990, the exhibition housed in the Manezh was entitled "Defenders of the Fatherland," and was an all-Russian collection of art devoted to the victory. Its organizer was Col. Nikolai Nikolaevich Solomin, a smallish, brown-haired gentleman in early middle age, who held me by the elbow and steered me through the vast hall, percolating with great enthusiasm in fast-paced, mellifluous prose. Col. Solomin is on the staff of the Grekova Art Studio, an outfit that for decades has produced battle panoramas for museums and portraits of heroes painted according to the most meticulous specifications.
handed down by the political administration of the Soviet Army. "In the old days before
perestroika," he told me, "every officer and soldier had to look like a battle-ready hero.
Once I painted some soldiers at rest, and was told that I had to point their sub-machine guns
up, even though that wasn't at all realistic. Now it's all changed; we're encouraged to paint
not exemplary fiction, but reality."

The Manezh exhibit underscored new forces at work in the army. It was a Russian
affair, reflecting the nationalism that in the past year or so has been the army’s main claim to
legitimacy. Far from restricting itself to the usual 1941-45 period, "Defenders of the
Fatherland," as my voluble host proudly pointed out to me, opened with icons of Alexander
Nevsky — the Grand Prince who defeated the Teutonic Knights in the thirteenth century --
and continued with artworks from subsequent wars against the Tatars, Poles, Lithuanians,
and Swedes. There was a magnificent display of nineteenth-century art commemorating the
Patriotic War against the French.

At the end came a motley collection of works paying homage to the Great Patriotic
War. Gone were the familiar battle scenes of decimation and triumph. Many, indeed most, of
the more recent paintings had no visible relationship to the war at all. They showed mostly
lovely, peaceful landscapes of villages and churches, in the style of romantic nationalism so
popular today. As a token to glasnost, the far corner of the exhibition hall included a small
display of dissident posters protesting Stalinism and the war's tens of millions of needless
losses. I asked Solomin why the exhibition was all-Russian and not representative of the
whole Soviet Union, even though every republic sent men to the front. He answered that the
artists' unions of some of the republics had declined to participate in the exhibition. But
historian Mikhail Gefter, to whom I later recounted my experience in the Manezh, assured me that Solomin had not been forthcoming. "Take a look at the outrageous things that have happened to Voennno-istoricheskii zhurnal (Military-Historical Journal) in the past year or so. In an effort to gain support for the army among the nation’s most reactionary forces, it has become ultra-nationalistic and openly anti-Semitic. The trumpeting of Russian nationalism is what the all-Russian exhibition was about!"

The bankruptcy of the Victory Day holiday was poignantly palpable in School No. 110, one of downtown Moscow’s better schools for children ages six to seventeen. In its muddy courtyard rests the only successful war memorial I have ever seen in the Soviet Union. It shows five thin, vacant boys going off to the front; they had all attended School No. 110, and none of them ever returned from the war. Every year on the day before Victory Day, the students proceed, class by class, to lay flowers on the monument’s pedestal. And on Victory Day itself, it is traditional for them to meet with veterans, mostly alumni of their school, and present them with the small bouquets of flowers that are always and everywhere in the Soviet Union the prime symbol of respect.

On the forty-fifth, the children were not having any part of those rituals. During the flower-laying in the courtyard not even the older ones could muster up a few moments of respectful silence following the teacher’s canned little speech about “that generation to whom we owe so much.” When one boy made believe he was going to eat his flower instead of placing it at the foot of the monument, the teacher slapped him across the face. After witnessing this most unsatisfying ritual, I managed to spend an hour in charge of a class of

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3See also New York Times, Jan. 10, 1991
seventh-graders. At the beginning of the hour a teacher came into the classroom and reminded the children to show up the next day at the designated meeting with veterans. "I don't want to see a repeat of last year's sorry performance, when not a single one of you turned up!" she warned in a nasty tone of voice. After she left, the children told me they would not spend their holiday putting on school uniforms and going out to greet the veterans. "It's not a pleasant thing to do and besides, why should our parents have to pay for the flowers?" said one intelligent-looking boy with big glasses.

On May 9, 1990, brilliant spring sunshine added dazzle to the military parade, which was doubtless held to placate the army leadership. Veterans were followed by marching bands from various military academies, playing the haunting wartime marches that veterans love to sing at their informal gatherings. Then out came the antique tanks, roaring and spewing foul-smelling smoke. The first tank to enter Red Square bore the words, "1941, Motherland." The parade's highlight was a magnificent float, a live tableau of the monument in Berlin's Treptower Park. A mighty Soviet soldier clasps a little German girl; his other hand drives a sword into a swastika. On the float were a real soldier holding a real little girl dressed in white.

The parade was short, and, by the standards of totalitarian kitsch, decidedly modest, quite unlike the extravaganza at the fortieth, five years earlier. As I tried to get the best view of the proceedings, teetering on a stone ledge to the left of the mausoleum and only a few feet from a line of elegantly uniformed KGB guards, I knew I was witnessing the swan song of the cult of the Great Patriotic War. The swagger, the self-congratulation, the hyperbole about socialism having defeated imperialism, were no longer there. Indeed, in view of its
recent and painful collapse, any of the old hype about the victory as proof of socialism's superiority would have been laughable.

The informal meetings of veterans in front of the Bolshoi Theatre and in Gorky Park were subdued and only partly focused on the Great Patriotic War. For the first time in anyone's memory, uniformed afgantsy, young veterans of the decade-long embroilment in Afghanistan, some of them in wheelchairs, made their appearance at a Victory Day celebration. According to tradition, old folks sang war songs on the steps of the Bolshoi; only fifty yards away, young adults danced in graceful pairs while others belted out the ancient Russian folk songs that are so popular in today's spirit of revived nationalism. In Gorky Park I threw a ten-ruble note into an enormous plastic bowl half-filled with money being collected for a planned kniga pamiati, a book of memory listing the names of every single victim of the Great Patriotic War. No mention here of the victory. Just an effort to pay respects to the war dead.

At 6:50 I clicked on the television set, expecting to see the familiar flickering flame of the Unknown Soldier Tomb and hear the unseen, unctuous voice of the high priest of the war cult exalt the glory of the victory and its bitter costs in the annual Victory Day television service. What I saw instead was a collage of scenes depicting wartime horrors. The narrator called upon his viewers to find in the memory of the war a source of healing and reconciliation. He urged people to seek mutual forgiveness at the common graves of the millions who died in the war. Astonishingly, the text included references to the Jewish contribution to the war effort, and refrained from singling out the Communist Party as the most valued segment of wartime society. "Let us empty our hearts of anger...Before their
common graves, let us forgive one another and become true to their legacy....Everyone is equal in war, in death -- man and woman, general and soldier, Communist and non-Communist, Russian, Lithuanian, Uzbek, Jew..." The cult of the Great Patriotic War was over, replaced by an admixture of passion, regret, nostalgia, rage and remembrance.

A few days before Victory Day, the newspaper, Komsomolskaia pravda, published an article entitled, "Stolen Victory," which brought into high relief some of the most sensitive questions tugging at the war myth. It began with a conversation that had recently taken place between two elderly veterans: "We've given away Germany, we've given away Europe -- for what then did we lay down so many lives during the war?" "Why beat around the bush?" responded the other veteran, "they've stolen our Victory, and that's the whole story."

Do Soviet people really believe that their country fought fascism in order to take over half of Europe? Gennadii Bordiugov, a scholarly commentator interviewed in the article, was not surprised at this reaction to the recent liberation of Europe: "Our sea of spilled blood was too vast, our wounds too deep.to expect our people, especially those who fought, to respond to the events in East Europe without pain." But he went on to assert that in fact the Victory had been stolen from the people -- by Stalin and his system -- on the very day of the Victory, May 9, 1945. In the 1930s Stalinism had bled the populace, driven the peasantry onto collective farms, instituted a reign of terror that stripped the nation's soul of its energy, spunk, and self-confidence, and purged the armed forces of its officer corps -- all in the name of being prepared for a future war. The Komsomolskaia pravda interviewer, Alexander Afanasiev, remarked that it was "as though Roosevelt, with the aim of strengthening his position on the eve of war, had taken the farmers and 'collectivized' them, driven them onto
reservations, and had locked up all potentially discontented individuals into concentration
camps...." When war did come, the Stalinist system proved singularly incapable of waging
it.

The article reveals that in 1941 and 1942 groups of factory workers rebelled against
their bosses, complaining of their ineptitude in meeting wartime needs, and, even more
frequently, protesting that Party officers and NKVD men were taking care of themselves,
evacuating their wives and families, and doing nothing for the people. In 1942, thousands of
people wrote letters to a single workers' newspaper, expressing their hatred, "a hatred equal
to, if not stronger than, my hatred of fascism" for the Party bosses who get all the
privileges, do none of the work, and who, "when we defeat fascism, will shout that they
brought about the victory."

For Stalin, the imperative to rein in the anti-Stalinist and anti-Party sentiments in the
country at large was at least as important as defeating fascism. In the end, "Who was
victorious and who was conquered, who won the war against whom, if the vanquished are
now sending food to the victors?"³

A united Germany supplying an impoverished Soviet Union with food! Could any of
us have predicted it five, or even three years ago? Who was victorious indeed? "We live like
beggars," an old veteran said to me last May as we strolled around Leningrad's Piskarevskoe
cemetery, the resting place of some half a million siege victims. "There is nothing in our
stores, nothing. And our former enemies are living like kings. So for what kind of victory
did we sacrifice tens of millions of Soviet lives?"

³Komsomolskaia pravda, May 5, 1990
Many members of the intelligentsia have, in fact, come to equate communism and fascism, Stalin and Hitler. They now blame Stalin for much of the war’s destructiveness. Stalin’s collectivization drive and first and second Five Year Plans resulted in millions of deaths and -- as the recent collapse has shown -- dislocated the economy beyond repair.

"Stalin destroyed the Soviet Union, he utterly ruined it, that’s why they’re in this mess today," remarked Stalin biographer, Robert C. Tucker, not long ago. The Party purge and mass terror of the thirties took many more millions of lives and broke the morale of the people. "And then, bled white, unimaginably weakened," wrote Komsomolskaia pravda reporter, Alexander Afanasiev, "‘with naked hands,’ as my father used to say, this people was thrown against a steel wall" — the German army.4

In 1941 the Red Army had no officers to lead it. "We used to think that some 40,000 army and navy officers died in the 1937-39 purge of the military," said Professor Georgii Kumanev, a member of the department of the Great Patriotic War in the Academy of Sciences’ Institute of History. "Now we know that figure to be more than 50,000. By 1939 in effect our armed forces had no commanders. Stalin had destroyed the army. The military purge gave Hitler the certainty that the USSR would be incapable of military action against the Reich in the event of a German attack on Poland in 1939. Moreover, Stalin’s senseless Finnish War of 1939-40 — that he started, unprovoked, and almost lost to tiny Finland -- demonstrated to Hitler our utter weakness and without a doubt brought about the June 1941 invasion. Of course, when the invasion came, our forces were totally unprepared because Stalin was terrified of arousing Hitler’s wrath by mobilizing our defenses, despite repeating

4Komsomolskaia pravda, May 5, 1990
warnings of the planned attack from credible sources. And then, did our whole country rise up to fight? No, because millions of able-bodied men who could have helped save civilian lives were languishing in Stalin’s jails and labor camps."

Kumanev, an energetic and self-confident man whom I interviewed in his Moscow office, was especially concerned about getting straight the numbers of Soviet war dead. He assured me that the legendary twenty million figure ought to be hiked up to somewhere between twenty-seven and twenty-nine million. Twenty-seven million was the figure Gorbachev quoted in his 1990 Victory Day speech. The assessment of these figures today seems thoroughly politicized, a grisly numbers game in which the more radical, anti-Stalinist, anti-Soviet critics estimate ever-higher losses and point to them as a reflection both of the system’s incompetence at waging war, and of Stalin’s direct and indirect role in those millions of deaths. Some estimates run as high as almost fifty million wartime losses.5

Recent Soviet publications and films about the war have been relentless in their drive to reveal the ugliest aspects of the war, and in particular, Stalin’s brutality toward his own populace. The Soviet high command under Stalin never hesitated to use its own citizens as hostages or cannon fodder. Stalin’s infamous Order #270 stipulated that the families of military and political officers who allowed themselves to be taken prisoner would be liable to arrest and the families of imprisoned soldiers would lose their rights to all government relief.6 Last year "Shtrafniki," a documentary film, created a major stir. It graphically detailed the wartime fates of some of the notorious shtrafbataliony, punishment battalions of

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5Iurii Geller, "Nevernoe ekho bylogo," Druzhba narodov, No. 9, 1989, pp. 229-244

6Komsomolskaia pravda, May 5, 1990
former political prisoners who were sent on the most dangerous, often suicidal missions, followed by commissars pointing guns at their backs to make sure they followed orders.\footnote{Literaturnaia gazeta, March 7, 1990. For a moving review of the film, see Viacheslav Kondratiev, "Parii voiny," Literaturnaia gazeta, January 31, 1990}

There was also Stalin's famous "Not a step back" order of July 28, 1942, calling for the strongest discipline in the army and ordering the armed forces to fight "until the last drop of blood" rather than surrender any more territory.\footnote{Otechestvennaia voina 1941-1945: Sobytiia, Liudi, Dokumenty (Moscow, 1990), p. 435} The army newspaper, \textit{Krasnaia zvezda} (Red Star) reminded its readers that "now is not the time when a coward or traitor can rely on mercy. Every officer and political worker can, with the powers given him by the State, see to it that the very idea of retreating without orders becomes impossible...."\footnote{Alexander Werth, \textit{Russia at War}, (New York, 1964) pp. 418-419} Meaning: officers and commissars may shoot suspected cowards and traitors.

The cruelty unleashed during the war did not only come from above. Many Soviet citizens turned traitor to their own army and people, some with a vengeance, helping the Nazi occupiers to terrorize and torture the populace. It is difficult to say why; human brutality is, fortunately, always hard to explain and not something we expect to find as a matter of course.

Surely the nightmarish first two decades of Soviet history did much to brutalize a beleaguered populace. The First World War in Russia was followed by the chaos of revolution and then by three years of civil war. At the end of the twenties the forced collectivization of the peasantry brought about massive famine and was followed, in the middle 1930s, by the Communist Party purge and mass terror that resulted in the arrests and
deaths of millions of people. Furthermore, all of these events pitted Soviet citizens against each other. In those grim years Soviet people forced other Soviet people onto collective farms at gunpoint, shot kulaks (wealthy peasants) and middle peasants, starved out entire villages of recalcitrant peasants, interrogated Party comrades, frequently with the use of torture, brought false charges against neighbors and colleagues leading to their certain arrest, sentenced one another to long years in jail or forced labor camps, and shot one another in the dread courtyards of Soviet prisons. Considering, for example, how World War I brutalized Italian and German soldiers, and the significant role this played in the emergence of strong fascist movements in those two countries, it is likely that the protracted agony of the Soviet experience in the Civil War should help explain the brutal excesses of collectivization and the purge and terror, and that these in turn could have produced the callousness that portions of the Soviet populace displayed in the Second World War.

This raises the inevitable explosive question: how many of the tens of millions of Soviet lives lost in the war must be blamed on the Soviet people and their Supreme Leader? The Soviet Union’s enormous wartime losses, which so deeply impressed themselves on its allies, and President Roosevelt in particular, were decisive at the war’s end in enabling Stalin to capitalize on those losses and build for himself a vast empire in Eastern Europe.

Some might argue that the numbers are unimportant, that “war is war,” and that any belligerent power inevitably destroys many of its finest sons needlessly through error or the chaotic circumstances of war. But such an assertion willy-nilly leads to the troubling question of numbers. What if it turned out that in fact the Soviet Union had been directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of two million of its own men, or four million or fifteen million?
Should one say that two million self-inflicted losses properly can fall under the rubric of "war is war," but fifteen cannot? And if it could indeed be determined that Stalin and his compatriots must be blamed for fifteen million, or one-half of all wartime losses, do we accord the Soviet Union fifty percent less respect and sympathy than if the Germans had in fact killed the entire thirty million?

That way lies madness. It spills over into the whole bedeviled question of the quantification of suffering. Did the Soviet people suffer five times as much as the Jews because they lost more than five times the number of people? The answer to that question is clearly no. Victims of terrible ordeals, such as enslaved Afro-Americans, the Jews in the Holocaust, the Soviet people in World War II, become aggregates of national suffering on behalf of which future generations make compensatory claims. Few would dispute the legitimacy of such claims in principle. However, fewer still would be prepared to rationalize numerically the intensity of a nation’s ordeal and the assessment of its demand for recompense.

And yet on some level numbers do matter. It does in fact matter whether a significant portion of the Soviet war deaths cannot be blamed on the Germans, not because we need to know just how much to temper our sympathy for the Soviet side, but because in that case the decades-long Soviet mourning for their twenty million martyrs was in part a cover-up for the past sins of Stalin, his system, and the Soviet people.

Not long ago Ales Adamovich, a renowned Belorussian novelist, political activist and deputy to the Soviet parliament, published an article about Stalinism and the war, which he calls "the war with Hitler." The term, "Great Patriotic War" is so loaded, that nowadays its
very usage identifies the user as a conservative, a traditionalist, or an old fogie. In the article, published in Literaturnaia gazeta, Adamovich reiterated an argument that has come to represent the revisionist interpretation of the 1945 victory: "In paying an immense price for the victory over Hitler, the people facilitated the complete victory of Stalin's absolutist tyranny." Of course it was necessary to defeat Hitler, Adamovich writes. The big challenge during the war was to remain human while being squeezed by two inhumane tyrannies. Hitler and Stalin were each other's doubles. "How to distinguish between those Hitler killed and those Stalin killed, if they killed our people the same way -- one entering the country from the outside, the other -- from within?"

Hitler had his Khatyn and Stalin, his Kuropaty. Kuropaty is a wooded area in Belorussia containing recently discovered mass graves from 1937-1938. Khatyn was a Belorussian village. In 1943, with the help of the polizei, collaborators from the local population, the Germans rounded up all the residents of the village of Khatyn -- including the children -- into a wooden barn and burned them to death, a fate they meted out to over six hundred Belorussian villages. In all, more than one quarter of Belorussia's population died during the war.

Stalin and Hitler did each other's work, wrote Adamovich. Stalin served Hitler's cause when he shot those tens of thousands of experienced Soviet military commanders in the purge of the army and navy. And Hitler did Stalin's work, killing off the bespectacled members of the intelligentsia, he only wasn't thorough enough about the Jews to satisfy the Georgian leader.

Adamovich, himself a former partisan, exploded the war cult's "Glory to our
partisans!" myth. He recalled that in 1944, in the Vitebsk region, the high command of the army managed to pull together most of Belorussia's partisans, tens of thousands of them, to await reinforcements from the regular army -- but these never came, and thousands of partisans were mowed down by German tanks. Adamovich suggests that this all happened according to plan, that Stalin feared partisans as potential post-war terrorists and arranged to have them taken care of before the war's end. "'Glory to our partisans!' but it is better, easier, safer, if they have first died a heroic death!"

Adamovich also took apart the legend about the wartime unity of the Soviet people. Quite the contrary, for him the war was in many ways a continuation of the 1918-21 civil war -- virulently divisive, conflicted, strife-filled. Gentiles against Jews, collaborators against non-collaborators, Stalinists versus anti-Stalinists -- these were just some of the wars being waged on Soviet territory in 1941-1945 during the war with Germany.¹⁰

But not all memories are so negative. Other survivors of the war -- particularly women -- recall the war years as a positive experience in which the national divisiveness that has lacerated the USSR in recent years was nowhere in evidence. "I was a participant in the war and from 1941 until 1954 I helped the wounded," wrote a woman with a Ukrainian name in a letter published in Izvestiia. "They were all dear to me. I was with the 223rd Azerbaijani division defending the Caucasus. And it never came into my head to think about which of my friends were Azerbaijani, and which ones were Armenian or Georgian...Let the memory of the war, the friendship of peoples tempered in its fires, be an example for our

¹⁰"Kuropaty, Khatyn, Chernobyl," Literaturnaia gazeta, August 15, 1990
conscience today."¹¹

Not long ago I spoke with two Muscovite women in their early seventies, who, their voices breaking with emotion, recalled their wartime years as navy nurses as the most satisfying period of their lives. "Never again did we feel so absolutely needed," explained Tamara Ravdina, a cheerful, athletic-looking woman with close-cropped grey hair and a youthful complexion. "Of course the work was horrible. I spent most of the war in a makeshift hospital along the Ladoga lifeline that supported Leningrad during the blockade. There was bombing all the time. And I will never forget the incredible stench in the separate tent we had for victims of gangrene. When after the war I had a son, I already knew how to feed him after all those years of feeding paraplegics."

"But those were our finest hours, the most brilliant time of our lives," added her old friend Lela Gefter, a small but vigorous woman with a melancholy face. "I know that the regime here has for years exploited the memory of the war to militarize the youth and so on, but nonetheless, for our generation the memory of the war is a holy memory."

During the war they were young, energetic, selfless. They knew what was right and what was wrong. Moral questions seemed easy and clear, unlike the terrible confusion of today's chaotic times.

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The Baltic states' recent struggle for independence is inextricably bound up with the de-sacralization of the Great Patriotic War myth. The classic Brezhnevite narrative of the war

¹¹Izvestia, April 28, 1990
involved a massive cover-up of the secret protocol of the Nazi-Soviet Pact signed on August 23, 1939, by Foreign Ministers Joachim von Ribbentrop and Viacheslav Molotov. As recently as New Year’s eve 1987, Molotov’s grandson, also named Viacheslav, whom a colleague had brought to my Massachusetts home as a dinner guest, assured me (over the incongruent combination of borshcht and champagne) that there had been no secret protocol to the pact. "Grandfather gave me his word of honor," said the handsome young man earnestly, "and believe me, he would never have lied to me."

Less than two years later, Soviet authorities published the clandestine portions of the pact, and proved old man Molotov a liar. Publicly a treaty of mutual non-aggression, the settlement provided for a partition of Poland and other territorial arrangements, including the eventual transfer to the Soviet Union of the three Baltic states. A week after the treaty was signed Hitler proceeded to invade Poland; World War II had begun. After some initial hesitation, Soviet troops moved into eastern Poland. In 1940 they occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, only to lose them to Germany after Operation Barbarossa. The Soviet army replaced the German occupying forces in the Baltic states during the course of 1944 and incorporated those territories -- formerly part of the Russian empire -- into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Soviet government’s public acknowledgement of the real Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact came in the waning days of the “good” Mikhail Gorbachev, the bearer of glasnost who sought to fill the “blank spots” in his nation’s understanding of its own past. Gorbachev encouraged the publicity of Stalin’s crimes in all their awful depth and breadth. But what of the inevitable popular demand for some kind of accompanying restitution? It was easy
enough, after rehabilitating Nikolai Bukharin, to honor Anna Mikhailovna Larina, his widow, and furnish her with a better apartment in recompense for her twenty-odd years in labor camps and the 1938 shooting of her innocent husband, who had been one of Lenin's close confederates. But how to compensate the millions of families whose loved ones had also been shot, or had "sat" (as the expression goes) for years in the GULAG? Some have suggested that at the very least, survivors of prisons and camps and their immediate families ought to receive the same modest privileges granted to veterans of the Great Patriotic War, such as access to special food supplies (no small matter nowadays), the right to go to the head of food lines, and free rides on public transport.¹²

Stalin and Stalinism repressed (the current Russian catch-all term referring to the full range of victimization, from deportation to purge to incarceration to execution) not only millions of individuals whom the dictator's subordinates deemed disloyal or potentially traitorous, but also entire nationalities. Today, with the Stalinist system discredited and in ruins, will exemptions from a five-kopeck bus fare be adequate compensation to the hundreds of thousands of Volga Germans and Chechen and Ingush peoples who were deported en masse during the war to locations thousands of miles from their native territories because Stalin suspected some of their members of treachery? In fact, these peoples and their descendents have been organizing robust attempts to return to their homelands.

For the Baltic nations, destalinization by definition means an end to the Muscovite domination that was the product of an illegitimate, clandestine agreement between two discredited dictators. Lately, an impassioned battle over public monuments and symbols in

¹²Veterans are also entitled to treatment in special hospitals.
the Baltics has focused on war memorials. Last fall, a monument to Soviet soldiers who liberated Lithuania from fascist occupation, the work of a prominent Lithuanian sculptor, was blown up. A little over a month before the mid-January 1991 military crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia, the Soviet army newspaper, Krasnaia zvezda (Red Star) ran an article accusing the Baltic republics of paying homage to indigenous pro-Hitler wartime army units who opposed Soviet power, erecting monuments in their memory, honoring them "almost as saviors of the Fatherland." At about the same time, four mysterious explosions destroyed a recently-constructed Latvian monument to the local pro-fascist anti-Soviet wartime "legionnaires." No one knows who committed the crime, but the Latvian minister of the Interior suggested on television that the deed had been perpetrated by Soviet army personnel carrying out orders of Minister of Defense Dmitrii Yazov about the liquidation of monuments to "Fascists." The Latvian parliament responded by passing a resolution ordering the defense of national monuments and memorials.

In destroying each others' monuments, the two sides are ready to destroy each others' people, correctly predicted a journalist for Literaturnaia gazeta last December. "The problem," she wrote, "lies in ... our ineradicable longing to do battle with the dead.... We still cannot come to terms with our own dead, cannot agree on which ones merit eternal memory and which ones do not."  

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13 Literaturnaia gazeta, Nov. 21, 1990
14 Krasnaia zvezda, Dec. 8, 1990
15 Literaturnaia gazeta, Dec. 12, 1990; Krasnaia zvezda, Dec. 8, 1990
16 Literaturnaia gazeta, Dec. 12, 1990
The "Great Patriotic War" was neither Great, nor consistently Patriotic. Ales Adamovich called it the "war with Hitler," but that is not right either, since he himself points out that during the war Stalin was no less an enemy to the Soviet people than was Hitler. It was just a war that, like all wars, revealed the extremes in human behavior -- bravery, self-sacrifice, sadism, treachery, cowardice.

A half-century after Operation Barbarossa, painfully, insistently, real memories of the 1941-1945 war are coming out, from the bottom and the edges of Soviet society. Descendents of the war's hidden heroes -- members of punishment battalions, prisoners of war -- are demanding that their loved ones be rehabilitated and given at the very least the same honors as other veterans. The shtrafniki, of course, will need to receive their honors posthumously; almost none of them returned from the war and those who did, did not last long. Many of the war prisoners ended up in Soviet labor camps for the crime of having surrendered to the enemy, victims, first of Hitler, then of Stalin. Now a few survivors of this fate and their children are writing letters to newspapers and magazines, demanding rehabilitation and veterans' benefits. With the recent compulsion to honor the war's real victims, even the Vlasovites -- an anti-Stalinist collaborationist army that fought alongside the Germans in 1944 -- are now, in some quarters, considered heroes who sacrificed themselves in a courageous effort to rid Russia of its hated tyrant.

A number of television documentaries in the past year or two have taken up the cause of those many participants in the war who disappeared without a trace, missing in action.
Volunteers have been combing forests and slogging through swamps in former battle zones where an untold number of war victims lie unburied and unidentified. A recent issue of the liberal magazine, Ogonek, estimates their total number to be about two million. The volunteers exhume the remains, do what they can to identify them, and put them in coffins so they can at last be decently buried. Taking off on the slogan of the official war cult, the Ogonek article is called "IS NO ONE FORGOTTEN?"

I first heard about those unburied dead about three years ago from Avgust Alexeevich Mishin, a hulking, bespectacled professor of law, with large, craggy features and a frizzy beard of a greenish yellow color I had never before seen outside of a Crayola box. He was missing an arm. "Shot right off by German bullets in the battle of Moscow," he said. At the end of a long evening of war talk, he was already dressed to leave, his empty coat sleeve dangling conspicuously from his shoulder, when he remarked, "In woods outside of Smolensk you can see skeletons of soldiers. They had died and just stayed there, strewn around. At first it was too dangerous to retrieve them, because the area was mined, and finally they were just forgotten. You can go and see for yourself." Once started on the subject, Mishin did not want to let it go. "I remember when the fighting was so thick that corpses just fell everywhere and we pushed them into pits, Germans, Russians together. No one took the time to sort them out; they became just one great stinking mass."

Almost fifty years after the war's end, at informal Victory Day gatherings people still bear placards pleading for information about their missing fathers, brothers, grandfathers, front buddies. Last year at the forty-fifth, I saw a man, no longer young, with a face utterly void of emotion, standing stock-still in the Bolshoi Theatre park and holding a sign asking
for information about his father, whose wartime photograph showed a handsome young soldier with the same vacant face. A passer-by told me in a whisper that every year, for as long as he could remember, that soldier’s widow had held up that same photograph in exactly the same spot in the park; now the son had taken over, so the old woman was presumably infirm, or dead.

The one prime -- even primal -- act of respect that any army owes its soldiers is to bury those killed in action and notify their loved ones. The young volunteers who are now doing the grisly work of sorting out the war dead may well deride their government for constructing tens of thousands of war memorials while leaving two million carcasses to rot in the forests and swamps of the Motherland to whom those unnamed unfortunates gave their lives.

Many surviving veterans complain that the regime has been no less callous toward them, denying them necessary medical care, decent housing, the most basic amenities of life. And they are right. From the very first days after the war’s end, veterans, particularly invalids, were neglected, until about a decade ago, when the Brezhnev regime granted them a few privileges accompanied by the specious organized homage to those who had fought in the war. This created a class that literary critic Lazar Lazarev calls "veterans by profession," whom he loathes.

The veterans’ license to coveted goods and conveniences have exacerbated an already troublesome tension between the generations which, like so much else, gained freer expression when, by the end of the decade, glasnost and a growing disdain for the military combined with almost unprecedented shortages of consumer goods to make tempers short.
"My mother was never at the front, and she didn't work in war industry," a taxi driver explained to me a few months ago. "But," he continued, "she ran herself ragged trying to feed her children in our Urals region evacuation, where there was far less food than at the front. She worked and suffered as much as any veteran. Why shouldn't she be entitled to privileges too?"

Last year a young Muscovite acquaintance told me of a scene she had witnessed in a dry cleaning establishment a few weeks before the 1990 Victory Day celebration. Along with about a dozen other people she was waiting to be helped, while the staff, an assortment of wrinkled, stubbly-face men in dirty suits and tired, round-faced old women in faded flowered dresses, sat around on stools with their hands folded over their large bellies and made no move to assist the customers. Suddenly an irate young man of about thirty holding a bag of clothes in need of cleaning shook his fist at the old people and shouted: "Why doesn't someone take these clothes? You're all too lazy even to get up! You, old folks, it was you who stuck us with this terrible life, you who ruined everything for us!"

"What did we ruin?" countered one of the men. "We suffered, we fought for you and for our country."

"And what kind of life did you fight for?" retorted the young man angrily. "fascism couldn't have been any worse!"

Lately the Soviet press has published many letters from indignant veterans, complaining of shabby treatment by their compatriots. "I walked, limping (my wounded leg was hurting) and hesitantly placed myself at the head of a taxi queue at the Kievskii Railroad Station," began one such letter. "'Look at the Vova,' curtly remarked a woman holding a
string bag." The derisive term vova comes from the acronym for the words Velikaia
Otechestvennaia voina, or Great Patriotic War. "As a rule, I almost never avail myself of my
insignificant privileges," continued the author, "since they elicit only humiliation and insults.
‘Vovy’ indeed! Like mammoths we are disappearing from the face of the earth. We limp, get
sick, forget things, repeat ourselves. We cling to our battle stripes, our wounds and medals,
only because they dare to demean us with pitiful privileges, pitiful pensions, vacant
glances."17

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In 1941 -- at a time of utmost crisis -- Soviet wartime propagandists, after decades of
spurning the prerevolutionary Russian past, appealed to the memories of ancient warriors and
tsarist generals in order to mobilize the spirits of the Soviet people. "May you be inspired in
this war by the heroic figures of our great ancestors, Alexander Nevsky, Dmitrii Donskoi,
Minin and Pozharsky, Alexander Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov!" intoned Stalin in his famous
speech commemorating the November 7, 1941 anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution.18 At
the same time the government opened up the churches and invited the people to worship
freely for the first time since the mid-twenties. Stalin, who as a boy had been trained for the
priesthood, understood very well that Communist Party pap was too pale to inspire a people
who were being pushed to their very limits. Only the mighty weight of history and the

17 Sovetskaia kultura, April 14, 1990.

18 Alexander Werth, Russia at War (New York, 1964), p. 249
millenium-old devotion to the God of Orthodoxy could provide the Russian people with the sustenance it craved to pull through the ordeal of war with an intact sense of nationhood.

Exactly fifty years later, the people of the Soviet Union are living through a time of troubles as terrifying as any they have confronted since the war. The breakdown of the economy, the utter despoliation of the environment, the fear of total civil war, the loss of their status as a global superpower, the collapse of every legitimizing myth that had bound them together, have led to a societal atomization. For the defunct leadership and many of its supporters, the idealized memory of the Great Patriotic War was the last remaining source of national pride. Today, even the Soviet army has been unable to work out a convincing line on the remembrance of the war, embracing instead the most reactionary kind of Russian nationalism.

And again, as in 1941, both the people and their leaders have turned to nationalism and to religion to help guide them out of the abyss. But this time, the Church is divided and the nationalisms are many. And few seem to take much satisfaction in making the necessary sacrifices to help ensure a brighter future -- or any future at all.